



UPFRONT LATIN



Latin Notas

LEILA COBO lcobo@billboard.com

A New Point Of View

All-Spanish Network Pushing 'Meaningful Programming'

Spanish-language TV is quite often the realm of the lowest common denominator. This isn't just an opinion. Turn on the TV and every other entertainment show is populated with scantily clad women. Speak off the record with producers from all networks, and they'll admit they constantly compromise their content to get ratings.

Enter **V-me**, the first all-Spanish national network presented by public TV in the United States. The 24-hour digital broadcast is the first venture of V-me Media, a partnership between PBS station Thirteen/WNET New York and the privately held Beaza Group.

Launched March 5, V-me (a play on words that loosely translates to "See Me") reaches

28 million homes in 18 markets, with plans to expand to 30 markets by year's end.

The station has been in the works for the past three years, its research including hundreds of interviews with focus groups around the country.

Overwhelmingly, V-me president **Carmen DiRienzo** says, what emerged was a demand for "meaningful programming."

"It's entertaining, intelligent and diverse," DiRienzo says of her network. "It is all the things Latins are."

V-me's programming falls into four categories: kids (a six-hour block of daily preschool programming), lifestyle and entertainment, factual, and movies and specials. The network mixes orig-

inal shows, including flagship interview program "Viva Voz" that rotates hosts and guests, along with Spanish-language versions of shows from a variety of sources, including channels like Discovery and the Food Network.

There is daily Latin-American cinema and also performances from around the world. Programming is helmed by senior VP of content **Guillermo Sierra**, who previously worked for Spanish Broadcasting System and Discovery.

The intent, says DiRienzo, who was previously VP of WNET, was not to simply "take a PBS channel and slap a track on it. It was for people who enjoy the benefit of quality programming for their



LEON KRAUZE, left, hosts **LOS TIGRES DEL NORTE** on V-me Media's flagship interview program 'Viva Voz.'

families in the language of their choice."

And while the programming is in Spanish, it's not always Latin-themed. The assumption—fortunately—is that Latins don't just want to hear about themselves.

One would think that a network like V-me is long overdue. But Spanish-language TV is only now beginning to diversify, much as radio has been doing for the past decade. Bilingual, youth-oriented channels like mun2 and MTV Tr3s, for example, are new phenomena that needed a critical mass of bilingual, bicultural youth in this country to really take off.

In fairness, other stations and networks have attempted the V-me route before, but ratings-driven advertising has made it difficult to compete with the bikini-clad dancers of other channels. But as a network aired by PBS stations, V-me doesn't have those constraints.

V-me is far more pluralistic. Like Univision and Telemundo (which, by the way, do have smart, engaging shows in their mix) it seeks to offer a little something for everyone, which makes its role all the more challenging.

biz For 24/7 Latin news and analysis, see billboard.biz/latin.