

ESPN Has Fallen and Can't Get Up

The biggest company in the San Fernando Valley – in fact, in the entire Los Angeles area – is the Walt Disney Co. So it's increasingly alarming to see the company continue to fumble with ESPN, which is the biggest chunk of Disney's biggest division.

The sports channel accounted for the deeply disappointing portion of Disney's generally disappointing earnings report last week. Subscribers have been leaking from ESPN since its peak in 2011, and lately that leak has widened. It's not quite a screen-door-on-a-submarine kind of leak, but it's getting there. Worse: Disney doesn't appear to know what to do with ESPN. If you cup your ear to hear Disney's plan for rescue, you'll hear crickets.



ONE MORE THING

Charles Crumpley

Granted, a lot of ESPN's problem isn't Disney's direct fault; it has to do with larger societal trends. Thanks to the internet, fans can get their sports highlights online for free. And thanks to the so-called over-the-top bundles, cable subscribers have been furiously cutting the cord. Since ESPN is the most expensive cable channel at more than \$7 a month for each subscriber, it makes any cable package

that includes ESPN a pricey one, making it a ripe target for cord cutters.

But some of the problems were caused by Disney and the sports channel. For one thing, ESPN keeps paying ever-larger sums for rights to broadcast games. How could they have allowed that to happen? Given the declining state of the cable industry, it is stunning that Disney and ESPN haven't done a much smarter job of negotiating down those costs. I mean, think of all the tenants who hammered down their rents in mid-lease back in 2009 and 2010. And it's not as if the sports leagues have all that many competitors to ESPN that could broadcast games. There's ESPN and – what? –

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channel 442 and 443, maybe.

But the most dunderheaded misstep was ESPN's decision to go political. As you well know, you can go up or down your cable listings and find plenty of channels with partisan types yelling past each other. I used to think of ESPN as a welcome respite from that; a safe place where you could stop, nestle in and learn about something newsworthy that specifically and pointedly wasn't political. But alas, now you get a heavy dose of pious partisan sermonizing on ESPN, too.

Sometimes I agree with the political views of the ESPN commentators, and sometimes I don't. It doesn't matter. The point: there is no business reason for a sports channel to take sides in our country's political divide, thereby frosting off one side or the other. I wonder what was said in the meeting when managers decided to veer down the partisan path. "Hey! Here's an idea: Let's drive off half of what remains of our subscribers!" Maybe they thought they were improving their product, but Coca-Cola chiefs thought the same thing when they proudly unveiled the disaster of New Coke.

Regardless of whether ESPN's problems are

self-inflicted or result from a changing market, the big and important question is this: What is Disney's plan to turn around ESPN? That's the part that is really alarming. There doesn't appear to be one. True, ESPN has gone through some furloughs, but that's a decision to reduce costs, not a strategy to win back viewers. Disney Chief Executive Bob Iger recently denied that ESPN is too political, so the campaign to alienate half the audience apparently will continue. And any move to join the cord cutters and stream more sports is a decision to get into a low-margin business that will hurt the high-margin cable franchise.

It reminds you of that old television commercial in which an older woman groans, "I've fallen and I can't get up!" ESPN – the biggest piece of the Valley area's biggest company – has fallen. And Disney appears flummoxed about how to get it back up.

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On the other hand, Disney just pulled off a coup for its ABC television network.

ABC announced early this month that Ryan Seacrest would be the permanent co-host with Kelly Ripa on the "Live! With Kelly" morning show. That was immediately intriguing because it brought up the possibility that Seacrest could move his reality-show powerhouse, "American Idol," to ABC. As you may recall, "Idol" ended its long run last year on the Fox network.

Last week, it was reported that yes, "Idol" is moving to ABC.

What will "Idol" do for ABC? Well, as others have pointed out, the show's lowest-rated season over its 15-year run on Fox would make it ABC's second-rated show today. What's more, "Idol" will be a nice complement to ABC's "Dancing With the Stars" and "The Bachelor/Bachelorette."

In Seacrest, ABC got much more than just a partner for Ripa.

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Want to Help? Employ the Autistic

By JOANNE LARA

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, one in 68 children (or 14.7 per 1,000 eight-year-olds) in the United States has been identified with autism spectrum disorder. And each year more than 50,000 individuals with autism graduate from high schools across the country and 80 percent of these individuals remain unemployed seven years after they graduate, according to Autism Speaks, an advocacy group.

If we could place one third of these 50,000 students in meaningful employment during that seven-year period after graduation, we could successfully decrease the amount of taxpayer's dollars spent (\$265 billion in 2015) on state and federal benefits, according to Autism Speaks.

The solution is to bring back middle- and high-school vocational training centers and teach our youth with autism skills sets, such as horticulture, bakery, medical data coding, car detailing, gardening and lawn care. Along with the kiddos we lose to the gangs and then the prison system annually, we would significantly reduce cradle-to-grave Social Security payouts, and at the same time this subgroup actually would be paying taxes rather than the opposite.

Youths with autism are graduating from high school at 18 or 22 years of age with no skill set. Many don't even have an email account; you can't have a job if you don't have email.

In 2000 when I first began teaching students with autism in the Los Angeles Unified School District, the Inclusion Movement was in full

swing. That meant our students with autism were either fully included in a general education classroom with their peers or they were in a special day class and were mainstreamed into a general education classroom with their typical peers for whatever percentage of the school day that their individual education plan team agreed was appropriate for the student.

Consequently, our students with moderate to severe autism were no longer exposed to vocational skill sets that could potentially equate to a job when they graduated. So, while full inclusion proved beneficial in many areas, such as social and emotional ones, it left vocational skills out of the equation. We took two steps forward but three steps back in that our students with moderate to severe disabilities were biding time in a general education classroom but not graduating with skills necessary to get and keep a job. We must ask ourselves: in retrospect, did we truly serve these individuals?

The Autism Works Now program that I lead, along with director Susan Osborne, is teaching pre-employment skills needed to land and keep a job and addresses this core deficit. Candidates with autism and related differences meet once a week in a facilitated workshop to not only build their resumes, learn how to talk to co-workers on the job, research a job, get an interview for a job and follow up after the interview but also how to maneuver their way around Google docs, use Google maps to get to and from a job interview and most important of all, increase their self-confidence and understanding of their rightful place in the community.

It would be so helpful I we could get small and

mid-sized businesses in the San Fernando Valley area – and kudos to Ralphs and Traders Joe's, which have been employing our youth for more than 10 years – to offer paid internships and jobs to autistic youths. It also would be helpful to get the federal government on board with restructuring the tax credit incentives so that small and mid-sized businesses would benefit from hiring employees with disabilities. If we could do that, and bring back vocational centers, we might be able to change the way that autism is viewed in this country at the same time we increase their quality of life and decrease the federal and state hand-out money.

A congratulatory shout-out to our own Valley Industry and Commerce Association member, William Pond, field representative for Assembly Member Raul Bocanegra, who just hired Luke Guastero, an Autism Works Now candidate who has a bachelor's degree from California State University – Northridge in city planning, in an intern position at the San Fernando District 39 Office.

Who doesn't want to wake up and have a place to go each day? No one. Not me and not you, and not individuals with autism, or any disability. We need to all be a part of the solution and ensure that our youths' lives are full and meaningful, and that they have the opportunity to be vital contributors to our community. We need to help these individuals take their seat at the table.

Joanne Lara is executive director of Autism Works Now in Woodland Hills and is the founder of Autism Movement Therapy Inc. She is the author of "Autism Movement Therapy Method: Waking up the Brain!"

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