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Trump brings star power to reality TV

Mogul delivers fame to genre that had lacked it

By [CHRISTINE CHAMPAGNE](#)

For more than two decades, the New York real estate developer plastered his name all over buildings and golf courses, and wrote bestselling books, while the ups and downs of his personal and professional life were chronicled by tabloids and business magazines alike.

Even Donald Trump's hairstyle got press.

This profile contrasted sharply with that of say, Simon Cowell -- who was to the U.S. a rather obscure Brit import at the time "American Idol" was launched in 2002 -- or Jeff Probst -- a little-known multihyphenate when the first "Survivor" took off in 2000.

Indeed, when "The Apprentice" launched in 2004, Trump didn't exactly fit the mold for reality TV, where contestants had typically been the stars.

"It was a risk -- Trump is a polarizing figure," concedes NBC reality topper Craig Plestis of reality guru Mark Burnett's fateful decision to build "The Apprentice" around Trump. The gamble paid off. The skein became a cultural phenomenon in its first season, averaging 20.7 million viewers, according to Nielsen, and gave NBC its first big reality hit at a time when its dominance in the realm of scripted programming was decidedly on the wane.

This was, in no small part, because of Trump's sheer force of personality: In a programming genre previously dominated by plucked-from-the-crowd contestants like Richard Hatch and Kelly Clarkson, "The Donald" was an established star recognizable by definite article and first name.

Even his sidekicks in the "Apprentice" boardroom, the since-fired-herself Carolyn Kepcher and George Ross, and later, his grown-up daughter and son, Ivanka Trump and Donald Trump Jr., became minor TV stars.

"The show had to be grounded in credibility," Plestis reflected, "and we had it in spades with Donald Trump."

In turn, Trump credits the show with raising his public profile.

"Since this show happened, where I've really become well known is with young kids," Trump says. "I had missed that generation. Now, 12-year-olds are coming up to me and saying, 'You're fired.'"

According to E-Poll -- a company that researches public attitudes toward brands and celebs -- Trump is recognized by face alone by well over 90% of the U.S. population, an "awareness" level similar to Oprah Winfrey.

Meanwhile, "The Apprentice" has also made Trump -- who's net worth has been pegged near \$3 billion -- even richer. According to Forbes, Trump, who not only receives a per-episode "Apprentice" salary but also gets a cut of the integrated ads, earned \$32 million from June 2006 to June 2007 solely from entertainment endeavors.

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