

Soft soap treatment

In her second article on home shopping **Sophia Chauchard-Stuart** moves from the delivery of infomercials to the content and schedules, and discovers the serious side of retail programming

Home shopping television and infomercials are often a derided sector of the television industry – the not-quite-television programming that appears during the twilight hours.

Categorised by many in the business as 'low rent TV', most people's perceptions of home shopping (if they don't watch it) are of a world where bouffant-haired presenters are pathologically enthusiastic about paste jewellery and the latest in exercise equipment.

Costume jewellery still has its place on home shopping channels, but the whole business has come a long way since its inception as an off-shoot of direct response radio in the 1940s, when commercial sponsors' products were featured throughout certain programmes. With the advent of toll-free 800 telephone numbers in 1967, direct response television boomed.

It also provides a measurable response for marketers in a way that conventional advertising does not. Such a quantifiable 'hit' is essential in a retail economy where units

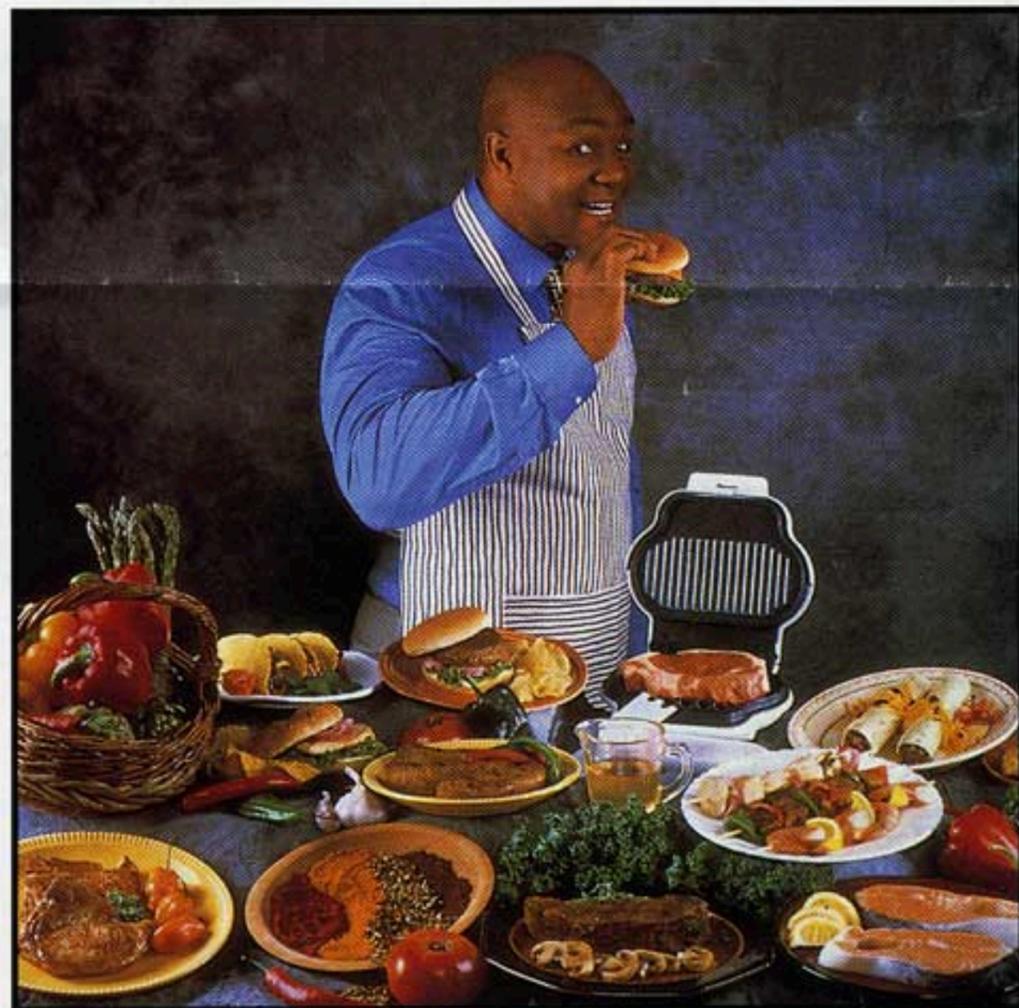
sold must surpass promotional spend.

Which is why the Fortune 500 companies (*Fortune* magazine's annual listing of top international blue chip companies) have now entered the arena. The big names in retail have realised that home shopping television (live shows) and infomercials (pre-recorded, usually 25-minute programmes) offer a way to sell their products to an increasing number of people who would rather surf the channels late at night than cruise busy shopping malls during the day.

According to Goldman Sachs' estimates, electronic retail via the television is now worth \$5 billion and growing fast. Aggressive expansion into new territories like Asia and Europe has seen National Media Corp, owner of Quantum International (the world leader in infomercial production which also operates Q24, a 24-hour infomercial channel), increase its turnover by 73% in the last year.

QVC, the international channel tagged 'the virtual shopping mall that never closes', is now available in 90 million homes worldwide. As the company moves into countries with high GDPs (gross domestic product), such as Germany, it persuades big names such as Sony to join the QVC experience.

In the past few years, the electronic retail industry has worked hard on improving its image, both on and off screen. Home shopping channels like QVC have created a cosy on-screen atmosphere. Plenty of soft colours in faux living-room sets have established a homely atmosphere that belies the hard sell. The presentation style is sharper now, more professional and instinctive as presenters respond live to the



Boxer George Foreman demonstrates the value of third-party star endorsement

volume of interest generated by a product. As long as the telephone rings the presenters will sell.

SCHEDULING INFOMERCIALS

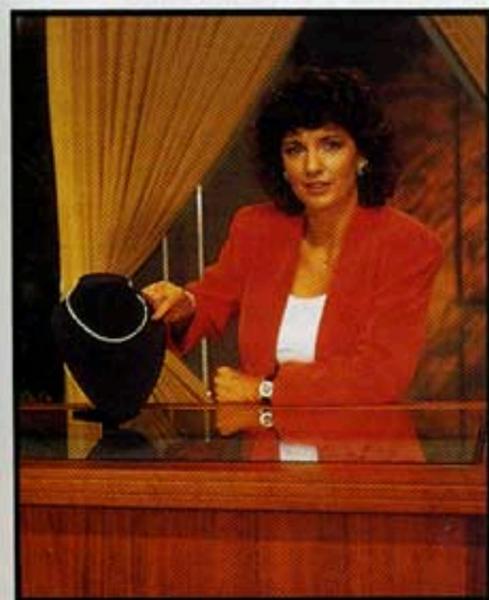
'Think local, act global' was the message from many speakers at the recent Promax 96 conference. The world's marketing and promotional executives in electronic media gathered in London to discuss how best to launch new channels and take advantage of emerging technologies. Meanwhile, those working in electronic retail are already putting this mantra into action.

Pick any country on the

television world map and, chances are, one of the big names in home shopping has taken advantage of the downtime on terrestrial, cable and satellite channels.

In recent years, home shopping television has taken a global branding stance, melding this with a concern for local tradition, local products and different cultural presentation styles – with great success. Moving into Germany this month, QVC has taken its cameras out of the studio and into the real world, with coverage of Oktoberfest. In the US it regularly celebrates local manufacturing by sending camera crews on location.

With an increase in channels ➤



QVC: creating a homely atmosphere