

Tinker: Ideas worth copying

Flipping through an old notebook the other day, I came across an interview with Grant Tinker from 1980, when he was president of MTM Productions and overseeing a quirky series pilot called *Hill Street Station*.

One year later, that program, retitled *Hill Street Blues*, would begin NBC's rise from the ashes of third place among the networks. It wasn't a ratings success, but it was so popular with critics, loyal viewers and NBC station executives that it was an important morale-booster and washed the taste of "loser" out of NBC's mouth.

Another important thing happened that year to reverse NBC's fortunes. Shortly after acquiring *Hill Street Blues* from Tinker's company, NBC also acquired Tinker, appointed him chairman of the board and gave him the task of improving NBC's morale, programming and profits — though not necessarily in that order.

Why did Tinker take the job?

A few of his forgotten statements, made during his final year at MTM Productions, explain the jump from MTM to NBC in easily understandable television terms. Running NBC was, to put it bluntly, Tinker's idea of *Fantasy Island*.

"I have this fantasy," Tinker said in 1980. "Somebody's going to come back to me someday and ask me to run a network."

Perhaps he was just using the interview as a free classified ad, sending out the word to Hollywood that he was both eager and available. His specific battle plan, however, suggests that Tinker not only had a dream, but adhered to it once his fantasy came true.

"I would go to Larry Gelbart (creator of *M*A*S*H*, co-creator of *Lou Grant*), and to all these people that I know, and give them a series commitment. They could do whatever they wanted. The only thing I'd do to interfere would be to make sure two guys weren't doing the same thing.

"That way, I wouldn't be spending \$30 million on development, and I guaranteed our percentage rate of successful shows would be at least as high as anyone has now."

In practice, Tinker and NBC Entertainment President Brandon Tartikoff have had to be a bit less utopian, but Tinker's original attitude, however diluted, prevailed. For series creators who treasured creative freedom, NBC was the place to go.

Four years later, that attitude still holds true, and has reaped such rewards for NBC that ABC, long considered the most arrogant of networks in terms of "creative interference," has publicly announced an about-face. ABC's executives now promise to be less meddlesome, more courageous and much more patient.

Consequently, Tinker's impact on television can be measured at two networks, not one. Like Fred Silverman, the man he replaced at NBC, Tinker has strategies that are so convincing that the competition has found it easier to switch than fight.

The same thing happened under Silverman's reign, when his youth-appeal, sex-appeal programming propelled ABC from third to first place. Both NBC and CBS scrambled to copy Silverman's giggle-and-jiggle formula.

The difference, though, is that viewers were ultimately penalized when all three networks began to embrace Silverman's programming strategies. The changes Tinker has proposed have resulted in better programs, and have, if only temporarily, improved the medium.

It's also important to note that Tinker's guarantee, while not as memorable as Joe Namath's promise prior to Super Bowl III, proved just as bankable. For the season just ended, NBC's percentage rate of successful shows was indeed higher than those at CBS or ABC.

ABC attempted 19 series projects last season, but renewed only three: *Who's The Boss?*, *Moonlighting* and *Mr. Belvedere*. CBS tried 10 and kept two: *Crazy Like a Fox* and *Murder, She Wrote*. That gives ABC a season-end batting average of .158, CBS a healthier .200.

NBC, though, introduced 16 new series and retained four: *The Cosby Show*, *Highway to Heaven*, *Miami Vice* and *Hunter*. That's a .250 batting average, and makes Tinker and Tartikoff the heavy hitters of the three-network league.

By DAVID BIANCULLI



On television