Once again, executives in the children’s television business from around the world are jetting into MIP Junior and MIPCOM for a few days (and nights) of intense networking, trend analysis, and most important of all, deal-making. Buyers have drawn up their content wish lists and are bracing themselves for the inevitable onslaught from producers and distributors.

Jules Borkent, the senior VP of global acquisitions and international programming at Nickelodeon, says the golden rule for him is to find “shows that are compatible with what we produce ourselves. The first thing any content owner needs to do is understand what Nickel is about. If they do that, they’ll realize everything we do is based around comedy — because that’s what our audience expects from us.”

When making deals, Borkent has a wide degree of flexibility, “but we don’t like enhanced acquisitions,” he says. “Where we come in early on a show and have the opportunity to shape the creative so that it fits our requirements. As a general rule, I’m always looking for shows that have a minimum of 13 episodes.”

One of Borkent’s most successful acquisitions over the years has been the preschool phenomenon Peppa Pig. More recently, he acquired ALVINNNTT and the Chipmunks from PGS Entertainment, Zack & Quack from Zoelio Kids and Max & Shred from Breakthrough Entertainment.

Ahead of MIPCOM, Borkent says, “I’m open to anything, but my acquisitions follow the needs of the network closely. At the moment we have a lot of preschool. So I’m focusing on original comedy animation ideas for 6- to 10-year-olds. I’m also keeping a lookout for interesting game-show formats.”

**SINGING DISNEY’S TUNE**

At a general level, content requirements for Disney Channel, Disney XD and Disney Junior are similar to Nickelodeon’s. Live action and animation are both priorities and content needs to be complementary to existing titles.

“On top of content from the U.S., we’re looking for shows that do two things,” explains David Levine, the VP of programming, production and strategic development at Disney Channels in Europe, the Middle East and Africa (EMEA). “Firstly, shows that will help our channels fulfill their broadcast obligations with regard to European content. Secondly, shows across genres that will appeal to kids in EMEA.”

For the most part, Levine is looking for content that can work across all markets in EMEA, “though there is some scope for tactical acquisitions market by market,” he adds. “We also get situations where certain kinds of content are tolerated more in some markets.”
than others. An example would be dubbed live action, which is a bit of a challenge in a market like the U.K."

One model that works well for Disney EMEA is telenovela-style live action. An example is Violetta, produced in Argentina with an international Disney audience in mind. Now in its third season, it has proved popular right across Europe, including in Northern European markets like Scandinavia.

In terms of more experimental live-action projects, says Levine, Disney EMEA recently commissioned Evremoor, a comedy-suspense four-part serial that will be produced in the U.K. by Lime Pictures but shown on Disney Channels around the world, including the U.S. The lead character is an American teen who lives with her mom, brother, stepdad and step-siblings in a large, spooky manor on the edge of creepy English moors. The concept is from Tim Compton and Diane Whitley, who were both involved in the international version of the Benelux live-action hit House of Anubis for Nickelodeon.

As for animation, "We've had a lot of success with the preschool show Zou, made by the French company Cyber Group Studios," says Levine. "And we're also working with Je Suis Bien Content on Boyster, an animated comedy about a boy who is part oyster."

Other series where Disney EMEA has played a lead creative and financial role include the preschool show Henry Hugglemonster and Randy Cunningham: 9th Grade Ninja.

As for his buying strategy at MIPCOM, Levine stresses that there is no point in replicating what Disney already does so well. "We don't need sitcoms, but we are looking to build our live-action development slate and will be meeting production companies that have strong creative and writing talent. In animation, comedy is always critical because the audience loves it. And if it is repeatable, that's even better. In addition, I'd say our European channels are always looking for classic European heritage animated series with strong storytelling."

TOON TIME

At Turner Broadcasting System EMEA, Patricia Hidalgo, the senior VP and chief content and creative officer for kids, says that her priority this year is Boomerang.

"We have made a strategic decision to elevate this channel to become our second flagship kids' brand next to Cartoon Network. We will be aligning our Boomerang channels globally with a new look and feel and a common unique positioning that we believe will resonate strongly with boys and girls 4- to-7 and their families."

Hidalgo continues, "Boomerang is a timeless brand, it is a lighthearted, safe and playful place where kids and families can enjoy their favorite animated shows. It is the home of our heritage Hanna-Barbera and Warner Bros. characters. Coming up next year we will be launching new content from our own classics like Scooby-Doo!, Tom and Jerry and Looney Tunes, as well as new seasons of acquisitions including Inspector Gadget, Mr Bean and The Garfield Show."

