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THE X FACTOR SECOND SCREEN EXPERIENCE

HOW PRODUCER/DIRECTOR MARC SCARPA
GUIDED A PARTICIPATORY FAN EXPERIENCE FOR
THE X FACTOR'S LIVE ONLINE PRE-SHOW.

By Claudia Kienzie

In recent years, primetime television has embraced a new trend—singing competitions that combine live musical entertainment, riveting personal dramas and highly charged theatrical spectacles. This was the case with season one of *The X Factor*, another Simon Cowell invention that proved itself on British television and in 41 worldwide markets before joining the Fox lineup for its U.S. debut last fall.

Stemming from Cowell's passion for social media, *The X Factor* (U.S.) capitalized on another significant media trend — weaving social media feedback into the fabric of the live television broadcast in real-time. Among its many social media and online initiatives, X Factor Digital — a production unit associated with the show — produced the one-hour *X Factor Pepsi Pre-Show Live* — a novel cyber event designed to drum up excitement prior to the show's Wednesday 8 p.m. telecast.

The pre-show capitalized on yet another television industry trend — the use of integrated production systems (IPS) to reduce the capital investment, budget and manpower needed to produce innovative live telecasts, especially targeting online au-

For a webcast, the *X Factor Pepsi Pre-Show Live* was fast-paced and intense with high production values. Prior to each of season one's 26 episodes (airing from Sept. 22 through Dec. 22, 2011), X Factor fans could tap into this innovative programming format using their smart phones, tablets or browsers.

Once online via the xfactorusa.com portal, fans became an integral part of the pre-show's unique format. They could tweet or post Facebook comments about behind-the-scenes interviews with contestants and judges, commentary by co-hosts Dan Levy and Taryn Southern and roving correspondent Jim Cantiello, or any of the activi-

ties caught by special contestant cameras placed on the legendary CBS Television City lot in Hollywood, Calif., where *The X Factor* is produced. Real-time social media feedback, Skype calls with fans, and on-camera interviews with special fans and other guests were kneaded into the live content in a dynamic way.

FEEDBACK FROM THE TWITTER- SPHERE

"Our goal was to create a compelling 'participatory' fan experience that complemented the main show by conveying that night's key storylines to viewers in the digital media space," said Marc Scarpa, producer/director of X Factor Digital's *X Factor Pepsi Pre-Show Live*.



Marc Scarpa, producer/director of X Factor Digital's *X Factor Pepsi Pre-Show Live*, engages viewers with the show before it even airs.

PHOTO COURTESY OF JESSICA CHOU FROM THE HOLLYWOOD REPORTER

diences. X Factor Digital chose to use TriCaster 850 EXTREME, the industry's premier IPS by NewTek, a broadcast technology innovator in San Antonio, Texas.

ENGAGING FANS

Situated within a Sweetwater JOECO custom control room adjacent to CBS studios, TriCaster served as the powerful, integrated central hub of a bustling streaming media workflow. Priced at less than \$50,000, TriCaster 850 EXTREME provides firepower comparable to a hi-def truck for a tiny fraction of the cost. And by integrating all of the key functionality of live television production — including switching up to eight HD camera signals, adding animated transitional effects and text, as well as video encoding — a single operator can man the entire show.

SYCOtv — a partnership between the show's creator Simon Cowell, Fox Networks, Fremantle and Sony Music — produced *The X Factorusa.com* experience. Scarpa was hired by Sony Music, which was responsible for producing all of X Factor Digital's online efforts, including the pre-show.

"As fans responded to what they were seeing, their feedback — contributed via social media, mobile devices, Skype and other platforms — actually impacted and shaped the creative direction of the show," said Scarpa. "Feedback from our fans would actually change the trajectory of topics or people we focused on, making them true participants in this engaging, live multimedia event."

Perhaps the most pivotal participant of all was NewTek's TriCaster, which absorbed all of the incoming video, audio and social media data to produce and output a polished webcast.

Exploring the Creative Potential of Emerging Media

Who is Marc Scarpa?

By Claudia Kienzle

Before stepping into the role of producer/director for X Factor Digital's *X Factor Pepsi Pre-Show Live*, Marc Scarpa had been honing his craft on many high-profile new media projects.

"The programming I like to create is participatory, real-time, and experiential. This means that it's an experience happening in the moment where the participant — traditionally known as the viewer — has an active role in the creation and conversation surrounding the programming itself," said Scarpa.

To enable well-crafted storytelling, Scarpa has been using the NewTek TriCaster integrated production solution for about 10 years now. Besides having all of the necessary functionality to produce a high-quality live broadcast within an affordable, compact system, TriCaster also builds in many tools specifically designed for live media streaming.

