

May 12, 2026

TV SHOW GENRE PROFITABILITY

Linear TV networks, cable channels and stations employ a wide variety of program genres. These vary greatly in terms of program costs or licensing fees, the right to present them as reruns, their ability to attract audiences and target certain demographic segments, etc. However, each genre must fit into an overall programming strategy and the underlying business plan of the network, channel or station, which balances anticipated costs against revenues for the totality of its content. In this exclusive analysis, we estimated the incomes and pre-tax profit margins of all of the linear TV operations on a national and local level. We determined that linear TV in its entirety generated a 19% pre-tax profit, including its digital and CTV ventures. When the latter are deducted, the average pre-tax profit margin rises to 21%.

In the second phase of this breakthrough analysis, we estimated the average pre-tax profit margins generated by each of 14 commonly utilized program genres as well as the norms for the various dayparts in network operations. Before commenting on these findings, we should note that they are intended as averages; within each genre and network type or daypart there will be significant variations from the norms, depending on the quality of the content, how often it has been seen, how it is scheduled, etc.

With that important caveat in mind, the results of our analysis are summarized on an index basis in the accompanying table.

As shown, the main profit centers for broadcast TV networks by daypart are the early AM and daytime hours, primarily due to low program costs and steady advertiser demand for early morning entries like *Today* and *Good Morning, America*. As with daytime game shows, soaps and talk shows, there is a high degree of commercial clutter that provides more ad positions for the sales force to exploit in these programs. As a result, both dayparts perform well above the norm in yielding pre-tax profits: the early AM shows, in aggregate, operate at 67% above the industry average and the daytime shows index at 129. In contrast, the networks make only modest profits in primetime and are losing money on sports and their late-night entries.

Looking more closely at the broadcast TV networks' primetime situation, their high-cost dramas and sitcoms perform very poorly compared to the much cheaper newsmagazine and reality fare.

The syndication picture is considerably brighter, as the three most common staples—small claims court shows, game shows and talk shows—all function at well above the industry norms. This is

**PRE-TAX PROFIT MARGIN INDICES
FOR LINEAR TV PROGRAM TYPES
2025**

	Index
I. BROADCAST TV	
Networks	
Early AM	167
Daytime	129
Early News	95
Primetime	23
Late Evening ¹	---
Sports ¹	---
Primetime Genres	
Newsmagazine	128
Reality	115
Sitcom	10
Drama ¹	---
Syndication	
Court Show	200
Game Show	157
Talk Show	162
Stations	
News	125
II. CABLE	
Primetime News	214
Reality	205
Documentary	190
Off-Network Sitcom	143
Off-Network Drama	105
Comedy	95

Note: The average profit margin for the total industry equals 100 in these index calculations

¹Genre loses money by a slight margin (5-10%).

Source: Media Dynamics, Inc.

also true for a number of cable program genres. Cable primetime news is the major profit maker and reality shows rank close behind, in both cases as a result of high degrees of commercial clutter, low costs and, in the case of news, continuing audience strength coupled with strong advertiser demand. Interestingly, off-network sitcoms also perform well, due to their unlimited rerun capabilities, but this is less evident for off-network dramas. In contrast, cable comedy shows, while still profitable, lag behind the other genres, partly due to the high fees commanded by their hosts.

The basic finding in this analysis is very clear. As has always been true, the "non-premium" genres are, by far, TV's most profitable types of content while sports and quality dramas are, in effect, loss leaders. They are needed to provide a sense of balance on most network or cable program lineups, offering nothing but reality and newsmagazines would drive away many viewers. And, as we have already pointed out, within the averages there are numerous variations. Some dramas do well and make money for the network, but when a high-cost drama series bombs in the ratings and is cancelled, the network still has to run whatever number of episodes it contracted for, often giving away its commercial time at bargain basement prices. Consequently, quality dramas are now considered a high-risk option necessary for schedule balance, but more likely to lose money than reality fare and many sitcoms. Sports is an entirely different situation. Even if these presentations lose money in their own right, they attract advertisers willing to pay high CPMs, offer opportunities to promote the network's entire program schedule to viewers, and can bolster the network's overall Nielsen rating averages, which is a major aid in the annual upfront time sale. Sports can also be bundled with other genres to support higher CPM demands and it is a valuable ad revenue driver for the networks' O&O TV stations as well as other affiliates.