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## Fox, on the Hunt for Comedy, Sponsors Contest

### Teams With New York Television Festival to Find Fresh Voices

By [Sherry Mazzocchi](#)

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NEW YORK (AdAge.com) -- When Kevin Reilly, president of entertainment at Fox, was approached by The New York Television Festival to sponsor a comedy contest, his immediate reaction was to say yes. "There is a lot of talk about finding fresh voices, but when push comes to shove, there are not that many opportunities," he said.



Kevin Reilly

The winner of the contest will receive \$25,000 and a development deal with Fox. But as far as Mr. Reilly is concerned, he's eager to have the chance to see all of the contestants. "I would not be at all surprised if we find more than one creative voice," he said.

Finding new sitcoms has become a priority at Fox, which is eager to find a new "Simpsons" or "Family Guy." At the Television Critics Association Tour in July, Mr. Reilly made it clear he was on the hunt for the next Fox comedy. "My observation is that a lot of confidence has left the creative space on a day-to-day basis," he was quoted on Forbes.com in July. "I see really talented people coming in very skittish, not knowing what to pitch and what will sell, and I see executives trying to figure out where is that nerve to hit."

**Mixing it up**

Mr. Reilly said Fox wants to hear comedy pitches on the writers' turf, in their homes or in a restaurant. "We've got to do anything to mix it up," Mr. Reilly told the assembled critics in July. "Our comedy brand has been a little anemic. We're ready for our next 'Malcolm in the Middle.'"

Terence Gray, executive director and founder of the festival, said, "We'd wanted to do a comedy contest for a while" and decided the timing was right this year. They pitched the idea to Mr. Reilly, a festival board member, who quickly got Fox involved.

Mr. Gray conceived the 3-year-old festival as "Sundance for TV" and started it as way to bring independent producers together with TV executives and talent agents.

The festival will be held in Midtown Manhattan from Sept. 12-17. It will feature panel discussions, a day devoted solely to digital TV and screenings of independently produced pilots. The winners of the comedy contest will be announced at the awards show.

**Thrilled with response**

During the 12-day application period in June, more than 900 scripts poured in. Mr. Gray, as well as the festival's senior staff, read each one. Ned Canty, festival director, said, "I credit caffeine and my three-hour daily commute from Philadelphia for getting things done."

The festival team was thrilled with the response. "The quality of the scripts has far exceeded our expectations," said Mr. Gray.

A lot of vigorous debate is going on behind the scenes. "The hardest part of the whole process is knowing you can only give it to 25," said Mr. Canty. "We take our responsibility to the artistic community very seriously."

While the scripts are very diverse, the festival staff has made a parlor game out of noting recurring themes. Surveillance issues and Southeast Asians profiled as terrorists are prevalent. The influence of "Arrested Development," "The Office" and "Malcolm in the Middle" are also widely evident.

**Nurturing talent**

The pile will be winnowed down to 25 finalists. From there, the senior development team at Fox will review the scripts. Mr. Reilly will determine the winner from a carefully selected handful -- somewhere between three to ten scripts. "We're looking for a comedic voice," Mr. Reilly said, "not a properly formatted sitcom." Instead, the idea is to nurture talent.

When asked if the development deals would include shows on MySpace or Fox Interactive as well as on broadcast TV, Mr. Reilly said everything was now in play.

An optimistic Mr. Reilly told AdAge.com, "If you have talent, you can rise to the top. We can use a breath of fresh air in comedy."

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