



Syfy Celebrates Genre, Fans on Its 25th Anniversary

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Over the past 25 years, much has changed in genre entertainment. Sci-fi, superheroes and fantasy have gone from the fringe to the absolute mainstream. Syfy, in all of its iterations, has been witness to the explosion of science fiction in popular culture, and now wants to celebrate the genre for the network's 25th birthday this September.

The massive month-long celebration has been in the works for more than a year, with the seeds planted in February 2016 when NBCUniversal consolidated Syfy and USA Network into a new network group.

"We spent the first three months looking mostly at culture and organization. Once we got that squared away, we turned our sights onto our roadmap and vision for the reimagination of Syfy as a brand and as a business," said Alexandra Shapiro, EVP of marketing and digital for NBCUniversal entertainment networks, which includes Syfy and USA.

"When someone mentioned that September 2017 would represent our 25th anniversary, I remember literally doing a jig with excitement. This is marketing gold, right? What better time to get back to our origins, our roots and pay homage to the essence of our brand and its meaning, than in its 25th year?"

she said.

The rebrand-with a focus on becoming a hub for science fiction as a whole-launched this past summer with Syfy's "it's a fan thing" campaign, culminating in a monstrous presence at San Diego Comic-Con in July.

This signaled a huge shift from the network's previously focus on their own IP.

"What we realized, given the breadth, depth and popularity of the genre, that the real opportunity was to be a champion of the genre at large, whether it was on our air or not, across every single category: TV, film, comics, books, games," said Shapiro. "We've seen an incredible surge in the consumption of genre content across all these categories. The cornerstone of the reboot was to be a champion of the fans who love it and consume it, and tap into that passion."

Syfy aims to cement their new mission statement throughout the entire month of September, with a blitzkrieg of new content and experiential marketing surrounding the network's 25th anniversary.

But Syfy wants to make one thing clear: it's not about them.

"When they have an anniversary, most people are self-referential or self-aggrandizing in their approach. We wanted to do the opposite. We wanted to turn the lens on the genre at large, just like we did in June with the rebrand, and celebrate the people, milestones and events that have fueled the genre over the last 25+ years," said Shapiro. "That's the strategic framework with how we approached this multiplatform celebration."

To start, the network partnered with Mythbusters star Adam Savage on a fan-centric podcast, "Syfy 25: Origin Series." Savage hosts the 15-part series, which features in-depth discussions with iconic creators in the science-fiction field, many of whom have shaped genre staples of the past 25 years, from Futurama to SYFY's own Battlestar Galactica.

With Savage's help, Syfy put together a guest list that includes old-timers and fresh faces, including Chris Hardwick, Frank Oz, Kevin Smith, Ron Moore and Neil Gaiman. Each will talk about their origin story within science fiction, and what made them lifelong fans.

All 15 stories will be released on September 8 as a collection, with animated vignettes from Laundry bringing some of the stories from the podcast to life.

"Each animation for each storyteller is different. We have a range of animation, of stories, of men and women, a diverse range of people," Shapiro said. "I couldn't be more proud of how we were able to bring this to life in such a modern way, especially for the millennial audience. The ability to make this

available through our digital ecosystem, boost it socially, and promote it on our linear platform to drive to it is a huge opportunity."

The network has also assembled an "Advisory Council" made up of creators well-versed in the genre to help Syfy on this journey. This Avengers-like team includes Savage, Bonnie Burton, Orlando Jones, John Barrowman, Grant Morrison, Jamie Broadnax and Patton Oswalt, with more names to be announced.

"As we go on this journey of getting back to our roots and our origins, we want to make sure that we have the leadership of people who are steeped in this space who can make sure that we're honest and we get this right. Everyone only has so many chances at that," said Shapiro.

"What we've set out to do is very ambitious, and we're not foolish enough or Pollyanna-ish enough or arrogant enough to go at it alone. The Advisory Council is going to be a great sounding board for us."

Syfy asked each council member broad questions about the genre that will appear as on-air interstitials during September.

While the Advisory Council launches this month, it's not a one-off marketing stunt, but the beginning of an ongoing dialogue for the network.

Another huge component of Syfy's rebranding is Syfy Wire, its revamped news organization dedicated 24/7 365 to everything happening in the genre, and it has a big role this month.

