

# Roma Khanna

**R**oma Khanna, the Vice President, Interactive at CHUM Television, is responsible for the strategic development and day-to-day operation of all new media initiatives for CHUM Television. In addition to leveraging the company's well-known brands and content across various new media platforms, including interactive television, wireless services and exclusive Internet properties, Ms. Khanna is responsible for creating new interactive initiatives that are integral to CHUM's original television content.

CHUM has long been a leader in using new media technology to foster audience accessibility. In addition to highly successful station-branded Internet sites, CHUM was the first Canadian broadcaster to launch interactive television to mainstream viewing audiences and garnered pioneer status in North America with the deployment of successful, cross-carrier, premium-rate text messaging applications. Prior to joining CHUM, Roma was Executive Vice President at Snap Media, a producer of interactive content and communities related to television, where she was involved in the production/creation of interactive projects for television programs including *Degrassi: The Next Generation*, *Tracker*, *Mysterious Ways*, *Made In Canada*, *Franklin the Turtle*, *FashionTelevision*, *Open Mike with Mike Bullard* and more. Before joining Snap Media, Roma was an entertainment lawyer and Manager, Legal and Business Affairs, at Sony Music Canada. Roma began her career practicing corporate/commercial law at the firm of Davies, Ward & Beck in Toronto. Over the years, Roma has also been involved in producing various film and television projects including music videos, television commercials and an independent feature film. In

2001, Ms. Khanna was awarded the I.H. Asper Broadcast Entrepreneur of the Future Award by the Canadian Association of Broadcasters.

**Wireless Telecom:** Your original career path was focused on corporate/commercial law. What influences led to your current role in interactive television?

**Roma Khanna:** I have always wanted to work in entertainment – especially music, film and television. Entertainment is what took me to law school in the first place. Once I started practicing commercial law, however, I realized I really enjoyed the actual nuts and bolts of the business side of things.

**You don't have to understand the technology to understand the impact it can have. But you cannot add in technology for the sake of being cool.**

I was working at Sony Music Canada in the legal and business affairs department in the mid- to late-'90s. At that time, file sharing and sites such as Napster were just beginning to attract attention. As well, record companies like Sony were starting to get very aggressive in using the online space for marketing music. I ended up spending a great deal of time working with our new media team. As I learned more about the online space, I became enamored. I loved the pace of change, the innovation and vision of connectivity and community the Internet offered. That led to me to want to get involved with interactive business. So I completed my MBA part-time and began focusing more on the interactive world. That eventually led me to Snap Media, a new media production company that works a great deal with television. It was at Snap that I really cut my teeth on interactive television. Working as a producer was very exciting, especially at a place that was at the forefront of new media. From there I joined CHUM Television. This is a great place for me. I get to work on the leading edge of interactive media while being a part of a bigger team and remaining connected to my first love – entertainment.



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**W.T.:** Why has CHUM placed such an importance on audience participation/interaction? What are the benefits for CHUM, and what are the benefits for the audience?

**R.K.:** Since the early days of Citytv, CHUM Television has always made audience participation a priority. Channels such as MuchMusic have incorporated this approach on every possible level. It has been a strength of CHUM and helped build the strong audience relationships we enjoy today. But television has changed. Audiences are demanding more control and more say in what they watch. They want to be entertained on their terms in a manner that fits within their busy lifestyles. So interactivity is more important than ever. It is our audience that keeps us on the leading edge of interactive television.

The benefit to CHUM is that we allow our audience to become a part of the process and can learn directly from them what is important to them. The benefit for the audience is that they get to influence and affect the television that they watch. In the end, the experience is more personal, and as a result can be more enjoyable. If you do it right, it can make for better TV. As well, it offers multiple points of contact between our audience and our content and brands. So the audience gets better TV and more content offered to them in the manner that they want to consume it. And we get an interested and excited audience. Everyone wins.

**W.T.:** As the person responsible for these activities, you are able to see the results first-hand. Has it been difficult to convince those that are less "tech savvy" about the importance of offering interactive elements to your programming? How have you sold the idea to those who may have been skeptical?

**R.K.:** Well, the proof is in the pudding as they say. The continued success of our interactive programs speaks for itself. From the Internet to ringtones to SMS television, our audiences respond favourably to interactivity. I am lucky to work here at CHUM with a group of people who share a passion for innovation and who want to include the audience on the terms that make sense to them. From the top down, everyone here values what interactive has to offer. I don't have to convince anyone of anything around here. This department was an important part of CHUM

Television long before I got here. The challenge we all face together is how to include interactivity in a way that enhances the viewing experience. You don't have to understand the technology to understand the impact it can have. But you cannot add in technology for the sake of being cool. The technology serves the content and the audience experience. As long as we stick to that philosophy, we won't need to convince anyone on this end to help make it happen.

**W.T.:** The idea of community building seems to be a constant theme. What are your views on the way people interact with these virtual communities?

