

The credit crunch: TV for cash-strapped viewers

The rise of thrift programming

The gloomy economic climate is creating growing demand for programmes that recognise viewers have less cash to spare, says Lucy Rouse

With the credit crunch biting a larger and larger chunk out of consumers' wallets every month, TV is one of the few pleasures that people aren't likely to be cutting back on. After all, there's nothing like an economic downturn to keep folk at home.

And all the signs are that life for UK consumers is likely to get worse before it gets better. As the price of petrol, gas and electricity continues to rise, UK house prices are sliding – last week HBOS reported that they fell by 11% in the first half of this year, the biggest slump for 25 years. Consumer confidence has nosedived accordingly, with stores such as Marks & Spencer, John Lewis and Laura Ashley all reporting lower year-on-year sales figures. Commercial broadcasters are also being affected: ITV is expecting its advertising revenue to fall by 20% in September.

With the economic climate changing so quickly, broadcasters are under pressure to deliver programmes that reflect this new, straitened world to viewers, regardless of the time it takes to commission, create and get new programmes to air.

But, faced with joyless news about the economic outlook, what programmes do viewers actually want to see on screen?

In the context of falling house prices and less disposable income, viewers might understandably want a variation on the early Noughties fare of wall-to-wall property shows and *Top Gear*-esque incitements to buy the latest speed machine.

For their part, broadcasters and producers are responding to the chillier climate with a wave of "thrift programming", from Gok Wan's *Fashion Fix* on Channel 4, which aims to prove "you don't need a fortune to look fabulous", to Martin Lewis' *It Pays to Watch* money-saving series on Five.

Meanwhile, older, more established series are being tweaked to reflect the new economic conditions. We talk to four programme-makers and one commissioner to find out more.

'Broadcasters must reflect the new, straitened world to viewers. But what do audiences actually want to see on screen?'

Gok Wan's Fashion Fix

The only TV fashion show to insist that "you don't need a fortune to look fabulous", *Fashion Fix* with the inimitable Gok Wan has yet to be reordered by Channel 4. Executive producer for Endemol Colette Foster is hopeful and, although she began developing the show with C4 this time last year, when the credit crunch had just begun, she knows that its "style on a budget" message is highly topical.

"We always wanted to be realistic about how much money people have got to spend and that they shouldn't feel pressured into spending what little money they've got on clothes," Foster says. This is a universal message, although it's perhaps not a motto that's overused by Victoria Beckham and other WAGs. "We're always fascinated to see what the WAGs are wearing but no matter how much they spend they always seem to be wearing the same things. We all love designer clothes but Gok

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A useful trend for Wan and the rest of the team on the show is the massive surge in sales of sewing machines – Argos reported in April that sales of the machines rose by 50% in the previous year. People, mostly women, are dusting off the ancient arts of mending and making do, finding ways of being inventive and – perish the thought – even being a little different in the process. "It's been fantastic for mums and grandmas because, in previous eras, fashion was all about DIY and getting out your sewing machine," Foster says.

The show's success is that Wan does invariably convince a studio audience that his creations are designer outfits, rather than the rag-tag of customised high street items he rapidly throws together. Which isn't to denigrate his achievements at all: anyone who can turn a hairband into a corsage deserves respect and a second series. With a share of about 9% to 11% at 8pm on a Thursday, let's hope he and Endemol get another run.



It Pays to Watch

"Martin Lewis is the man of moment – the credit crunch hero," says series producer Cat Lewis of the journalist and money-saving expert who has landed his first TV show after appearances on GMTV and Jeremy Vine's Radio 2 show.

The *Five* show is made by Money Saving Productions, the independent set up by the Lewis partnership last year to pitch the show to broadcasters. When the first series aired in January this year, the credit crunch was merely nibbling on most consumers' purse-strings. But the show's money-saving magazine format is now exceptionally topical and a third series is due to begin on 17 September with a fourth run already ordered for January next year.

"A lot of people perhaps wouldn't have thought of listening to what Martin's got to say but they now recognise the need because it's very timely, particularly with regards to food shopping," says Cat. She says that she personally has saved between £2,500 and £3,000 a year by following his advice.

Money Saving Productions originally developed a series for ITV called *Make Me Rich*, commissioned by Nick Thorogood. That idea foundered when Thorogood left the network to go the BBC. Instead *It Pays to Watch* became one of Jay Hunt's main



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commissions at *Five*.

"I see Martin as the Jamie Oliver of consumer journalism," says Cat. "He genuinely does inspire people to get their money in order – something which people can get in a tiz about."

She says the secret of the show's success is empowering people to take control and make changes themselves, rather than have Martin do it for them.

