

Making the Academy Awards More Viewer and Advertiser Friendly

By Steve Sternberg



As an avid movie fan and reasonably heavy moviegoer (pre-pandemic), I look forward to watching the *Academy Awards* every year. And **every year I find myself asking the same question: “Is it always this boring?”** I invariably find myself answering, “yes” (“The Slap” notwithstanding). And every year I forget the previous year’s telecast and look forward to

watching the show all over again.

But then, I’m a Baby Boomer. **Folks in my generation, as well as Generation X and early Millennials, grew up watching the *Academy Awards*** at a time when you seldom saw or heard much about movie stars outside of what their publicists put out there or what you might see on talk shows. Movie stars were more glamorous to the public, and it was interesting to see them in real-life settings. There was no social media, and people generally did not see behind the curtain (and celebrities didn’t communicate with their fan bases on Twitter or Instagram). There were also no streaming services, and no major competition for the broadcast networks – which typically

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scheduled repeats opposite the Oscars, which was always the second highest rated show of the year (next to the *Super Bowl*). Among advertisers, it was dubbed the “*Super Bowl* for women.” **It’s no coincidence that over the past 20 years the median age of the broadcast has gotten older by roughly 20 years** – they’re not attracting new generations of viewers, and the audience is aging along with the show.

There’s been a lot of discussion over the past few years about whether there needs to be a host for the *Academy Awards* broadcast, and if so, who would be best suited for the role. This came to a head in 2019 after the scheduled host, Kevin Hart, was forced to step down when some old controversial tweets were discovered. They proceeded without a host, and decided to do so again in 2020. The pandemic restrictions in 2021 made a host irrelevant. This year, hosts returned, as Wanda Sykes, Amy Schumer, and Regina Hall shared the reins. There is little doubt that hosts do make the show flow better and provides more natural transition from one segment to the next. But unless they bring back Johnny Carson or a young Billy Crystal, any host will have little to do with whether the show does better or worse in terms of Nielsen ratings.

Much was made this year about how eight “less significant” (to viewers) awards were given out before the Oscars telecast, and then edited for airing during the show. This was supposedly to shorten the broadcast, provide more time for other bits, and possibly increase ratings. To this viewer, it seemed as though all they did was cut some time that showed the winners walking to the stage – a very small impact on the home viewer for all the controversy and justifiably hurt feelings it caused.

That, of course, had little to do with improving either the broadcast or the show’s ratings. **The problem is not who the host is or whether the show runs 3 ½ or 4 hours.** The main problem is with the structure of the show itself. The *Academy Awards* broadcast is geared toward Hollywood insiders rather than the television viewer. There’s no reason it can’t do both.

Some relatively simple changes could revitalize the show, make it more viewer and advertiser friendly, and perhaps stall or reverse the trend that saw its median age rise from 40 to nearly 60 during the past 20 years.

Some have complained about the length of the telecast but that is only an issue because of how the show is presented. The show is generally about three-and-a-half hours long, and **they still don't give out the biggest awards until after primetime.**

In this year's award ceremony, while the *Supporting Actress* award was presented at around 8:20 pm, it took another hour before they got to *Supporting Actor*. The other awards presented between 8:30 and 10:55, during the bulk of primetime, when television usage is at its peak, were for *sound, cinematography, documentary short subject, visual effects, animated feature film, animated short film, international feature film, live action short film, costume design, original screenplay, adapted screen play, original score, film editing, documentary, and original song.*

Now, I'm not suggesting giving short-shrift to any of these important awards or not showing them live; simply spreading them out differently so they surround what most viewers at home consider the major awards. The Oscar for *Director*, for example, was presented at 10:55 pm (EST). The award for *Best Actor* was at around 11:10 pm, *Best Actress* was at about 11:25 pm, and *Best Picture* wasn't until 11:30 pm. Anyone who pays attention knows that if they tune in after 11pm, they can still catch the three or four biggest awards.

What a lot of people don't realize, is that **what should be the highest rated portion of the show is not even measured by Nielsen.** The ratings company only measures national

telecasts through the last national commercials (the post-primetime portion of the broadcast typically contains only local commercials).

There was a time when it was logical to hold back the major awards as a way to keep viewers tuned in. Thirty years ago, there were basically only three broadcast networks, much fewer cable networks, no streaming options, no social media, and very little original programming opposite the *Academy Awards*. But in today's media world, with so many other outlets competing for viewers' time, it is counter-productive to wait until after primetime to present the most important awards.

In addition, particularly with big live events, social media often keeps viewers tuned in. Had the major awards been spread out over the entire telecast, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and the like, would have seen significantly more Oscar-related activity, and kept more people tuned in and discussing the show.

I suggest that if they spread out the awards by giving out the six acting/directing/picture awards every 30 minutes or so, ratings for the entire broadcast would be significantly higher. For example, present *Supporting Actress* at 8:15, *Supporting Actor* at 8:45, *Director* at 9:15, *Actor* at 9:45, *Actress* at 10:15, and *Best Picture* at 10:45. Schedule everything else to fit into these parameters, and boom, the show is finished by 11pm – and even if it still runs long, ratings will not be negatively affected.

There are other ways to make the broadcast more viewer and advertiser friendly.

One solution would be to have a separate hour-long show from 7-8:30pm for these “other” awards (with a different host). Then they can have longer clips of how costume design, makeup, production design, sound mixing, etc., are done, which may actually be interesting to a lot of people.

The main awards show can then be from 8:30-11:30pm. In the main awards show I would include *Best Picture* and *Director*, the four acting awards, as well as *Original* and *Adapted Screenplay* and *Original Song*.

Here are some suggestions on the flow of the main show.

Present one of the four major awards every 30 minutes – Best Director at 9:00, Best Actor at 9:30. Best Actress at 10:00, and Best Picture at 10:30. Precede the award presentation with 2-3 minute clips of each nominee. This will provide a better picture of each performance and greater anticipation for each award. It will also serve as more effective promotion for the nominated movies.

Each half-hour segment of the show, for Best Director, Actor, Actress, and Picture can be sponsored by a different advertiser. While showing the clips, they could give viewers a chance to vote online and by phone, and then show their choices at the end of the show (or on an after-show) to see how viewers' votes compared to the actual winners. Viewers would vote only for the nominated movies – this year's attempt at Twitter voting for some made-up categories was awkward, and didn't seem to belong here.

If these suggestions are implemented, the show will flow better, viewer and social-media interest will be elevated, ratings will improve, younger viewers might tune in, and people may be interested in seeing some of the nominated movies they might have missed. A win, win, win, win, win, win.