

# Home to Iconic Brands

An Interview with Sarah Kirshbaum Levy,  
Chief Operating Officer, Viacom Global Entertainment Group

**EDITORS' NOTE** Sarah Kirshbaum Levy most recently served as the COO of the Viacom Kids & Family Group. During her nearly 20-year tenure at Viacom, she has led a diverse range of departments and businesses within the company, from consumer products to TV networks to ad sales. Prior to her role as COO of the Kids & Family Group, she served as COO for Nickelodeon. She began her career with Nickelodeon in 1998 as Director of Business Development. Kirshbaum received a B.A. in economics from Harvard College and an M.B.A. from Harvard Business School. Prior to business school, she worked at The Walt Disney Company and at Goldman Sachs.



Sarah Kirshbaum Levy

**COMPANY BRIEF** Viacom Media Networks operates through three brand groups based on target audience, similarity of programming and other factors: their Global Entertainment Group offers content that reaches a diverse group of adults and young adults who love comedy, music, pop culture and general entertainment. It consists of MTV, Comedy Central, Spike (rebranded as the Paramount Network in the U.S. as of January 18, 2018), VH1, CMT, TV Land, Logo and Viacom International Media Networks; the Nickelodeon Group offers content designed for kids ages 2 to 17 and their families; and BET Networks offers content targeted to African American audiences and consumers of Black culture.

## How do you define your role at Viacom and what are your key areas of focus?

As part of our strategic plan to grow Viacom and more effectively leverage our scale, I was appointed to oversee operations and strategy for the Viacom Global Entertainment Group (GEG). GEG is home to iconic brands including MTV, Comedy Central, Paramount Network (Spike), VH1, CMT, TV Land and Logo that, together with Viacom International Media Networks, serve audiences in more than 180 countries. My team works across a variety of business functions, from production management, business development, multiplatform product, research and programming to finance, legal affairs and human resources to ensure that Viacom's brand portfolio operates cohesively in support of our strategic plan for long-term growth.

My mandate is to make the most out of our existing businesses as well as lead teams that break totally new ground in content, distribution and the expansion of our brands' off-screen presence, including consumer products and live events. At the organizational level, I'm committed to removing silos to ensure we truly operate at scale while strengthening internal collaboration among our networks around the world. It's an exciting time to be at Viacom during a transition with so much opportunity ahead.

## What have been the keys to Viacom's consistent leadership in the industry and what makes Viacom's brands so strong?

Our brands each have distinctive identities, offering content and experiences that supersede their respective audiences. Deep audience insights fuel everything we do and distinguish us in a crowded marketplace. There is also tremendous power in our diverse portfolio that ensures we welcome creativity in all its forms and for every audience.

What truly differentiates us in the marketplace is something that unites all our brands: the ability to create frequently disruptive entertainment that elevates culture and connects deeply with audiences. MTV has been doing exactly this for decades, from the launch of *The Real World* – which sparked an entire genre of reality TV – and ignited much-needed conversations about racism, sexual prejudice and AIDS in the '90s, to the network's historic move to gender neutral awards at the 2017 VMAs, hailed as a watershed moment for the industry. Comedy Central's *South Park* and *The Daily Show* have been producing some of the most noteworthy, talked-about social commentary for decades, and they remain top series for young adults. The same could be said for Nickelodeon, BET or Paramount; these brands are household names because they excel at telling authentic stories that reflect the diverse perspectives of our audiences.

## Viacom places a major emphasis on building a diverse and inclusive workforce. How critical is this effort to Viacom's culture and the future success of the company?

We are deeply dedicated to promoting a culture of inclusion that cultivates strong communities of people with diverse viewpoints and experiences – communities that not only support

our employees, but our fans, talent and partners too. That's one reason why it's so important for Viacom to recruit, hire and retain employees from different backgrounds; we need to reflect the consumers we serve to continue making content that matters to everyone.

From a business perspective, the case for inclusion has never been stronger. All businesses require diversity of thought and experience to truly be successful and content businesses even more so. If we are truly committed to pushing the envelope on creativity, our workplace must be a welcoming environment for those ideas.

## Are there strong opportunities for women at senior leadership positions in the industry and what advice do you give to young women interested in a career in media?

There are more opportunities than ever for women in media, but there could – and should – be even more. Such progress must occur from the top. It's so important for women, especially those just starting out in their careers, to be surrounded by senior female role models who can offer them guidance. My advice to them is to seek out mentors and choose to work for organizations that have that support system in place. I have been fortunate to work with – and be mentored by – successful women throughout my time at Viacom, and it has made all the difference.

## Viacom is a leader in corporate responsibility and community engagement. Would you discuss these efforts and how deeply engrained this is as part of the values of the company?

Social responsibility has long been a part of our culture. Viacom's work to give back is largely centered on leveraging the power of our brands and platforms to drive positive impacts on the issues and causes that matter most to our audiences, from education and social justice to health and the environment. Recently, Nickelodeon held its 2017 HALO Awards, which honors and celebrates young leaders who are "Helping and Leading Others" to better their communities. That we can amplify the efforts of those making a difference and, in doing so, inspire others to act, is incredibly rewarding. Ultimately, doing good strengthens our connections to our fans as much as it does to each other, and the sheer breadth of pro-social initiatives that take place across the organization never ceases to amaze me. It's one reason why I'm so proud to work here. ●