

Ryan Seacrest Is All That's Left of the 'American Idol' Brand

By Kelsea Stahler , Hollywood.com Staff | Monday, September 17, 2012

With no surprises and almost no ado, **American Idol** finally announced its judging panel on Sept. 16. Joining **Mariah Carey** at the hallowed table will be country singer **Keith Urban**, rapper **Nicki Minaj**, and returning judge and music producer **Randy Jackson**. And despite the fact that Jackson has been a part of the panel since the series began, there's something about this combination — whether it be the addition of a fourth judge, the mind-boggling mix of star power that we've already seen on **The Voice** and **The X Factor**, or the exhaustion resultant of a summer of *Idol* judge speculation — that makes it all feel like it's not quite *Idol*. And that's when every longtime fan turns to rest their weary little heads on one solid, comforting fact: At least **Ryan Seacrest** is still the host.

Seacrest, his impeccable suits, inoffensive charm, plethora of dad jokes, and signature enunciation and cadence are the backbone the *American Idol* brand. The logo and theme song — both of which have been around as long as Seacrest — are great, but they're like the cartilage-like discs between Seacrest's solid vertebrae: they keep everything running smoothly. When it comes down to it, it's all about Seacrest.

And from a fan perspective, that might seem obvious. But even brand strategist **Denise Lee Yohn** could look at Seacrest's impact from a brand marketing standpoint. "I think it is pretty critical that he stays a part of the show because there is really very little else that has really kind of been consistent," she says. "It's one of the distinctives that it started with and still maintains today."

Season 9: *Idol* Changes Forever

At its outset, *Idol* boasted three very important distinctives: industry expertise, optimism and opportunity in a cutthroat industry, and comforting, jovial personality, courtesy of one Ryan Seacrest. Since **Paula Abdul** left the show in 2009, the elements of the series' original mojo have been slowly slipping away.

True, we first saw the odd four-judge setup in Season 8 with the addition of producer/songwriter **Kara DioGuardi** and saw it live on in Season 9 when the show added **Ellen DeGeneres** in the "Straight Up" singer's place. While the four-judge dynamic had been a little odd when it was first introduced, it still had within it the holy *Idol* trinity of Jackson, Abdul, and **Simon Cowell**. When the first of those members was removed, we found ourselves in the wasteland of Season 9 — the season widely regarded as the worst, least-*Idol* *Idol* season ever. And when Cowell left before Season 10 (along with DioGuardi), what was left of the *American Idol* we once knew vanished almost completely.

And Simon was just the last wavering Jenga brick. The dreamlike notion that this show could actually produce the next huge music star felt long gone at that point. Only three out of the nine existing *Idol* winners managed to make it big — **Carrie Underwood**, **Kelly Clarkson**, and **Jordin Sparks** — and the giddy confidence in the series' power as a star-maker was reduced to nothing. When Cowell, the captain of the industry dream team meant to lead these fledgling young singers to their true destiny, jumped ship, he took with it the industry insider element that gave *Idol* its necessary layer of expertise. What gave the series the authority to decide who was worthy and talented enough to be America's next big singer?

According to Yohn, that element was a distinctive piece of the *Idol* brand. "American Idol started with more integrity, starting with Simon and Randy being sort of people in the business who all they do all day is judge talent," she says. When that core of hands-on experience stopped being the core of the judges' panel, *Idol* loosened its grip on its own identity.

Of course, Season 10 and Season 11 were a valiant effort in the series' attempt to maintain the pieces of the existing brand. *Idol* still had Jackson, and, of course, they still had Seacrest. The marketing materials for the first season with Jackson sitting alongside **Jennifer Lopez** and **Steven Tyler** while mega producer **Jimmy Iovine** lent his wealth of industry know-how as a mentor held the promise of a new *Idol*. The show kept the

industry know-how as an undercurrent, and let the opportunity — the platform the series ran on at its inception — be the star. The ubiquitous ads were slathered with phrases like “Everyone deserves a chance” and “Every superstar begins with a dream.” The series set up a reality in which dreams were once again possible, and the industry experts were the vehicles set to drive contestants through to the finish line of a successful music career.

And while the effect wasn’t nearly as strong as it was when *Idol* first started, it did work. Out of the gate, *Idol* garnered ratings in the high teens and generally the low 20 millions, but as with any TV series, that waned as time went on. Season 10’s ratings managed to stay on par, for the most part, with Season 9’s, and the numbers for the finale were actually an improvement on years past, seeing an increase from 22.24 million to 29.29 million viewers.