Starting September 1, Syfy Wire will unveil two Syfy25 listicles each and everyday, ranging from silly to more canonical lists that codify Syfy's point of view on the top films, TV shows and characters over the past 25 years.

"While we're espousing our point of view and bringing these to life in fun and creative ways with our unique, new Syfy Wire voice, the hope is that it will spark debate and the fans will chime in and tell us where we got them right, and got them wrong," she said. "We'll encourage fans to get involved in the debate, because it's that repartee that is core to the behaviors of fans who love to participate in and around the space."

Over the past six months, Syfy has been rounding up their fans for testimonials, giving them the microphone and spotlight to share their passion.

These are done in concert with the aforementioned listicles, and crafted into on-air interstitials. Longer form versions will appear on Syfy's YouTube channel and across their social platforms.

"It's very robust. You will not be able to be on any platform and not see some kind of homage to the genre," said Shapiro. "We hope that in aggregate it will make a big statement and help reinforce the new direction for the channel and our vision for being the go-to place for sci-fi aficionados."

Their efforts will be bolstered by the network's continued commitment on social media. Syfy's main handle @SYFY is now 80 to 90 percent dedicated to promoting developments in the genre at large, with a micro-content calendar focused on anniversaries, events, milestones and connecting to Syfy Wire's listicles and the "Origin Series" podcast.

"That's a big shift for us too. Before, our handle used to be about our own IP. Now we have separate handles for our IP, and we use the masterbrand handle to be a blow horn for everything happening in the genre at large."

Throughout the month, Syfy we'll be orchestrating programming stunts on their air, with none bigger than bringing Battlestar Galactica back during their anniversary weekend.

The network will re-telecast the entire miniseries commercial free, along with the entire first season. All 80 hours of the show will be available on Syfy's VOD platforms.

Syfy will have wraps around the BSG marathon, and around the network premiere of Nathan Fillion and Alan Tudyk's Con Man.

The campaign also features an experiential component, including a yearlong partnership with Reddit, complete with Syfy's own branded Snoo.

The collaboration kicks off with an AMA ("ask me anything") series featuring some of the same creators and experts from their Origins podcast.

In addition, they've teamed up for a sci-fi gift exchange, modeled after Reddit's wildly popular Secret Santa initiative. 1,600 fans who signed up will get a basic gift, while Savage, Reddit co-founder Alexis Ohanian, and other big names will surprise one lucky fan each with a gift specifically curated for them.

Throughout the month and across the country, Syfy is teaming up with Alamo Drafthouse for a nationwide Syfy25 Screening Series that includes interactive screenings of films such as "Close Encounters of the Third Kind, RoboCop, Serenity, Galaxy Quest" and "Spaceballs."

"We've got people who are heading out to Devil's Tower, the national monument in Wyoming, for the Close Encounters of the Third Kind screening.

We're going to have a mashed-potato- building contest apropos of the movie," said Shapiro.

Each event will have a similar fun-filled wrinkle.

"What's important is having IRL experiential ways of engaging and interacting with our fanbase, addressing their passions, and being a conduit to expressing those passions," said Shapiro. "That's what being a champion of fandom is all about. Hopefully we're serving these passions and these desires in a myriad of ways."

It doesn't stop there. Throughout the month, Syfy will be surprising fans by sending them gifts through direct messaging, or creating custom content for them. Why?

"Just because we care about them. Doing that in a really big way right now will set in place the right foundation we need for everything we have in store as we move forward," said Shapiro.

Syfy is just getting started in its mission. But make no mistake, Syfy's plan very much includes its IP-focused original programming that began with 12 Monkeys and The Magicians, and continues with the adaptation of Grant Morrison's graphic novel Happy! and the Superman prequel Krypton.

"When I say we are an advocate for the genre at large, as a TV network, as a global multimedia brand, you can't do that credibly without having powerful IP. We're as committed as ever to our IP," said Shapiro. "But we have an opportunity to be even bigger than ourselves. We only have so many swings a year for our IP. The genre becomes the meat of the sandwich that is consistent, that can run horizontally 365 days a year."

It's Syfy25 this month, but soon it will be Syfy365.