

Karen Flischel

Meet the here! TV exec who's making lesbian visibility her top priority.

BY ELIZABETH G. HINES



"As my friend's father used to say, 'Busy girls are better girls.'" This is Karen Flischel's humorous explication of how, over the course of a twenty-plus-year career, she's come to excel at the always-demanding game of television programming.

As the newly-installed General Manager of here! TV—the nation's first premium television network targeted to gay and lesbian audiences—Flischel is as busy as she's ever been. The company's sales, marketing and PR divisions all report directly to her, and she carries the weight of establishing and marketing here!'s brand to consumers and television affiliates.

But a career in television wasn't always in the offing for Flischel. She got her start in higher education. After earning her master's degree from Indiana University in the mid-seventies, Flischel served as an assistant dean at Rider University for four years. But something about academia just wasn't clicking. "I knew I wanted to do something else and cable television appealed to me," Flischel says now. "I read an article about Nickelodeon, which at the time had just gone national and was little more than a four-hour puppet show. This notion of a channel dedicated to kids and kids' entertainment just resonated with me."

It inspired Flischel to quit her job, move to New York and begin trying to find a way through the doors of MTV Networks (the parent company of Nickelodeon). Eventually she did, beginning as a temp, then bouncing around the company for a few years before finally landing a permanent position as an analyst in their research department—a job suggested to her by MTV Networks' then-Vice President Geraldine Laybourne (now the Chairman and CEO of Oxygen Media).

From that point forward, Flischel's career skyrocketed. When the research department at MTV Networks decentralized in the early 90s, Flischel was tapped to head the research department at Nickelodeon, which eventually led to her being named Senior Vice President of Research and

Development Worldwide. Cultivating international expansion became Flischel's main duty and she spent much of the late 90's traveling the world, establishing Nickelodeon's brand across the globe. Flischel went on to serve as CEO of Nickelodeon Australia for two and a half years before moving to London to act as Managing Director of the company's European operations—a position which required all of the company's European channels to report directly to her.

In 1999, Flischel returned to New York to take a position as head of Nickelodeon's global interests. But after twenty years with the company,

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Flischel began to feel some growing pains. "Twenty years is just a long time to be somewhere," she shared, "and I decided I wanted to take a break."

It wasn't long before Flischel was itching to get back in the game, so when the opportunity to be a part of the team at here! was offered to her, Flischel admits she "leapt at the chance."

"[During my] time off...what I realized is that I really like start-ups. I like being involved in something that is being built and growing. Ideally, I wanted to be based in New York and I wanted to do something I cared about. This opportunity presented itself and it met all of those [requirements] and more."

Flischel believes strongly that here! has much to offer to the LGBT community. The network's goal,

she says, is to provide entertainment alternatives that have not existed until now—particularly for lesbians. "When you look at gay-themed entertainment," Flischel suggests, "there's an awful lot about men. There are [fewer] titles that target lesbians specifically. We are looking to alter that reality." here! has plans to produce its own original content, hoping that this example will encourage other independent producers to develop similarly-themed works.

As for any challenges she's faced since coming to here!, Flischel dismisses them. Citing the overwhelmingly positive response the network has received from cable and satellite operators, she says, "I don't feel like there're negatives anywhere, really. We're having a very good time."

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And serving a real need in the process. When asked to describe the most rewarding aspects of the profession that has sustained her for the last quarter century, Flischel doesn't have to pause to come up with an answer. Whether discussing her achievements with children's programming at Nickelodeon or her new role speaking to the LGBT community with here!, it is clear that for Flischel, increasing visibility is the key.

"Television is a very powerful medium, and ...having gay characters and storylines that are appealing to the gay and lesbian community is a very powerful thing," Flischel offers with real feeling. "Putting that visibility on television is empowering, and being a part of building that is very meaningful to me. It's a chance to make a difference." ■