But the luck did not hold out. Season 11 saw a serious drop in viewership, with most episodes struggling to rake in even 15 million viewers — a major blow for a series that is used having 20 million pairs of eyes tuned in each week. Perhaps it was the landscape of other big-time singing competitions like *The Voice* and *The X Factor*; perhaps it was the lack of *Idol*’s past industry clout; maybe it was the fact that the series didn’t deliver on its superstar promise (what’s the most we’ve heard from Season 10 champ Scotty McCreery?), but no matter what the reason, audiences weren’t nearly as interested.

Still, If He Hosts It, They Will Come

So, in the face of a muddled brand, how did *Idol* maintain a still respectable audience of 13-15 million people an episode? It attained that number with the small pieces that are left of its original, magnetic brand: the title sequences and, as we’ve deduced, Seacrest. “Ryan Seacrest is integral to the brand,” says Yohn. “He’s what we call one of the core voices of the brand, it’s him and what he brings to the show.”

To top it all off, Seacrest is the singular piece that neither of *Idol*’s biggest competitors can match. Over at *The X Factor*, the series is still without an emcee — though rumor has it **Khloe Kardashian** is the top choice — and *The Voice* has a solid, but uninspiring host in the former voice of *Total Request Live* teen joy, **Carson Daly**. Unlike his contemporaries — but very much like fellow hosts like **Jeff Probst** in the non-singing reality genre — Seacrest was relatively unknown when he began hosting *Idol*. While Daly and likely host Kardashian have their own pop culture clout, Seacrest grew his own success out of *Idol*’s success. He maintains the connection between “*American Idol*, this wacky new talent show” in 2002, to “*American Idol*, pop culture behemoth,” to “*American Idol* waning classic.” Seacrest is synonymous with them all.

And while *Idol* ushers in an era of completely identical reality show talent panels across television with the selection of Minaj, Urban, Jackson, and Carey — who sit alongside competitors **Demi Lovato, L.A. Reid, Britney Spears**, and Cowell on *X Factor* and **Blake Sheldon, Christina Aguilera, Cee Lo Green**, and **Adam Levine** on *The Voice* — Fox’s stalwart singing competition is hanging onto its singular solid asset for dear life. According to Yohn, a brand’s ability to differentiate itself from its competitors makes up 50 percent of its brand power. The other half comes from its ability to be “meaningful and compelling to who its target is.” By that logic, Seacrest is the last dangling piece of *Idol*’s differentiation factor.

“You Just Need to Start Over”

While the judge-slot panic has subsided, the host panic is imminent. Seacrest only has two years left on his *Idol* contract and his numerous business ventures — including but not limited to producing reality shows like *Keeping Up With the Kardashians*, working for NBC News, doing his daily radio show, and making public appearances in addition to running *Idol* auditions, and eventually running the show two times a week starting in February — are keeping him plenty busy. And he’s only getting busier.

Just after his position at NBC was made more expansive — the host reported from the London Olympics for *Today* — Seacrest Productions announced in late August that the company was hiring more executives and expanding its programming slate to include both reality and scripted series “across major broadcast and cable networks,” according to a statement Seacrest gave exclusively to *The Hollywood Reporter*. What happens if Seacrest should decide his time on *Idol* is over? Yohn is concerned the brand would be no more. “From a product and consumer brand standpoint, my advice would be, you just need to start over,” she says.

And it’s no wonder. Looking at other reality shows outside of the music genre, it’s clear that the hosts are key.

Chris Harrison is so much a part of *The Bachelor* that contestants seek his advice and fans cry out for him to participate as the eligible singleton himself. Cat Deeley's charming voice is the thing that sends every *So You Think You Can Dance* fan into the zone week in and week out. When *Project Runway* tried on a host that wasn't Heidi Klum for its All-Stars spin-off, it felt more like a bad copy than a sanctioned offshoot of the show viewers had come to love. Seacrest is the longest standing example of this audience-host relationship. Without him, it's not just the brand that will suffer. The audience will too.

So, *Idol* fans, the moral of the story is: Enjoy Seacrest's sometime lame jokes. He may sometimes feel vanilla, but his presence serves a very specific purpose you may not have even noticed. Should he decide to leave when his two years are up, so will the last remaining pieces of the series we fell in love with 11 years ago. Quite simply, Ryan Seacrest *is American Idol*.

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