

Does PBS get the support of viewers like you?

We need your support and we will interrupt your viewing until you give us money!

This seems to be the PBS mission during its pledge drive

Currently, it's the upteenth day during the upteenth time this year that my local PBS station, WETA, is looking for support from viewers. It may not be endless, but it sure feels like it.

Pledge month (?) is the time when the station starts playing "specials" that have been played dozens of times before, and interrupting them every fifteen minutes to ask for your support. In return, you will get any number of mugs/bags/videos/books based on the size of your contribution. Also, every other show seems to get interrupted—the Newshour, Washington Week, and most egregiously, the finale of the Great British Baking Show.

Enough!

Viewers like me do not like to watch tired, old "specials." Viewers like me hate having shows interrupted multiple times by the same talking heads giving repetitious pitches on why to give to the station. Viewers like me do not want mugs or tote bags. Viewers like me click off PBS the instant this pledge madness starts.

How can this model work today?

Here's a newsflash for PBS: Times have changed.

Hundreds of viewing options

All TV channels are under intense competition—both for viewers

and for advertising dollars. This is because viewers have many more options for entertainment than ever before: There are hundreds of cable and streaming channels, and also an internet chock-full of stuff to watch, read, react to and interact with.

It's an on-demand world

With DVRs and/or access to content on demand, people can watch shows on whatever schedule they choose. They can ignore advertising (and pledge drives).

There's a streaming channel for that

It used to be that you could only watch British shows like Downton Abbey or Inspector Morse on PBS. Now, you can stream them on specialized British TV/movies channels, and even watch them on Netflix.

Watch TV wherever you are, whenever you want

Smartphones and tablets can access the internet anywhere and everywhere. And users of these devices can buy/rent/download all sorts of entertainment to watch even when there is no internet access.

Interrupting viewer with a push-message is really old school

These days, inbound marketing is in favor. That's when potential customers/supporters come to you because you are providing great content/reasons for them to interact and buy/support from you. Forcing yourself on viewers, like the pledge drive on PBS does, is the complete opposite. It assumes a static audience that does not have any option but to sit there and listen to a sales pitch. It assumes that pushing a message is the best way to get action. It's the old way of doing things. And it may help PBS shed viewers, not gain them.

Is annoying viewers for a \$60 donation the best way to keep PBS afloat?

When you are aiming for lots of small donations, you have to do a lot more work. In this case, it means interrupting viewing more times, more often. It gets annoying. It's a turn-off. And I don't believe it's effective. I think it would be far more effective to concentrate on getting and retaining big, corporate or foundation sponsorships.

I understand PBS wants community support too. Perhaps instead of asking viewers to donate, PBS could emphasize obtaining a yearly membership with (real) special benefits (currently this is not clear on the PBS website). Instead of having pledge drives, PBS could include a 15-second ad/message for membership before popular shows.

What do you think? Do you watch PBS? Do you support PBS? Why or why not?