

## **Rewind. Rewatch. Relive: How Lead Fans Transformed the Wrestling Business Model**

**Sam Ford**

In an era in which professional wrestling was dominated by regional wrestling promoters, with top stars traveling from territory to territory, the most ardent fans in each area formed a national network and provided one another with weekly accounts of live events, which eventually was amassed and circulated among these lead fans in newsletter format. These people were then empowered in their individual territories as experts, and they could share information with less active fans in the local arenas about who new wrestlers in the territory were and where they came from.

This desire to trade information from individual territories was greatly enhanced with a new enabling technology by the beginning of the 1980s: the VCR. Televised wrestling from the mid-1950s until the mid-1980s was thought of primarily as an advertisement for arena shows. The television station got free content, while the promoters got a free promotional tool once a week. The fact that these shows often generated massive Nielsen ratings was important only in increasing the chances of “putting an ass every 18 inches,” in wrestling parlance. Promoters often recorded over one week’s show with the next, as the cost of video tape was considered too high to justify keeping them.

However, a group of perhaps 15 or 20 tape traders, the most active and ardent fans from each territory, began to swap copies of weekly regional shows. Fans could now see wrestling from around the country and watch stars wrestle who they had only heard about previously. Lead users like Dave Meltzer of *The Wrestling Observer Newsletter* began watching tapes from across territories and providing a comprehensive account of “the wrestling industry” in newsletter format. Eventually, his newsletter reached thousands of subscribers, and those “lead readers” became expert fans who were consulted by many thousands more in their own local communities. The desire for industry news and backstage gossip from the pro wrestling world only proliferated with the spread of Internet access, and the initial behaviors of 15 or 20 wrestling fans expanded exponentially.

The active consumption of these lead fans created a new way to look at wrestling content, which valued comparing performances and prioritized wrestling as a televised event over the live arena experience. I argue that these niche active behaviors transformed the way wrestling is promoted and packaged, alongside the consolidation of wrestling into a national enterprise through the rise of cable television.

World Wrestling Entertainment took advantage of the rise of cable television and pay-per-view to create a national wrestling promotion comprised of the top stars from each regional territory. The company toured nationally, but television increasingly became an income driver, through pay-per-view, home videos, and increases in televised fees.

The WWE hit a popularity peak in the late 1990s, largely through creative changes driven by the modes of viewing encouraged by outlets like the *Wrestling Observer Newsletter*. However, interest began to wane in 2001, due to what some would say was oversaturation of new wrestling content (at least 14 hours of cable and broadcast shows per week for the three nationally distributed wrestling companies in the U.S.) and bad creative decisions.

In response to losing mainstream interest, however, the WWE not only retained their bottom line but became even more profitable than ever, primarily by appealing to active

fan behaviors. The company capitalized on the active engagement that these archiving and proselytizing fans exhibited through providing wrestling content across multiple platforms and amassing, preserving, and monetizing a vast collection of wrestling footage that was once considered without worth by wrestling promoters.

These changes largely came through tapping into the interest in wrestling television content that tape traders pointed the way toward more than 20 years prior. Through a “Long Tail” business model, the WWE decided to repackage the vast amount of content, not only in its archive but in purchasing the existing archives of various defunct wrestling shows from years past.

The new WWE model was built primarily through the launch of a subscription-based video-on-demand channel called WWE 24/7 On Demand, that releases about 20 hours of content per month. The archive is further mined for DVD releases built around particular personalities, storylines, or types of matches. In short, contextualizing segments from the thousands of hours of footage in the WWE archives has turned what was previously considered content that had no value past first television airing into a product of continued interest, through using new television distribution technologies. These initiatives, and the WWE’s current profitability, required a shift in the business model toward television as the centerpiece and toward valuing the televised wrestling archive, changes which lead fans saw and laid the groundwork for decades earlier.