

WILL RATINGS HEMORRHAGE FORCE CNN TO LOOK INWARDS?



Staring down one of its worst crisis in its, more than three decades of existence, CNN is faced with a dilemma. The network is in a predicament about which way it should move, as the countdown to the November elections begin with the Republican and Democratic national conventions round the corner. Does it uphold and rigidly adhere to its non-aligned stance and report neutrally or does it 'take sides' in the political debate. Whilst its rival networks Fox and MSNBC have secured double-digit progress, CNN with critics calling it 'dull and rudderless,' has declined by more than 40 percent. That is really a huge slump from the heights of the 1990s when it towered above the rest on the political scene. According to Nielsen, CNN averaged just 519,000 total viewers in weeknight prime time, incurring a loss of 42 percent in viewership, whereas Fox added 18 percent, reaching two million viewers, while MSNBC increased by 37%, to 855,000. Amazingly, this decline in viewership has not affected the networks bottom lines media research firm SNL Kagan, CNN is estimated to earn about \$400 million on just over \$1 billion in revenue from ad sales and subscriber fees. However, what should be a cause for worry is that this income has been fairly stagnant over the last few years. Analysts say that it's high time CNN changed and adapted to changing times, but CNN still believes that their traditional old-school approach is still the best. The network is eyeing the presidential campaign to prove the cynics wrong and have initiated changes that they believe will help them regain lost ground. Wolf Blitzer, an old hand at CNN, who will be prominently anchoring and reporting the conventions said, "In the next six months, there's going to be a huge amount of viewer interest, I think people will come back and watch us." CNN's refusal to have any political leanings, in contrast to Fox and MSNBC, who openly take sides, is what gives CNN its value. Its Washington Bureau chief, Sam Feist said that he did not think the average American would like to be told who he should vote for; he is quite capable of making decisions on his own. "This is going to be a really good year for CNN, despite all the stories by media writers," Feist said. "CNN's ratings have peaks and valleys that are higher and lower than those of our competitors. We have a different product." Industry watchers however, feel that sticking to its non-partisan stance is not the only reason for the networks debacle. It falls flat when compared to other networks and needs to go for a complete overhaul and employ better more competent people. Moreover, they opine, the news needs to made "livelier, more provocative, more opinionated." They have to find a way to become more opinionated without being partisan. Piers Morgan host of its flagship prime-time interview program, who can normally be relied upon to assess situations appropriately, was uncertain of what should be done. He said, "It's not rocket science. It's bleeding obvious." But how much opinion is too much? How can CNN exploit opinion "taking sides"? Brad Adgate, an analyst for ad firm Horizon Media, said, "It's possible to turn it around, but it gets harder and harder with each passing year. They have to create a franchise show first that can compete with Fox News and MSNBC and anyone else, and rebuild from there. It's a great brand name, and that will help." "When Larry King started, there was no competition," said Morgan. "Now, CNN, in the middle, has been squeezed. Everyone at CNN realizes the game has changed." Will CNN bow to the dictates of market demands, or will it remain loyal to its brand image? Analysts believe the former is the more likely move, it is not a question of will, it is when.