

# VARIETY

## Science a hot topic at Mip Junior market

### Educational content drawing interest from buyers

By [KATHY TRACY](#)



**T-REX EXPRESS:** Jim Henson Co.'s 'Dinosaur Train' is expected to draw global interest at Mip Junior.

Science and sitcoms are the hot commodities going into this year's Mip Jr. market. Shows like "Dinosaur Train," "Sid the Science Kid" and "Blast Lab" have generated interest from buyers in territories from Europe to Asia.

Sam Ewing, head of international programming at the Jim Henson Co. (which is bringing "Dinosaur Train" to Cannes), says that in the preschool arena the curriculum is more sophisticated than in years past but transparent at the same time.

"Nobody got kids to eat more spinach than Popeye," he says. "The programs we're doing stick to the ribs of kids in an entertaining, fun way, so the message gets through. You can't beat a program that sparks the imagination in kids."

Science even crosses deep cultural divides, Ewing notes, because socialization, instilling curiosity and learning science and math basics are universal for preschoolers.

"Al-Jazeera's children's network has already committed to 'Dinosaur Train' after screening the episodes, without changing any of the content," Ewing says.

Nicky Davies Williams, chief executive at "Blast Lab" producer DCD Rights, says that over the past few years, the interest in science and technology-based programming has increased worldwide.

"People (in general) and parents (in particular) are concerned about capturing the interest of science in children at a younger age," Davies Williams says.

However, Davies Williams acknowledges that producing shows for the 6-12 demo presents special challenges.

"That is a broad spread of classes," she says. "So what we did in 'Blast Lab' was to generalize the content to science that's in curriculums worldwide, such as Newton's laws, which children of that age will be looking at regardless of whatever country they live in."

Episode topics include surface tension and propulsion. "Children are learning even if they don't realize it," Williams says.

Music also is a universal language, says producer Josh Selig, founder of Little Airplane Prods. and creator of the anticipated "Small Potatoes!" Selig says his approach to the international market "is to create shows that are designed to travel."

"This means that the writing, design and curriculum are not specific to any one country," he says, "but are built around what we believe to be some common principles and storylines that will appeal to preschoolers anywhere in the world."

International producers are just as eager to sell science programming to the U.S. market, which has more stringent educational standards than many other countries.

"International companies are getting wise to what the U.S. networks expect from a preschool series, including some form of educational curriculum and script review process by early childhood experts," Selig explains. "The days of simply hoping that an international preschool show will get placed in the U.S. are gone. Countries are now learning that they must plan ahead for it."

Selig believes the next big trend will be creating and producing applications for the iPhone based on television properties.

"(PBS Kids') Sprout got in first with 'Dress Up Chica,' but many others are following, including Nickelodeon and Scholastic," Selig notes. "I believe that iPhones will present a real challenge to other companies that make interactive and gaming devices for young children, as these games are fun, easy to download and, in many cases, free."

As for other types of programs at Mip Junior, live-action comedies "Jinx" and "My Almost Famous Family" will hit the Croisette running.

"Scripted sitcoms are very much in demand," says Anke Stoll, head of acquisitions & co-productions at Little Portman. "And they are being produced using a very American filming style and approach."

But unlike animated curriculum-based shows, scripted series do not have the universal appeal of science-based shows, Stoll says: "It would be nice, but it doesn't happen. It gets trickier as kids get older" when selling to non-Western markets.

Even when comedies do sell, Stoll says, dialogue frequently needs to be changed.

"Some markets, for example, might be offended by certain content or not understand the humor," Stoll says, adding that there's a growing appetite for scripted action-adventure drama for kids, calling it "an underserved market."