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When Tom Freston took over as CEO of MTV Networks, Britney Spears was only 5 years old, Eminem was 13, and Sponge Bob Squarepants wasn't even a gleam in someone's creative eye. Freston has kept MTV Networks (the cable empire that includes MTV, Nickelodeon, Nick at Nite, TV Land, VH1, and CMT) consistently successful over 15 years of shifting fashions, musical tastes, entertainment interests, and economic conditions. In 2002, MTV, Nickelodeon, Nick at Nite, and TV Land had their best years ever. "[The success] can't be a coincidence," says Mel Karmazin, president of MTV Networks' parent group Viacom. "It has to be because of the leadership."

Interestingly, when asked about the success of MTV Networks, Freston gives credit to his senior leadership team and his employees rather than accepting all the applause for himself. Freston believes they're the ones who really keep MTV Networks sizzling. He has built a programming powerhouse partly by hiring talented, creative people and giving them the freedom to explore, imagine, make decisions, and become the best they can be. It is Freston, though, who provides the right environment, the vision, and the direction for what MTV Networks can be. His vision is

to keep MTV on the cutting edge of popular culture without veering so far that it is perceived as radical. He's built a distinctive corporate culture that reflects shades of his antiestablishment values of the 1960s but also emphasizes keeping pace with current youth social trends and the needs of the business. When business results are less than expected, Freston's demanding side comes out. "He's tough as nails," said one executive. "If you don't perform, he's all over you."

How does Freston keep people performing at their peak and MTV Networks playing the popular-appeal game so well? He says he's just doing what he loves. "If you do something in your life that you really love...who wants something more?"¹