I Want My HIV TV

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Even if you have more than 57 channels, there's not necessarily anything to watch -- not with a viral twist, at least. But that may change in 2003, as two new gay-themed cable channels get ready for their close-up on the tube.

The biggest, a Showtime-MTV collaboration, is slated to be a premium channel with a per-month subscription fee. No official word yet on HIV-specific shows, though the not-so-strange bedfellow channels have a mixed history of AIDSy programming. MTV's partnership with the Kaiser Family Foundation has yielded years of kick-ass safer-sex promos, World AIDS Day specials and the verité docudrama of *Real World* HIVer Pedro Zamora. Showtime has lent airtime to documentaries and *Queer as Folk*, popular with viewers if not critics. For a show that spends most of each week on gay sex, there's little lip service paid to real-life condom concerns, and the sole regular HIV positive character is rarely waved in from the wings. Still, the series and both networks have won praise from Cable Positive, an HIV-focused industry organization. "Showtime's programming has been absolutely outstanding," said executive director Steve Villano.

Another channel, ALT1-TV, plans to be up and beaming next year with original programming and vaguely defined community-driven AIDS content. "We are adamant that it's included," Chance Mitchell, one of the company's three openly gay founders, told *POZ*. Unlike the Showtime-MTV venture, ALT1 is shooting for ad-supported slots on digital cable.

So gay HIVers might get a channel (or two) of their own. Will the programming be strong enough to surpass what's being done by mainstream outlets? Cable Positive's Villano predicts (predictably) that it's a safe bet. "You'll never see risk-taking on broadcast TV -- the nature of its existence is to water things down," Villano said. "Cable is about fearlessness."

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