Martin Lewis has already claimed first blood in a campaign to tackle unfair bank charges. A test case is currently with the High Court, but meanwhile anyone who wants to try to reclaim fees from a bank can print out a template letter from Lewis' website. The show also tackles mortgage and loan rates, council tax, insurance and childcare. Just about everything, in fact, that viewers are worried about as they stare the prospect of recession in the face.

Twiggy's Frock Exchange

Indie Silver River is producing this new series for BBC2 to air in October, building on the idea of clothes parties. A clothes party is where guests bring at least one item of clothing they no longer want and where, they hope, they swap it for something they do want and which someone else doesn't.

Despite better than expected figures for retail spending in July, high street stores including fashion outlets are anticipating a general fall in demand for goods including expensive new clothes this autumn and winter.

Silver River has so far filmed three one-hour episodes, each based on a clothes party attended by 100 women and presided over by Twiggy, Lauren Laverne and *Crazia's* style director, Paula Reed. There's a certain amount of restyling of old – let's call them vintage – clothes and free stuff donated by designers.

"Filming it was bedlam. It's got a *Mamma Mia* vibe, with *Sex and the City* and the Women's Institute thrown in," says Silver River head girl Daisy Goodwin. "We take these hideous Laura Ashley things from the 1970s and turn them into sexy stuff that's very now."

Pitched to broadcasters in February and March this year, the show has a deliberate emphasis on thrift. "There's a general mood about that thrift is



cool. It's no longer clever to wear your wallet on your sleeve. The days of the WAG are numbered," Goodwin says.

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Does she feel the "thrift is cool" message goes beyond merely fashion TV?

"Definitely. There's a feeling that the relentless consumption of the past 10 years hasn't made us happy.

"Although the credit crunch is painful, as a nation we're not happy having all that stuff. As a national religion, shopping is bankrupt."

Goodwin naturally hopes that if it works for BBC2, the 3 x 60-minute series will be recommissioned. It will air as part of a season on fashion called *British Design Genius*.

Location, Location, Location



The leading brand in property TV shows starring the peerless Phil Spencer and Kirstie Allsopp has a relatively tough time reflecting short-term changes in the wider economy because it's filmed well in advance of transmission. So the series shown earlier this summer was shot last year, before the crunch had really begun affect UK consumers.

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C4 and producer RDF were upfront about this fact and did at least incorporate information on the housing market that was up to date at the time of broadcast. Kirstie and Phil also did three pieces on stamp duty which was duly earmarked for possible review shortly afterwards by the chancellor, Alistair Darling.

Next year's series of *Location* will of course reflect the fact that the housing market is no longer "rampant", in the words of Andrew Jackson, C4 commissioning editor, features. It will also be voiced close to transmission, allowing time for economic realities to be reflected in the programmes. "One of the joys of *Location* is that it's always giving good information and when a market is down you can't get enough good information. So I'm very happy with it," says Jackson.

More immediately, Jackson has commissioned Tiger Aspect to make *The Home Show* with architect George Clarke (poached from Five's *Build a New Life in the Country*). It's Clarke's first major show for C4 (he will present another new C4 series *Restoration Man* next year) and in 6 x 60-minute episodes he helps families and couples reconfigure the space they have in their existing homes, convincing them to stay put and use money they may have set aside to move in order to make home improvements instead.



River Cottage

Although a new series of *River Cottage* is being filmed in deepest Dorset before airing on C4 in October, celebrity chef Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall is not about to change his core message of eating well, growing your own veg and giving animals a good life before you slaughter them, bake them in hay and serve them with boiled flagolet beans.

Sometimes living this sort of good life involves spending good money – particularly if you frequent Hugh's farm shop in Axminster, Devon, where the food is sourced from luscious local suppliers but is somewhat more expensive than the out-of-town supermarket. Good food comes at a price.

However, series producer Sara Woodford, who worked on *Jimmy's Farm* and *How to Eat to Save Your Life* with Jamie Oliver, believes the series is relevant to these straitened times: "The holistic *River Cottage* approach to fresh, seasonal fruit and vegetables is less wasteful and it's going to save people money."

She says the Bristol families featured in the last and the next series of *River Cottage* are currently wheeling barrowloads of fruit and veg away from their allotment, it being harvest-time, while the *Butcher's Apprentice* strand is reintroducing viewers to where our food comes from.

"The cost element is sewn into the whole ethos of the programme. It's about getting the best out of local, seasonal food," says Woodford.

What about the regrettable fact that organic and even locally produced meat and veg often costs more than the standard produce at major supermarkets? "But everybody can grow their own veg and it invariably is cheaper than buying. Everyone can have their own slice of *River Cottage*, even if it's a small slice. I'm really keen on land use and having access to an area in which to grow fruit and veg, even if it's a polytunnel or a window box," says Woodford.