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A new model for online branded entertainment

By **Richard Shore**

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Turn on the TV today, and it's almost impossible not to come face-to-face with branded entertainment. From the Olympics to "Undercover Boss"; from "American Idol" to "Project Runway" and, of course, "Mad Men", sponsorships, product placement, and hour-long PR campaigns are everywhere -- and becoming more popular.

It's a model that started with soap operas nearly half a century ago and has carried a stigma with it ever since. Perhaps the negative connotation has its roots in the fact that soap operas are not quite in the same league as Oscar Award-winning movies or Pulitzer Prize-winning publications. But sponsoring daytime dramas certainly gave consumer goods companies a direct path into housewives' homes.

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Now, with the web, there are even more opportunities for branded entertainment -- and more ways that advertisers can make branded entertainment for them. There is too much potential online for advertisers not to take advantage of branded entertainment.

Today, branded entertainment has come to encompass several distinct types of projects. For example, there is a distinct difference between brand-funded entertainment and sponsoring a piece of premium content. But this line has been blurred because studios -- in particular, web studios -- have come to rely on one brand to fund an entire production, regardless of the execution.

Take a moment to revisit why branded entertainment works offline. In short, it works because the studio does not try to recoup the entire cost of the production from its brand sponsor. From syndication deals to ad-supported content, branded entertainment is supported by multiple revenue streams offline.

Why don't we use this model online?

The people who watch content on their computers might be different from the people who watch content on their TVs, but all successful content appeals to people for one simple reason: It has a good story. Successful online producers and independent production studios work the same way, creating web originals that "pop" online because they have good stories, they know their audiences, and they have high production values.

If a brand is going to be involved in a premium content production, it's critical that they have a first look at the content. They need to envision the fit between the product and the story, understand the vision of the director, and set clear expectations. Working with an independent studio can be another way to become involved early, and stay involved throughout the process, since independent studios generally have the flexibility to deliver to their clients' specifications.

These early conversations are a perfect opportunity to discuss the online distribution plan for the property.

How do we apply this offline model to the online world? Perhaps we consider applying the windowing approach of traditional distribution to the online world. For example, a studio might recommend exclusive distribution on a major video portal to launch the web original, followed by widespread ad-supported distribution throughout a network of sites and supplemented by distribution via a subscription-based service or via an authentication service.

The key is creating content that appeals to an audience, and distributing the content effectively to the target audience. If this is done successfully, it's not just the brand advertiser that's funding the production -- it's a combination of the brand advertiser's investment supported by a thorough distribution plan. This helps to maintain both the quality and the authenticity of the production.

Where could this revised model for branded entertainment lead? Our early indications are that it will provide better integration of brands and professional video content, which will ultimately deliver a higher value experience for both brands and studios -- and an end product that people want to watch.

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