



O'Brien Conjures 'Carnac' for 'Tonight Show' Ratings (Update1)

By Andy Fixmer



June 1 (Bloomberg) -- **Conan O'Brien**, who makes his debut as host of NBC's "The Tonight Show" this evening, may draw younger viewers to television's longest-running late-night program by adding more skits and comedy routines.

The former "Late Night" host is bringing characters and sketches from his previous show, including "In the Year 2000," with jokes about future developments; "Noches de Pasion," a spoof of Spanish-language soap operas; and "Triumph the Insult Comic Dog," O'Brien said on a May 26 conference call.

The emphasis on quirky, scripted bits reflects O'Brien's early career as a writer for "Saturday Night Live" and "The Simpsons." Predecessor **Jay Leno**, whose strength is in stand-up comedy, lost 35 percent of the "Tonight Show" audience ages 18-49 since 1993-1994 -- a bigger drop, during an era of shrinking TV viewership, than O'Brien's 24 percent among the age group most coveted by advertisers.

O'Brien's "comedy style is more in keeping with what works with younger viewers," said **John Rash**, director of media analysis at advertising agency **Campbell Mithun** in Minneapolis. "Younger audiences expect and want the more sardonic style of humor that Conan delivers."

General Electric Co.'s NBC is betting fans of O'Brien's 12:30 a.m. "Late Night" will tune in an hour earlier. Leno, 59, ended his 17-year "Tonight Show" run last week and will start a 10 p.m. NBC talk show in September.

O'Brien, 46, is bringing sidekick **Andy Richter**, the **Max Weinberg** 7 band and his "Late Night" writing staff.

Carson's 'Carnac'

Many "Late Night" segments will appeal to "Tonight Show" audiences, O'Brien said on the conference call. Under **Johnny Carson**, who retired in 1992, the show featured routines including "Carnac the Magnificent."

"I used to think to myself, 'This bit could work at 11:30,'" O'Brien said of his "Late Night" skits. "I could have probably as a child sold these bits to Johnny Carson. They're just fun, sort of old-school 'Tonight Show' pieces."

O'Brien will also add new routines, he said. Guests this week include actors **Will Ferrell**, **Tom Hanks** and **Gwyneth Paltrow**, and musical acts **Pearl Jam**, **Green Day** and **Sheryl Crow**.

"The 'Tonight Show' guest list will be more mainstream and Main Street than those who appeared on

his last show," Rash said. O'Brien will get "higher-profile and more-conventional television and movie performers."

Changing late-night hosts is a gamble for NBC. "The Tonight Show With Jay Leno" has been the most-watched program at 11:30 p.m. weeknights for 14 years, averaging 5.04 million viewers a night this season, according to Nielsen. **David Letterman's** "Late Show" averaged 3.79 million on CBS. "Late Night" pulled in about 1.96 million.

Younger Viewers

O'Brien did better than Letterman and Leno in holding younger broadcast viewers, who have drifted to the Internet, video games and cable TV. "Late Night" drew 486,000 viewers ages 18-34 this season, or 71 percent of the 1993-1994 average, according to Nielsen. Leno's audience in that age group fell 40 percent in the same period to 735,000, while Letterman's shrank 78 percent to 501,000.

Jimmy Fallon of "Saturday Night Live" took over "Late Night" in March. The show continues to draw more viewers than **CBS Corp.'s** "Late Late Show" with **Craig Ferguson**.

NBC may continue to win the biggest late-night audiences because viewers are trained to tune in, **Brad Adgate**, research director at New York-based advertising firm Horizon Media Inc., said in an interview. Outside of network prime-time schedules, audiences are slow to change programs, he said.

GE, based in Fairfield, Connecticut, rose 37 cents, or 2.7 percent, to \$13.85 at 12:45 p.m. in New York Stock Exchange composite **trading**. Before today the shares declined 17 percent this year.

'Serious Baton'

NBC first aired the "Tonight Show" in 1954, putting **Steve Allen** in the host's chair. **Jack Paar** inherited the program in 1957 and Carson took over in 1962, joined by sidekick **Ed McMahon** and band leader Doc Severinsen. In 1992, NBC handed the job to Leno, passing over Letterman, now 62.

"It's a serious baton being passed to Conan," said **Shari Anne Brill**, senior vice president of audience analysis at New York advertising firm Carat USA. "He's inheriting a legacy."

O'Brien's style of humor may alienate audiences in middle America, Brill said in an interview. That could give Letterman the opportunity to retake the lead, she said.

"Leno is folksy and has mainstream appeal," Brill said. O'Brien "doesn't appeal to middle America."

On the conference call, O'Brien sought to quell concerns about the breadth of his appeal.

"My show has always just been silly," O'Brien said. "And I think silly should work for all kinds of people."

The challenge for O'Brien is to capitalize on the initial interest, said **Andy Donchin**, director of media investment at Carat USA.

"It will be important for Conan to start strong out of the gate," Donchin said. "He has to do a good job so the people sampling him will stay."

To contact the reporter on this story: **Andy Fixmer** in Los Angeles at afixmer@bloomberg.net

Last Updated: June 1, 2009 12:48 EDT

©2009 BLOOMBERG L.P. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. [Terms of Service](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Trademarks](#)