



Border Security a TV ratings hit

More than 60 episodes of the ground-breaking program have been aired on Seven Network by the end of 2007 and it continues to shape positive community perceptions of the work of Australian Customs.

Filmed mainly inside airports, *Border Security* is an observational documentary; factual programming which takes viewers behind the scenes of Customs and its partner agencies, the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service and the Department of Immigration and Citizenship.

The program shows officers from the three agencies at work, catching smugglers, turning away illegal arrivals and finding drugs and other illegal items.

Most of the action occurs in airport arrival areas and consists of a sequence of conversations as officials try to work out if arriving travellers are telling the truth and what they may be hiding.

Viewers also see Customs vessels intercepting illegal foreign fishing boats, investigators executing search warrants and searching cargo arriving from overseas.

But, importantly, many steps are taken during the filming process to ensure operational and security aspects of Customs vital border protection work are not compromised.

So why does the program, now in its fifth series, attract a national audience of more than two million viewers weekly?

Seven Network's series producer Lyndal Marks believes the appeal for viewers is the opportunity of a glimpse into a world usually hidden from view.

"The drama and suspense of real-life situations make the series a hit. People are intrigued by what people smuggle, how they go about it, and how they are caught.

"Seemingly routine questions asked by the Customs officer fall into place when the passenger is found to be concealing drugs in their bags, or on their body," Lyndal Marks said.

The program is filmed with the full cooperation of the three agencies involved. Each vets the content for possible breaches of privacy, legal and operational processes. These safeguards, in addition to strict filming protocols, determine what can and cannot be filmed.



Since it first premiered on Australian television in October 2004 to an audience of 1.2 million viewers, *Border Security: Australia's Frontline* has become a runaway ratings success.



Uniquely, the Seven Network retains all editorial control over the program.

Customs Manager Media and Public Affairs, Matthew Wardell, said this arrangement was an Australian first when negotiated back in 2004.

“The partnership between Australian Government agencies and a commercial television broadcaster was unique. It allowed the program to be made and put to air at a time when there was nothing else like it on Australian television,” Matt Wardell says.

The agreement has since attracted international attention from other Customs agencies contemplating a similar community engagement strategy.

He says the key driver for *Border Security's* ongoing success is the outstanding co-operation from Customs officers right across the country: “Without them there would clearly be no show.”

Border Security camera crews have been provided access to just about everywhere Customs operates.

“Filming has occurred on our patrol boats, in helicopters and surveillance planes, in our x-ray facilities, remote area patrols, mail centres and airports. We’ve even filmed officers conducting helicopter boardings of ships arriving in Australia,” Matt Wardell says.

“While filming is concentrated at airports in Sydney and Melbourne, the program has also travelled to Brisbane, Adelaide and regional areas including Dampier (WA), Bundaberg and Mackay (Qld).”

The ongoing popularity of the series has taken many in government—and the Australian television industry—by surprise. Following its move to a prime time slot, the program has consistently attracted an average of more than two million viewers weekly.



Border Security finished 2006 as the second most watched program on Australian television, behind celebrity ballroom dancing competition *Dancing with the Stars*. Such large audience numbers have traditionally been reserved for American dramas, sitcoms and sporting events.

The program has also been aired in several countries and on pay television in Australia.

"It has undoubtedly lifted Customs profile as Australia's premier border security agency, and increased the community's support for the work carried out by our men and women on the front line," Matt Wardell says.

Filming for series six of *Border Security*, to air in 2008, is now underway.

Amanda Palmer

