



Posted: Fri., Apr. 10, 2009, 6:38pm PT

## Networks look for low budgets

### Frugal mentality pervades industry

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As the economy forces the broadcast nets to economize in every way possible, the deal that saved NBC's "Friday Night Lights" from cancellation last month may be a portent of things to come for primetime skeins.

At first blush, many in the biz saw the two-season licensing agreement between NBC and DirecTV for "Friday Night Lights" as an anomaly -- a Hail Mary pass for a critically beloved ensembler deemed too good to be killed off by low ratings.

But the business plan behind "Lights" could well be a model for future primetime series, as nets deal with the one-two punch of ever-rising production costs and dwindling auds, plus the left hook landed this year by the steep advertising slump.

"FNL" has essentially adapted the cable series production model to primetime -- lower budgets, tighter shooting schedules, fewer episodes and a general cost-conscious mentality that fosters cheaper solutions to crane shots, crowd scenes and other expensive frills.

The show costs about \$2 million and change per episode, compared to \$3 million-plus for many network skeins (or just under \$3 million on the low end), and there are 13 episodes per season, the norm for cable shows, rather than the network tradition of 22-24.

The "FNL" model and production mentality are looking more and more appealing to net execs as the Big Four brace for an upfront advertising sales market this summer that could be down as much as 20%-25%, by some dire forecasts. With the nets certain to take a cash flow hit, it's very likely they'll order fewer scripted series overall, and fewer episodes of new and returning shows.

The economic meltdown has provided the urgency, but in truth network and studio execs have been scratching their heads at how shows like AMC's "Mad Men" and FX's "Damages" put so much on the