**R.K.:** I think people, especially young people, look for ways to connect to the world around them and the people in that world. Virtual communities built around television programming provide an easy and fun way to connect with people that share similar interests. I don't think these communities replace more traditional methods of communication, but they add a new dimension to socializing that allows us to reach beyond our regular neighbourhood to discover new "virtual" neighbourhoods. Interactive communities are expanding the world we live in, while at the same time bringing us closer than ever to people who share the same interests. There is so much content out there. Communities help us make sense of it all and offer us a safe and fun place to interact.

**W.T.:** How does CHUM handle privacy concerns that can arise when individuals share personal information as part of their interaction?

**R.K.:** Obviously, privacy is extremely important to us. CHUM Television has put in place privacy policies that we expect our audience to adhere to. All of our communities are monitored and moderated, and personal information is not to be shared. Where it makes sense, technology can be used to help out (such as filters that remove phone numbers and other personal information), but where it is needed, we use real people to moderate and read information. As importantly, we try to educate our audience as to what is acceptable behaviour in our interactive world.

**W.T.:** CHUM is increasingly using mobile applications to reach its audi-

ences. Where are the markets that you offer content? What are the greatest benefits the mobile component brings to your audiences?

**R.K.:** We are adding mobile components wherever it makes sense. We have used mobile applications with our CP24 news channel, and will be adding mobile applications to Citytv. Our primary focus however is with MuchMusic. This is a young, smart audience that is very well wired – and wireless! They use cell phones frequently in their everyday lives. Using mobile applications allows our audiences to interact with us in real time and on a personal level. It can also be handier than the Internet in some cases as you may not be near a computer when you want to reach out and interact with MuchMusic.

There was a time when we all thought that iTV would be the next big thing. That vision has not been realized for many reasons. But mobile applications allow us to achieve many of the same goals with less of the infrastructure and costs. Most of our audience members have a cell phone or have access to a cell phone. They can interact from almost anywhere. It is easy and it is becoming more and more visual. So mobile is a great way to impact your television screen in real time, as well as a great way to find your entertainment content when you are not watching TV.

**W.T.:** In your opinion, what mobile applications have been the most successful? Are there any areas in particular that you feel offer the most potential for growth?

**R.K.:** Most of the mobile applications we have offered have been successful. Our audiences seem to be as excited as we are about mobile. In particular, the audience reacts well to applications that allow them to have a direct impact on television. So, real-time voting that affects the outcome of the show, such as with MuchMusic's *Takeover* works well. Also, chat-to-screen is always a big hit. That is a really direct way to see yourself reflected on TV! As for growth, we are only at the beginning of discovering the mobile applications of television. The potential is enormous across the board.

**W.T.:** CHUM has a tremendous amount of rich content to offer mobile

subscribers. Are you exploring MMS content and video streaming as part of your mobile offerings?

**R.K.:** Yes we are. We view mobile as one more way to connect with our audiences and to bring them content that is relevant to them. We'd very much like to bring content from all of our channels to mobile platforms. We've already had big success with our MuchMusic WAP deck and the ringtones store at [shop.muchmusic.com](http://shop.muchmusic.com).

Currently however, the market has not yet matched the vision. Cell phones that are capable of streaming video are just beginning to be rolled out. And the carriers will soon be offering richer media capabilities over their networks. But it is not there yet. As importantly, the business models have not yet evolved to a place where innovative broadcasters such as CHUM can make good business sense out of the many programs we would like to launch. Short code fees are too high for companies like ourselves that need multiple codes. And the carriers' current revenue share arrangements make it difficult for content providers to invest

in new business models. But we are all learning together in this new space. We need to build the market so that we make money on volume, not just on just individual transactions. Prices need to be reasonable while still allowing for all of the partners to get paid. We need to find a model where everyone wins – especially the consumer.

**W.T.:** Earlier this year, MuchMusic launched Canada's first third-party online wireless content store. What has been the consumer reaction to this innovative retail venture?

**R.K.:** The MuchMusic ringtones store at [shop.muchmusic.com](http://shop.muchmusic.com) has been a huge success, both financially and from the perspective of offering value to our audience. The fit of mobile music and MuchMusic has been perfect. Our audience loves music and loves to have control. Ringtones offer them both. They can personalize and customize their phones to reflect their own individual taste with both music and images. And they can trust that MuchMusic will bring them the latest and greatest offerings. We have started to add voice ringers from our VJs and

hope to soon offer mastertones. That is where things will start getting really fun. Your phone is no longer just a practical device. It is now an extension of your personality. We are extremely happy with our ringtones store and look forward to growing that business more over time.

**W.T.:** Can you give us a hint about any future wireless projects/plans Canadians might see coming from CHUM/MuchMusic?

**R.K.:** We really believe that the wireless space holds great potential for our audiences and our content. We want our audiences to use mobile both as a method to interact with their favourite TV and as a delivery platform for their favourite content. We are ready and willing to do more and more in this space. We just need the business models, the networks and the market penetration of video-ready devices to catch up to our vision of the future. And they will – sooner than you think. So keep an eye on your mobile phone. We're there now, but what we have to offer you is just going to get better and better! ■

