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Upfronts: 'Chuck' Saved By Subway

BY BILL CARTER

"Chuck" is coming back to NBC, and it has new reasons to be grateful.

In a deal that NBC says came from its decision to go to advertisers early with pitches for integration ideas, "Chuck" will return to NBC's prime-time schedule next season with a special sponsorship deal with the Subway sandwich restaurant chain.

"Chuck," a series about a tech store computer geek who, through one of those all-too-frequent cosmic accidents, has most of the government's nasty secrets downloaded into his head, was considered on the fence for a third season, despite performing better than many shows that have already been brought back by other networks.

But NBC executives made clear on Tuesday that the renewal came about mainly because of an advertising partnership that was suggested to Ben Silverman, a chairman of NBC Entertainment, by Subway executives, who were enthused about the special marketing opportunities the show afforded the company. Subway sandwiches played a role in an episode of "Chuck" last month, with a Subway slogan as part of the dialogue.

Most advertisers have been looking for enhanced positioning inside television shows, and "Chuck" was a natural for Subway for several reasons: it has a mostly young audience, the kind that buys a lot of foot-long subs at malls — and it is set in shopping center.

Chuck's girlfriend, Sarah, is a top CIA agent but she works undercover at the mall in different eateries. It is no leap to think she could be selling Subway sandwiches next season. An NBC executive said that discussions had been held about the specifics of the Subway tie-in and that the idea had been considered, though the terms were not formally decided yet.

NBC's president of ad sales, Mike Pilot, said the deal validated what NBC had called its "infront," process, in which it presented its lineup to ad executives two weeks before the other networks and sought ideas for tie-ins like the one developed with Subway.

While the decision on "Chuck" was in the balance, the show's fans waged an aggressive campaign online and through Twitter to try to save it.

"Chuck" will return to its spot on Monday nights at 8 in the winter following NBC's coverage of the Winter Olympics.