CLASSIC COMEBACK

"We are looking for classic content that can engage a new generation of viewers—and not only if the show has the exact same characteristics and/or similar animation style and values as our classic shows," says Hidalgo. "We look for unique and surprising stories that have great characters that feel authentic to and for kids. If your show has these characteristics, then we want to hear from you!"

Tapping into Turner's U.S. portfolio, the U.S. originals Uncle Grandpa and Steven Universe launched on Cartoon Network across EMEA earlier this year, and Clarence will be rolling out this fall. "Globally for Cartoon Network we have commissioned more seasons of The Amazing World of Gumball and the first series of We Bare Bears, which is a comedy about three bear siblings and their attempts at assimilating into human society. That is from Daniel Chong, who worked on Cars 2 and The Lorax."

Global commissions include Wabbit, a series of comedic shorts featuring Bugs Bunny, Yosemite Sam and Wile E. Coyote, and Be Cool, Scooby-Doo!, an all-new animated comedy series. "In addition, we have pre-bought Mr Bean series two from Endemol and the new Inspector Gadget from DHX for EMEA and Asia Pacific," she says.

Hidalgo is not opposed to live action but animation really resonates with Cartoon's viewers. "Live action is not out of fashion and we have seen kids' telenovelas as well as drama working extremely well this past year, especially with the 6- to-11 girl demo. That said, it is getting clearer that comedy animation has broader appeal and our shows like The Amazing World of Gumball are attracting both boys and girls aged 6 to 11."

The big pan-regional kids' channels have deep U.S.-based content-creation hubs to draw from, so often kids' distributors will find the greatest opportunity for sales among strong local-market brands. In Canada, Corus Entertainment runs a portfolio of leading kids' channels, including YTV, Treehouse and TELETOON. Comedy is still a driver for
Corus’ audience. YTV’s recent commissions include The Stanley Dynamic, Max & Shred, The Game, Numb Chucks and Nerds and Monsters. At MIPCOM, the programming team will be looking for character-driven comedies in both animation and live action that have strong unique concepts and fun, relatable characters.

On the live-action front, YTV is attracted to projects with visionary creators and showrunners that target kids, tweens and families. Live action can also include reality and competition series that empower kids.

Treehouse focuses on the preschool demo and recently premiered the originals Trucktown and Dinopaws, a co-production with Cbeebies in the U.K. Acquisitions have included Silvergate Media’s Octonauts, Zodiak Kids’ Zack & Quack and 9 Story’s Peg & Cat. Treehouse looks for special properties that have strong characters preschoolers can relate to, and whose stories are age appropriate and have an element of humor.

TELETOON’s recent commissions include The Bagel and Becky Show, ToonMART Marty and Croqué. It has also picked up Atomic Puppet, an animated comedy from Technicolor and Mercury Filmworks that will launch in 2015. The channel is on the lookout for animated shows broadly targeting the 6- to 11-set, with a particular focus on 10-year-olds. While TELETOON does have a boy audience skew, the channel also wants shows that are accessible to girls.

LAND DOWN UNDER

In Australia, the public broadcaster ABC has a new head of children’s TV, Deirdre Brennan, who joined the company from BBC Worldwide. “ABC’s original content needs to be distinct and creatively adventurous, developing new local talent while celebrating the expertise of our international partners,” she says of her content strategy.

Looking ahead at the 2015 production slate for ABC4Kids and ABC3, she says they “reflect a diversity of genres designed to engage young Australians (aged 2- to 14-years-old). Preschool titles include the flagship programs Play School and Giggle and Hoot, with new animated series Bubble Bath Bay, Guess How Much I Love You season two and The Kazoops. Older viewers will enjoy new seasons of the award-winning drama Nowhere Boys, factual hit Bushwhacked! and The New Adventures of Figaro Pho. New titles include the comedies Little Lunch, Winston Steinburger & Sir Dudley Ding Dong and the groundbreaking Prisoner Zero,” which is a 26-episode science-fiction action-adventure series from Planet 55 Studios.

Addressing her MIPCOM priorities, Brennan says, “Our acquired inventory consists of a variety of genres – live action, animation and mixed media. We will consider all formats and types of programming suitable for preschool (2 to 6), bridging (5 to 9), older children (8 to 12) and teens (13-plus). However, priorities for 2015/2016 relate to older children’s and family content, proven program brands and innovative scripted formats, such as TV movies, miniseries and events. With educational programming expanding onto ABC3 from July 2014, we are looking for learning content.

Preschool opportunities are currently limited, with no new titles required until 2016.”

