

COMMENTARY

# Change Your Head By Changing The Channel? Mental Health TV Network Launches

By Les Luchter



The Mental Health Television Network (MHTN) has launched as a 24/7 linear and on-demand streaming service.

If you think the TV content world doesn't need another niche player, perhaps you should expand your vision. At a time when everyone seems to either have mental health issues or to know someone with mental health issues, MHTN may just be aiming at a mass market.

Co-founder and CEO Kiernan Clarke, a 40-year veteran of sales and GM roles at such TV companies as Tribune, Meredith and Fox, tells Pharma & Health Insider that he's never received as much "deep, authentic, and feeling" feedback as he is now getting. "The word I've seen most is 'needed,'" he says.

While Clarke hopes for a "general market" audience, he acknowledges that MHTN's initial target is women 25-54, with two additional "skews": "younger folks" at colleges and universities who "need it desperately," and older people who "need it more than

they think” because they’re “continually more isolated, lonely and depressed.” And then finally, men, who he says are still showing resistance when it comes to “opening up about mental health.”

Clarke is also looking at the “general market” advertising-wise, targeting not only pharma brands but also “all those brands that support [May’s] Mental Health Awareness Month [but have] no mechanism to support it year-round.”

Programming, which Clarke says will be entirely original, currently consists of one new four-hour block daily being played in a 24-hour loop. When we tuned in Wednesday, the service’s two anchorwomen were providing mental health-related news items, with commentary by MHTN co-founder and chief medical officer Dr. Dan Bober on such topics as the pros and cons of being able to predict dementia.

Other regular interviewees include psychiatrists, psychologists, life coaches and other experts, Clarke notes.

The new programming block will increase to six hours a day within three months, he says.

And MHTN’s content will consist of more than just news and interviews, he adds.

There will be documentaries, Clarke says, and even scripted shows focused on specific mental health issues that will evoke “what we used to call after-school specials.”

“We’ll find the budget through sponsors starting in June,” he says, and “start out with probably 10 a year,” followed by a panel discussion about each topic with four or five experts.

Launched just a couple of weeks ago in a free stream at MHTN.org, MHTN will be offered in both subscription and free ad-supported formats. It has already secured a distribution deal with FAST service Freebie TV, is in discussions with two Canadian cable companies, and has a “nearly completed deal with a top tier 1 platform,” Clarke says.

Connected TV pickup is also in the cards as MHTN has partnered with Amagi, which connects FAST channels with connected TV manufacturers like LG, Samsung and Sony.

Another “critically important” key distribution venue will be out-of-home locations like doctor and hospital waiting rooms, Clarke says.

In addition to subscription fees and ad sales dollars, MHTN’s monetization plans include a directory of mental health professionals as well as “expert” conferences.

The directory, Clarke says, will launch soon, with psychiatrists and psychologists paying between \$12.99 and \$19.99 a month to be included.

The conferences, on specific mental health topics, will also be shown on MHTN, becoming another source of programming.

MHTN’s plan for promoting and marketing its service includes partnerships with nonprofits, the first of which is the Jon Bon Jovi Soul Foundation, whose mission, according to its website, is “to break the cycle of hunger, poverty and homelessness” by supporting “innovative community benefit organizations.” The foundation will include an MHTN feed on its website, and appear on-air “a couple of times a month to talk about the trends that they see,” Clarke says.

MHTN, which has a staff of 25 and studios in Orlando, Florida, seems like an ambitious undertaking, and Clarke doesn’t disagree.

“We really do plan to change the way the world looks at mental health, destigmatizing it, making it part of a natural organic flow of conversation,” he declares.

And maybe launching in this election year makes a lot of sense.

“Mental health seems to be the only thing that Democrats and Republicans can agree on,” Clarke comments.