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Unwired Net Hits Target With Viewers

Online, Bloggers or User-Generated Videos Can Be Starting Point to Create Links

By Mark Dominiak, Special to *TelevisionWeek*

In the television space, planners constantly find themselves trying to locate programming choices that attract large numbers of the target audience. Planners might use Nielsen ratings or MRI skews or any variety of research tactics to locate target prospects. If they get really lucky, the target prospects also may be extremely passionate about the programming the planner has discovered.

Sometimes the discoveries are easy to execute in the broadcast marketplace, other times not. For example, if a particular network, syndicated or cable show seems to do the trick, a planner could just work with his agency's buying partner to contact the show's vendor and start negotiations.

But sometimes, opportunistic content isn't so easy to purchase. It might not be available for sale by a vendor, may be too cost-prohibitive or may cover more geography than is needed by the brand. In that circumstance, an "unwired network" may be the solution to the problem.

In my planning past, I've been involved with a few interesting unwired solutions. In one situation, our planning team had identified "Saturday Night Live" as a great venue for reaching the brand's target, but national sponsors and prohibitive rates barred our brand from taking advantage. An unwired negotiation allowed us to cobble together the NBC affiliates in our best markets in order to solve the problem.

In another case, Olympics coverage seemed like a natural, but again, network costs would have decimated our budget. The team's solution was the local break before late news, which noted Olympics highlights to be covered but allowed us to take advantage of slightly narrower geography.

Unwired Nets Online

Today, the notion of unwired networks is still relevant and more complicated than ever. On the other hand, the creativity a planner can bring to bear to solve problems has much more depth today than years ago.

One great unwired opportunity is the emergence of solutions in the digital space. So many individuals are creating viable user-generated content that marketers are beginning to take note -- and advantage.

For example, Advertising Age recently noted the Sci Fi Channel's digital press tour initiative brought

roughly 30 of its most avid blogger fans to the Vancouver, B.C., sets of "Battlestar Galactica" and four other Sci Fi shows for a weeklong science fiction fest. For Sci Fi, it was a public relations and goodwill gesture that allowed it to connect with the hundreds of thousands of regular blog readers.

If you were a planner working on a brand for which "Battlestar Galactica" or Sci Fi Channel programs were passionately consumed by the target prospect, wouldn't it be a great addition to your plan to secure ad space on those blogs? It's even possible that many of the blogs have video capability and probably are cost-advantageous compared to national television rates.

I sat in on a local manifestation of the same idea just last week. With Harry Potter fans in the house, we ended up at Borders to meet Emerson Spartz, a Harry Potter junkie who's also the noteworthy 20-year-old founder of Mugglenet.com, the largest Harry Potter fan site on the Web and co-author of the book "Mugglenet.Com's What Will Happen in Harry Potter 7: Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Falls in Love and How Will the Adventure Finally End."

Part of his discussion covered two notions with unwired underpinnings. First, his publisher approached him specifically to write the book to tap into the huge fan base of Mugglenet.com. In reaching out to Spartz, the publisher accessed a broader, passionate network of Potter fans. Second, "Harry Potter" author J.K. Rowling herself invited Spartz and Melissa Anelli of The-Leaky-Cauldron.org, to Scotland to interview her, helping build buzz for the book and the latest film, "Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix." You could call it good PR, but Rowling essentially created an unwired network for movie trailers and the latest buzz using the two Web sites.

The Coming Political Storm

There are yet more intriguing unwired ideas beginning to take shape that could reach even broader audiences.

Think about the momentum building behind the upcoming presidential election. News bits and buzz are just starting to gather steam, but imagine how much political coverage will weave its way into the media by fourth quarter 2007 and first quarter '08. And given the dramatic growth in digital technology the past few years, think about how much impact online video could have on the coming election. That video has the potential to create online unwired networks.

There have already been a couple of widely viewed political viral videos this year. Obama Girl's "I Got a Crush on Obama" and Hillary Clinton's spoof of the "Sopranos" finale have received significant levels of online play. All that was missing from the videos was advertisers. If they had sponsorship as part of the actual video, all of those viral posts could end up constituting a sizable unwired network.

There is evidence to suggest the viability of the concept. Fox News ran an over-the-air story on Obama Girl that was picked up digitally. The digital version contained a presenting advertiser spot for Levitra. If Fox News can get advertisers to support stories on viral videos, it seems viral video makers have the potential to secure sponsors on their own account. When focus on politics goes through the roof in 2008, an unwired network might be a great environment for some brands.

Good user-generated political content may be easier to find than planners think. For example, Citizen Kate is one video blogger who has gone from an unknown, neophyte political reporter to one whose clips are widely circulated on Wikipedia, MySpace, YouTube and Veoh. She is having such a significant impact online that many candidates are seeking her out to reach voters.

Here's the interesting thing: When Citizen Kate files another digital blog, the report gets posted on her MySpace or Wikipedia page and is subsequently viewed by pundits and other reporters alike. That report then ends up linked to multiple other blogs or news reports across the Web. Essentially, Citizen Kate's user-generated content has become its own unwired network. And no doubt Kate would love to have sponsors.

Citizen Kate's recent press conference Q&A time with John Edwards demonstrates some great things about the potential of these user-generated unwired opportunities. It's not the same old thing we're used to seeing on network TV. Kate's honest, basic questions generate interesting reactions from politicians. The result is funny yet engaging content.

New Perspective

Because Citizen Kate is basically an average person who has decided to jump into the volatile realm of politics, she sticks out like a sore thumb in this environment. But that's good, because it provides a different perspective from what audiences are used to seeing.

Those are the qualities that have made reality programming so compelling to viewers: real people we can identify with in situations we're unfamiliar with.

Unwired networks also offer the ability to link brands to the content. In the Edwards video, there's a lot of discussion about jobs and finding jobs. One would think brands such as Monster.com or CareerBuilder.com would be all over that. There is also a video report about Kate's wardrobe problems as Sen. Obama announced his candidacy in the cold of February in Illinois. A retailer or clothing brand would be a great fit.

Sponsorships for video reports are seemingly very negotiable, meaning an ad could be attached to the video that then would be uploaded into Kate's blog and postings. As others pick up the link, an unwired network of viewers interested in Kate's content is created.

Citizen Kate is just one example of user-generated content that could be a platform for brand messaging in the upcoming political season. As the races start to heat up, it's likely Kate and other content will provide viable, broad-reaching unwired viewer opportunities. Given that 2008 is also an Olympics year, there probably are user-generated content opportunities surrounding Beijing that are currently getting off the ground or soon to come.

The bottom line is that these types of user-generated content platforms can provide an unconventional yet viable unwired network opportunity for a planner's brands. All it may take to unleash them are creativity, the occasional perusal of YouTube and remembering that the sales rep for the opportunity may be the guy one cubicle over from yours.

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