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SPONSORING ONLINE SCRIPTED CONTENT



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Content Integration Director

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While many people may remember Justine Bateman from her role as the adorable Mallory on "Family Ties," today Justine has transformed herself into another superstar role: cofounding producer of digital studio FM78.

This new powerhouse of producers, writers, and talent really know how to combine old media savvy with new media innovation, which just might be the perfect formula for creating and distributing brand content in the future.

Last week, I caught up with Bateman about her new role as digital producer and how FM78 envisions working with brands.

Christine Beardsell: Briefly tell me about how FM78 got started.

Justine Bateman: I was very involved with the Writers' Strike of 2007-2008. During that job action, I met Peter Murrieta (my strike captain), Alan Sereboff, and Jill Kushner, who were to become my partners. Alan and Jill were two of the executive producers of the "Speechless" campaign, for which I became an associate producer. It was a series of videos with some of the top stars showing their support for the writers in their stand against the [Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers].

We realized during the strike that the bottom of the distribution pyramid had dropped out and that the Internet had crushed the stranglehold on distribution that the media corporations had held for decades. We knew that the studios and the networks would fold in on themselves and that the entertainment business as we'd known it would never return. We fully recognized that there was an opportunity to be some of the pioneers in this space, in new media, and we jumped at it.

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CB: Why did you decide to dive into digital production?

JB: When the U.S. government relaxed the rules governing how much a media corporation could own, everything became vertical. And very tall, at that. The result was very few corporations owning the entertainment outlets and too many people in that vertical-ownership silo having a say in the creative process. Both are bad news for the creative community and for the ultimate consumer of the product. For the creatives -- the writers, directors, actors, and crew members -- we entered a season of not being paid our worth, receiving too many notes [changes to the script] during the process, and seeing fewer opportunities. During the writers' strike, there was a tipping point and the light went on for many of us. We saw the future of entertainment and it didn't involve the studios or the networks. It was independent and it was online.

CB: What is your vision around building an audience and creating awareness around an online show?

JB: A lot of attention has to be paid to bring an audience to your show online. Traditional media must be used. To imagine that someone is going to guess your URL is silly; you have to let them know about it. One element that FM78.tv brings to our projects is some of the best talent from old media. These people bring with them their own audiences (and massive social media followings) to add to the show's allure. Great writing, great actors, directors, and a talented crew -- that's what we bring to the online table.

Not only does traditional media need to be used, but there must be a trust between the content creators and the online community. The quickest way to get rejected is to present a polished, corporate campaign in an aggressive manner. The content creator has to be a part of the online community and has to have some skin in that game. The core Internet user is online because they don't like being hard-sold; they like the relative lawlessness of life on the Web and they're going to keep it that way. For that reason, the tactics and business grids of old media cannot work in digital. They do not translate.

CB: You grew up acting on TV and working in traditional media. What are the main differences you see when it comes to acting and writing for digital content production and distribution?

JB: I think the biggest difference is how you're involved in the project. So much of old media is set up very compartmentalized... If you are the actor, you just show up, do your work, leave, and then attend to any press the studio or your publicist sends your way. As a writer, you would be a little more involved, but still there are lines that aren't crossed, lest you get into someone else's territory

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on a project. On an Internet project, you'd better be bringing something else to the party because not only are there less people involved, but much more has to be attended to.

Here's an example: Illeana Douglas is a good friend of mine, and I've been in both seasons of "Easy to Assemble," sponsored by IKEA. She wrote, produced, and starred in this show and is doing a great job with it, by the way. She created this "40 and Bitter" talk show for my character in the series, and now IKEA wants to create a Web site and blog for that fictional talk show. Who's going to build and man that blog? Illeana and I. So it's a good thing we know something about creating and manning sites.

CB: How does FM78 partner with brands and marketers?

JB: We are really excited about sponsor-funded content. Sponsor-funded scripted content is one of the best ways advertising dollars can be spent right now. When a sponsor is organically integrated into one of our projects, not only are we accomplishing a favorable association for our audience of that product in that we will always present the product in a good light and make clear to the audience that the sponsor is the reason we are able to bring them this entertainment but it's [also] the gift that keeps on giving for the sponsor.

There are no continuous bills for future ad buys. There is only a distribution model that involves copious amounts of press (an incredible ROI before the show even launches), distribution on all the top sites online, and an involvement of the online community. The show will be passed around, re-blogged, scraped, and shared. And that is one of the ways content is distributed online and is to be embraced.

CB: What is your strategy for organically integrating brands into your content?

JB: At FM78, we don't believe in product placement wherein a product might sit on a table while people are talking about something that has nothing to do with that product's or that brand's goals. Audiences hate that, content creators dislike it, and it reflects poorly on the product. We like "associative advertising" that was more popular in the '60s and '70s, where certain qualities were associated to a brand that may not have had anything to do directly with use of the product itself. The American Express card, for example, was much more cosmopolitan and international to own than a Visa or MasterCard. That was a result of a great ad campaign and the fact that throughout a particular span of literature, expats were always referencing the Amex office abroad as a place to retrieve their mail and other messages. Consequently on the home front, when it was time for you to

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get your first credit card, you wanted an Amex card and not one of the others. As a "cardholder" you felt different when you took it out for purchases; there was a world created about that card when really it served exactly the same function as the other cards.

When we incorporate a brand or company into one of our scripts, there has to first of all be an organic fit, and then the placement in the plot has to add to the story. Sometimes we are dealing with one of our existing scripts on our slate and sometimes we are creating something new for the sponsor. In those cases, we like to discover first what the sponsor needs, what kind of impression are they hoping to make on their customers, and then we create a narrative story that either covers that theme or captures the qualities that the consumer may associate now with the product. Always, the story and narrative are paramount.