

DIGITAS

SCOUTING OUT TALENT TO REPRESENT A BRAND



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This piece originally appeared in ClickZ

In my last few columns, I covered new emerging studios and channels working to develop content in the online space. And I touched on the new talent these companies are discovering and shaping to be the next generation of entertainment.

Working on several brand content productions during the past year has allowed me to connect with rising Internet stars and established talent looking to plunge head first into video blogging, participatory storytelling, and everything else that makes online media what it is today.

With that in mind, in coming weeks, I'll concentrate specifically on this talent - both new and established. More important, I'll explore how agencies can best evaluate, engage, and manage this new emerging talent.

To start, here are some high-level considerations to keep in mind.

Deciding Between a Rising Star and an Established Actor

One would think an established actor is the better bet when looking for talent to best represent a brand. After all, you're guaranteed a certain level of professionalism. However, unless that established actor is the star caliber or comedic talent of a Will Farrell, the overall playing field has really leveled out in terms of talent online.

With the emergence of television 50 years ago, many actors found that their performance, though successful on stage, didn't translate well on television. For example, the actors' hand gestures were over exaggerated, their voice tone was unnaturally high, and they often addressed an invisible third person versus the other talent right in front of them.

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Similarly today, as the medium transitions from a passive to an interactive and participatory experience, there is a shift in how talent communicates a message to an online audience. While the transition from stage to television mostly required rethinking the physical outward performance, the online audience demands something that can't be as easily taught: authenticity and transparency.

Finding talent willing to get to know her audience and invest the time to nurture and connect with that audience far outweighs the importance of finding talent that can deliver the perfect performance.

Finding and Managing Talent

Finding talent for a television spot is fairly straightforward. Casting directors and talent agencies pretty much have that market covered. It's exciting (and a bit terrifying) finding and managing talent for online. For the most part, there are no processes or hardcoded rules. While some larger talent agencies are slowly starting to represent Internet stars, overall brands and ad agencies are now positioned to have much more direct contact and direct management of their own contractual agreements with this talent.

You can save money by not going through a talent agency. But there is some downside as well. Owning that relationship directly also means you have to manage that talent directly. Savings you obtain when bypassing an agent can be eaten up if you have to micromanage the talent - especially when working with someone who hasn't worked with brands.

Finding and discovering talent that's right for a brand isn't an easy task. Look across the various video portals to see who is gaining an audience. Video portals like blip.tv and Sony's Crackle keep close relationships with the talent on their sites, making contacting these portals a good place to start.

Of course, if you have the budget or your client demands a more established talent, contacting casting directors and talent agencies are still the way to go. And in a future column I'll introduce a number of agencies that are representing some of the best new online stars as well.

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Protecting the Brand

Regardless of where you find talent, the most important thing is to protect the brand and to give clients the assurance that playing in the new digital brand content space will not put their brand image at risk. That means creating good moderation tools - both automated and human.

If you host your content within an existing video network, some portals will have tiered moderation offerings you can purchase. If you decide to house your own content, you can partner with a SAAS platform companies like PermissionTV, Vitruve, or Mixercast. These companies can either create and manage a moderation plan for you or give you the administrative tools for you to moderate your own content.

Setting Aside Money to Nurture an Audience

Overplanning and spending money to create the perfect script and shoot the perfect performance doesn't necessarily equal success. What's far more important than dressing the set with the perfect lamp or delivering the perfect line is creating a production schedule and budget that will allow the talent to nurture and be responsive to an audience. Audience participation is now part of the production itself. Additionally, always allocate enough of your budget to plan for the unknown!

In the end, allowing the audience to influence the content encourages deeper engagement with the talent and, in turn, the brand - which is the result we're all working toward.