Commenting on Australian market trends, Brennan says, “The children’s industry is still adapting to the creative opportunities offered through digital convergence, but new concepts designed to pull audiences across platforms are starting to emerge. Broadcasters are also looking for proven, entertaining factual formats that can engage local audiences.”

BRITISH REVIVAL

CITV, operated by the U.K.’s leading commercial broadcaster, ITV, has stepped up its commissioning budget over the last few years. Coming to the channel in 2015 is the much-anticipated new series of Thunderbirds, called Thunderbirds Are Go. It will also have a brand-new series of the animated Mr Bean, plus the returning Horrid Henry.

Another important addition has been the recently launched weekend breakfast show Scrubbed! “This gives the morning block a real sense of personality with a fresh presenting team,” says Janila Metran, the head of programming at CITV. “The format includes chat, games and comedy sketches interlinking between great shows such as Victorious, Horrid Henry, Deadtime Stories and Adventure Time.”

CITV’s main rival is the BBC, one of the major forces in European kids’ content. With a commissioning budget of around £100 million ($163 million) a year, it supports production across all genres for its two kids’ channels. CBBC, aimed at 6- to 12-year-olds, and Cbeebies, for the preschool set.

Because of its status as a public broadcaster, the BBC tends to plough most of its money into original shows.
that have been produced in the U.K. The BBC does also have room in its schedules for complementary acquisitions such as Arthur and Dragons: Riders of Berk.

SUPER-SIZED

In Germany, there have been big changes following the arrival of the new free-to-air Disney service at the start of 2014. The biggest transformation has come at SUPER RTL, which had been heavily reliant on Disney kids’ content until the new channel arrived. Required to drop all its Disney daytime programming, SUPER RTL responded by signing a five-year output deal with DreamWorks Animation, which gave it access to shows like Dragons and Turbo F.A.S.T. It also ramped up its budget for original programming and put more emphasis on select acquisitions like Callmero, from Gaumont Animation, Califa and Studio Campedelli.

“We have been really active over the last two years [replacing] our Disney content,” says Frank Dietz, SUPER RTL’s head of acquisitions and co-productions. “As a consequence, we have signed deals with partners such as DreamWorks, Warner Bros, FremantleMedia and 9 Story, to name a few.”

The channel has also been active in preschool, acquiring local broadcast, licensing and home-entertainment rights to Kate & Mim-Mim, which is produced by Nerd Corps Entertainment and distributed by FremantleMedia Kids & Family Entertainment. The series was acquired for SUPER RTL’s Togolino preschool block.

Looking ahead, Dietz says, “MIP Junior/MIPCOM is an important date in our annual calendar of markets. The event gives us the opportunity to screen finished shows we have followed over the years and also to discover and discuss new development. In terms of trends, animated comedy shows remain a hot topic for us and there is a constant need for this kind of show. But we are more hesitant to pick up live action.”

The other big player in Germany is public channel KiKA, a joint venture between ZDF and ARD. “KiKA is doing extremely well because of many great titles we produced, co-produced or acquired during the last 24 months,” says Sebastian Debertin, the head of acquisitions, co-productions and fiction. “It paid off to look long-term and follow our high-quality content strategy. Despite new competition, we are the daily market leader in kids’ prime time and the number one channel for the youngest [viewers]. SLR Productions’ Guess How Much I Love You is fantastic and so is Tilly and Friends from Aardman. The new CGI series Maya the Bee and Vic the Viking are great fun, while The New Adven-

YTV’s original commissions include Max & Shred, which is repaid by Breakthrough Entertainment.

GETTING REAL

Live action remains popular with a segment of KiKA’s viewers. “Real life does not go out of fashion, as we can see from our audiences, especially when it comes to the 8-plus age group,” explains Debertin. “So Makos Mermaid and Dance Academy are doing well, as are Sadie J and Tracy Beaker/Tracy Beaker Returns. We have some great live-action series from Scandinavia. The only wish I would like to get fulfilled is they should produce more episodes. Often they just come up with six, eight or ten episodes, where we would need 26.”

Not surprisingly then, at MIPCOM Debertin will be looking for high-quality live-action series for the 6-to-9 demographic. He is also in the market for “great animation, for school-age girls and boys.” Feature films will also be on his shopping list, as KiKA has three slots to fill per week.

Caroline Cochaux, the director of programs for kids’ and youth channels at Lagardère Active—which include the dominant French kids’ services Canal J and Tiji, and the family-skewing Gulli—says she is off to MIPCOM in search of “big brands that will appeal to children and the entire family. It can either be animation or live action. We also look for animation specials or TV films.”

