Leading International Media

BOB BAKISH ’85, MBA’89BUS

Bob Bakish, recently named president/CEO of Viacom International Media Networks, is always amazed when young professionals map out their careers. “I never had it all figured out. Life is made up of a series of crossroads. When you get to one, you evaluate the opportunities, make your decisions, and go,” he said.

That approach has made him the leading man for Viacom’s Hispanic and international networks, including MTV, Nickelodeon, and Comedy Central. They reach more than 600 million households in 160 countries via 166 TV channels and more than 550 web and mobile sites.

Bakish’s task is to meld them into global brands while preserving their local flavor.

He never envisioned this job while studying operations research at Columbia. He entered school unsure of his interests and pursued engineering because it taught problem solving. He put those skills to work at AT&T shortly after it was divested into competing companies, then returned to Columbia for an MBA.

Within a year of graduating, he was consulting on packaged goods at Booz Allen Hamilton. He reached a crossroads unexpectedly at an evening meeting, when he called a direct marketing plan “a ridiculous way of achieving a simple goal.” The partner in charge of the engagement asked how he would change it. Bakish explained, and the two stayed up all night revising the plan. Afterwards, the partner, who did media consulting, asked Bakish to join his group. “I didn’t know a thing about radio, but we hit it off and I jumped in,” he said.

He spent years developing increasingly sophisticated plans for large media businesses. Then a Viacom executive asked him to join the company.

“My head: ‘If you ever want to play the game on the field, we should really talk.’ The words continued to resonate. Shortly after making partner, he joined Viacom to work on long-term planning.

One crossroad followed the next. He shuttled between Viacom and MTV Networks, including a stint as chief operating officer of MTV Networks advertising sales. Just when he was getting comfortable, he returned to corporate to help split the company into two entities, Viacom and CBS.

He was appointed president of MTV Networks International in 2007. “We were a confederation of national networks, not a real multinational,” he said.

Bakish restructured the company to leverage its scale and further integrate it with digital TV distribution and web technologies. This freed the individual networks to concentrate on local content.

The new infrastructure was a hit with audiences, especially when news broke. Within hours of Michael Jackson’s death, for example, MTV was providing updates, commentary, and musical works around the world. “This reinforced our position as a truly global network and resulted in unprecedented viewership,” Bakish said.

Although he has traveled a long way from engineering, Bakish is still solving problems and seeking challenges.

“You never know what’s going to happen. You work hard and build your capabilities, so when you get to a crossroad, you can pick a direction and dive right in,” he concluded.