

HBO'S NEW BLOOD, TRUE BLOOD

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by Sophia Banay

Time Warner's key cable channel is hoping a vampire series can vanquish Showtime and get its creative juices flowing again.

HBO likes the spotlight. And to introduce its vampire-themed fall drama, *True Blood*, to viewers, the subscription cable channel has been hamming it up something good.

In a comprehensive marketing attack—done by the show's creator Alan Ball and ad agency Campfire of Blair Witch Project fame—HBO has plotted 13 separate listed events, announcements, or product mailings between May 21, when teaser mailings went out to influential bloggers, and September 7, when the series premieres on HBO. An article in the *New York Times* described the campaign as perhaps “the most extensive that HBO has ever undertaken.”

It's not that HBO hasn't promoted its other shows with panache. For the launch of *Big Love* in 2006, it ran fake wedding announcements for the main characters in major papers like the *Times*. Before the original miniseries *John Adams* this spring, it partnered with the U.S. Postal Service in a campaign capitalizing on Adams' prolific letter writing.

This time though, the stakes—pardon the pun—are higher. HBO has gone years without a show that generated the fans of either *Sex and the City*, which went off the air in 2004, or *The Sopranos*, which had its series finale last summer. In *Treatment* and *Tell Me You Love Me*, two of the channel's newest shows, have been picked up for second seasons despite relatively small audiences and mixed critical reviews.

In the meantime, a crop of cable competitors, from Showtime to FX to AMC, have been encroaching on HBO's territory with offbeat, edgy original shows and characters, and plotlines that pushed the limit of what could be considered small-screen fodder.

Mary-Louise Parker's pot-dealing mom character from Showtime's *Weeds* has become a counterculture heartthrob and garnered the actress an Emmy nomination. *Mad Men*, a show on which HBO passed and which ended up on AMC, received six nominations.

HBO received a total of 85 Emmy nominations this year, one fewer than last year, but still impressive, especially considering that *The Sopranos* wasn't up for consideration for the first time in years.

“I'm curious, like everybody else,” about *True Blood*, says David Poland, who writes about HBO in his entertainment-industry blog. “The question of whether HBO is relevant in this regard is real.”

That question might explain the many bells and whistles of *True Blood*'s marketing campaign, which includes the launches of at least seven promotional “micro sites,” dispersed throughout the blogosphere and chockablock with videos portraying White House press conferences and civilian protests in the fictional world where vampires have just come out to live among mortals; mail-delivered samples of *Tru Blood*, the beverage at the heart of the show; and staged live petition-signing events, with actors posing as vampire supporters and detractors, in cities across the U.S.

But HBO bristles at the idea that the *True Blood* marketing campaign is unusually elaborate—or expensive.

“Comparatively, the budget is absolutely in the ballpark of all of our other series launches,” says Zach Enterlin, vice president of advertising and promotions at HBO. “This series' marketing campaign is commensurate with other programs.”

Enterlin adds that Alan Ball, who penned the Oscar-winning screenplay for *American Beauty* and created HBO's dark and popular *Six Feet Under*, drove much of the creative energy behind the promotional plans.

In terms of the popular appeal of vampires, HBO's timing could be perfect. Vampires are having a cultural moment: The upcoming movie *Twilight*, a vampire love story based on the bestselling series by author Stephenie Meyer, is getting plenty of attention, and just snagged the cover of *Entertainment Weekly*, despite its December release date.

Enthusiasm for *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* has proved to be “undead” since the show went off the air five years ago, with a recent resurgence of comic books and compilations.

And there's the power of the popular vampire series *Charlaine Harris* wrote on which *True Blood* itself is based, not to mention Alan Ball's following of devoted fans.

But in an increasingly competitive landscape for original cable programming, those factors might not be enough to guarantee true success for *True Blood*. HBO is hoping that its night-stalking marketing campaign will be.