Listing recent successful shows, Cochaux picks out Back at the Barnyard and My Fairly OddParents. The latter show she calls “funny and a bit crazy! The whole family loves it, as there are several ways to understand the dialogue.”

Addressing the relative appeal of animation and live action, she says, “I believe youngsters would prefer total animation, and pre-teens would go for live action! That said, we have had real success with Mia and me, which is a part live-action, part animated series.”

Comedy programming is “definitely hotter than ever,” Cochaux says, a perspective backed by all the buyers surveyed here.

“There continues to be a significant amount of animated comedy available in the market with broad, international appeal,” observes ABC’s Brennan. “As the children’s indus-
try moves increasingly toward this genre, we need to ensure that distinct, live-action storytelling remains part of our content mix. We should also explore innovative production models and new formats, including short-form, miniseries and features, that push beyond the prescriptive nature of current kids output."

Reveals are another key trend to watch, CITV's Metran notes, "with Thunderbirds Are Go for us, Teletubbies and Clangers for CBeebies and Danger Mouse for CBBC."

Turner's Hidalgo backs up that view, adding, "Reboots of successful classics continue to be popular. We will be bringing back The Powerpuff Girls, which we are really excited about, as well as working with Warner Bros. to launch new series featuring core Boomerang characters."

KIDS ONLINE

Broadcasters are also closely tracking how kids are using online and mobile platforms.

The BBC is one of Europe's most active broadcasters when it comes to digital content for kids. It approaches digital in various ways. For example, it debuted the last season of the comedy drama series Hank Zipzer on its on-demand platform BBC iPlayer, underlining the shift in viewing patterns among British kids. It also creates online gaming content to complement series such as Junior Vets and Strange Hill High. In addition to this, it created a 30-episode comedy drama called Dixi specifically for distribution across mobile, tablet and desktop. Available in the form of daily video blogs, the series encourages children to enjoy the creativity of the Net while also getting them to think about the potential dangers of social networking, explains Patrick Healy, the head of product for BBC Children's.

"We know children's media habits are changing and we must innovate to reach audiences whenever and wherever they are," says Healy. "Dixi is a great example of how content can work across multiple platforms and at the same time help children and parents engage with important issues and continue their learning."

THERE'S AN APP FOR THAT

Nickelodeon's Borkent says there is room in his remit for content that is specifically aimed at nonlinear platforms. We know kids are watching content everywhere, so we have to scope out interesting short-form ideas for our Nick apps. Not only is that useful in its own right, but it's a really good way of finding out if content has the potential to be adapted for long form.

While Borkent is seeking out new concepts for Nick's nonlinear platforms, most broadcasters are using apps, websites and other destinations to extend the linear storytelling experience.

"If an idea fits better or has its roots in the nonlinear space, then we are interested," Turner's Hidalgo says. "Kid audiences are moving into those spaces so we are also moving there with our own production of shorts, apps and games that are produced purposely for that. So yes, we are looking for good content ideas wherever they come from. We can expect an ecosystem where TV is the core element, but we will increasingly deliver across multiple platforms and devices."

Levine says there is no requirement for stand-alone nonlinear content at Disney at present. "Our emphasis is on content that extends the experience of our shows. We're not looking to launch new IP from the nonlinear space."

At ABC in Australia, Brennan says that it is "vital we create the infrastructure that can support a platform-agnostic approach and manage content accordingly. In the future, this will include programming or gaming that lives away from the channel."

In Germany, there are regulations in place that limit how much KIKA can do in terms of its original nonlinear content strategy. "Public TV in Germany is limited by law in order to keep the commercial broadcasters happy," Debertin says. "So we are not allowed to put original content only online. Instead, a show has to be on TV before a rerun on the web is allowed for a certain time only."

At rival SUPER RTL, Dietz says nonlinear commissioning is something he looks at, "but we are very careful about our content selection."

As buyers adjust to the realities of serving kids across multiple platforms, they are also facing competitive threats from new services—namely Netflix and Amazon.

"It seems that producers are really happy with their recent SVOD business as new platforms emerge," Dietz says. "Let's see which shows will make it to the second round of licenses and which platforms will make it in this competitive environment."

Tara Sorensen, the head of kids' programming at Amazon Studios, says she is looking for "original content and innovative ideas in the preschool and kids 6-11 demos 11- and 22-minute formats for consideration on Amazon Prime Instant Video. We want to see projects that are character- and story-driven and can be signature [projects for] Amazon."

Clearly, from the traditional free-to-air broadcasters to the pan-regional giants to emerging platforms, all buyers are searching for the same thing: great content that will keep kids coming back to the screen.