

DIGITAS

DIGITAL, BLIP.TV, AND GETTING VIDEO OUT FRONT OF THE UPFRONTS



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This month, I had the pleasure of interviewing Dina Kaplan, blip.tv cofounder and chief operating officer, on the shifting nature of online advertising, content creation, and distribution in the online space. This follows my last column, which examined established and intriguing digital studios and networks in the online video content creation space, including blip.tv. Over the last couple of years, blip.tv has housed, distributed, and promoted successful brand content shows like Holiday Inn Express's "The Smart Show," as well as helped negotiate the HBO brand integration deals for the politically savvy shows "Talking Points Memo" and "Political Lunch."

Christine Beardsell: You come from a traditional television background. What made you decide to move into the online space?

Dina Kaplan: Before blip.tv, I worked in TV both as a producer and an on-air news reporter. I loved working in broadcasting, but you quickly see how cumbersome the process is to get a show "on the air" and also how succeeding in television often seems to have as much to do with who you know as how talented you are or how good your idea for a show is.

In the past, someone who wanted to bring a show to a network would have to know someone at a big production company, or at Bravo, Disney, Fox, or wherever they wanted the show to air. There is a lengthy pitch process, and then shows go into development, and the whole thing is enough to wear down someone who just wants to make good content.

Now, with sites like blip.tv, if you have an idea for a show you can just do it, and the only limiting factors are your creativity and your ability to bring the show into production.

CB: In your view, within the online space, what is the relationship between content creator, distributor, and advertiser? And how have the roles and responsibilities changed?

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DK: In the online space, the relationship between content creator, distributor, and advertiser are 100 percent different than TV and film relationships, and this is sparking an enormous change in Hollywood.

In the past, the distributor had the power. You knew if a show were airing on a broadcast network that it would attract some of eyeballs and press and then most likely be sold at the upfronts and have advertising attached to it. Programming executive at an NBC or Fox have had a huge amount of say in dictating people's tastes and controlling what people are watching.

In this scenario, content creators are in a constant state of pitching, and a network executive has clear green and red light authority.

Now, content creators have more power than ever before, and it's up to them to choose a distribution outlet. An A-list talent may decide to launch a Web show so that she could have total control over that program and then could choose to "air" it on MySpace or YouTube or blip.tv or another outlet. But in that case, the content creator has the rights to the show and can really shop it around for the best deal and the best terms for what they want to do.

In both cases, advertisers have a lot of power, too, since they're funding productions both on the Web and TV side. And that makes both content creators and distributors in the end beholden to advertisers.

CB: You have a lot of great quality shows and content. How have you avoided becoming just another UGC [user-generated content] video dumping ground? And what do you think attracts content creators to your site versus others?

DK: Blip.tv was created to be a service for the best original online shows, and we've never wavered from that. We saw the viral video phenomenon become huge in 2006 and 2007, but we never went after it. And at some point I think a site that caters to friends and family videos of weddings and vacation videos will do very well, but we'll never move towards that segment of the market.

Also, we hang out with these content creators all the time. And for our first two and a half years, support e-mails were sent to all of the co-founders of the company. When you feel the pain points because they're showing up on your BlackBerry all day and all night, you know you have to fix them, and you fix them. That type of responsiveness is something that content creators appreciate and is, I suspect, a reason they recommend us to other content creators.

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CB: Do you consider other online video portals like YouTube and Revver friend, or foe? Why?

DK: Other places that people watch videos on the Web are friends, and we eventually could imagine doing distribution deals with almost all of them. We believe content should go to where the eyeballs are, and if your Aunt Ginnie likes to watch videos on AOL Video, then we should distribute blip.tv videos to AOL, which we have done. We actually built the syndication network for blip.tv even before we built out a destination site. And we're really proud that from blip.tv you can syndicate shows to AOL, iTunes, Yahoo Video, the Adobe Media Player, and other portals on and off the Web as well.

CB: Describe your ideal advertising partnership.

DK: In terms of an ideal advertising partnership, we love when brands or agencies give us a demographic or a psychographic they'd like to reach for one of their products. We can then come back to suggest shows that reach that demographic. If they choose a few of those shows, the best scenario is to start off by asking the content creator how best the brand should engage their audience. In one case, we had a content creator put up a wiki and ask fans of her show to script an ad that the host then produced and starred in. In other cases, show producers have done custom shout-outs to their fans about the product or the film, but in their own words.

We need to realize that content creators have very special relationships with their audience, and they're going to have some great ideas for communicating with them about your product. So if we can let that happen, and let the brand really benefit from working with a talented show host, beautiful things can happen. We've found those campaigns tend to be the most innovative and tend to spark the most press and also the most conversations among the audience.