As a content creator, Scarpa is not limited to any particular platform, technology or tool, but rather chooses whatever medium is right for the project. His impressive bio can be read at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marc_Scarpa, but here are some of the highlights.

He is an executive board member and the founding New York Chair of the Producers Guild of America New Media Council and a recipient of the Marc A. Levy distinguished service award. He won a Webby Award in 2010 for Best Event/Live Webcast for his work on the 52nd Annual Grammy Awards. For this CBS awards special, Scarpa developed, produced, and directed the first participatory online experience for the Grammy Awards, including 72 hours of continuous live streaming media coverage on Grammy.com, among other sites consumed by 3.8 million unique visitors.

He also produced *Earthday Live!*, a seven-hour live online participatory broadcast that bridged the in-person attendance of 250,000 on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., with the online world of several million people in 18 countries.

"With participatory media, we're not dictating the content to viewers. Participants are shaping the nature of the content itself — in real-time," said Scarpa.



PHOTO COURTESY OF SULINH LAFONTAINE
With TriCaster's integrated functionality, Scarpa only needs to interact with a single operator.

With TriCaster's integrated functionality, Scarpa only needed to interact with a single operator, his Technical Director Victor Borachuk, to craft the live presentation.

ENABLING TECHNOLOGY

While TriCaster contains all of the tools needed for high-quality live television, in this particular instance it was configured to interface with a wide array of high-end, third-party video and audio gear, including an audio mixing board, large multiview display and a video/audio patch bay.

Four of TriCaster's eight video inputs were dedicated to Sony PDW-F800 XDCAM HD 4:2:2 camcorders that operators were using to capture live video from the set inside the press tent adjacent to the studio facility and X Factor Digital's trailer. Other video sources included pre-produced video packages that were stored on TriCaster and rolled-out live or as "look lives." There were also program opens, closes, bumpers and other graphics assets created using After Effects and input into TriCaster as .mov files for live play-out.

Rather than renting an expensive, high-end HDTV mobile production truck, (where one day's rental fee would equal or exceed the fully outfitted cost of a TriCaster 850 EXTREME), X Factor Digital chose to base its remote production of the pre-show on a TriCaster. TriCaster was stationed inside a large trailer retrofitted with equipment racks to hold broadcast gear and sufficient console space for several work areas.

While one TriCaster operator could manage the switching and graphics of the show, Scarpa had a wide array of crew people — including an engineer-in-charge, audio mixer, two encoding engineers, assistant director, several utilities, a teleprompter op, a social media producer as well as writers and executive producers — within the digital control room.

In total, roughly 45 people contributed to X Factor Digital's content creation efforts, several of which were directly or indi-

rectly associated with the pre-show itself. The custom control room also used CBS Studios' blazing fast 450Mb/s fiber infrastructure, as well as Bright Cove and Akamai's content delivery network services. According to Scarpa, CBS Studios' phenomenally fast data connection and technical expertise were critical to this production because of X Factor Digital's demanding multi-device-streaming media challenges.

SOCIAL MEDIA INTEGRATION

"Since we were getting over 2,000 tweets per minute, our social media producer used a software-based social media curation solution called Mass Relevance to filter out those incoming tweets that were particularly relevant to what was being said at that moment in the pre-show," said Scarpa. They would filter tweets based on keywords such as the judges' names — including Simon Cowell, Paula Abdul, Nicole Scherzinger, or L.A. Reid — as well as the names of competing singers or singing groups, and any other key topics for that night's storyline.

"We used TriCaster's Text Overlay feature to place the social media elements right onto the screen in appealing displays, such as transparent boxes, lower-third supers, and other non-disruptive graphics that popped in and out," said Scarpa. "So if our host was asking Simon Cowell about Melanie Amaro, (the contestant who ultimately won season one), we might have had an overlay of a tweet, such as 'Good choice, Simon,' or any other select tweet about his thoughts on that performer."

TriCaster supports the input of social media data, including tweets, Facebook posts, pictures and videos, from any iOS (iPhone operating system) device, such as an iPhone, iPad or MacBook Pro. The user interface also offers one-button Internet streaming that allows use of Adobe Flash or Microsoft Windows Media to deliver a full HD live stream directly to the Web.

IDEAL FOR NON-TRADITIONAL FARE

Since it is equally at home in the Web streaming and traditional broadcast worlds, TriCaster includes other helpful streaming features, such as the ability to simultaneously archive the webcast for later viewing and support for multi-bitrate streaming profiles. TriCaster's Streaming Profile Manager also has an integrated browser that makes configuration, importing and previewing of Web streams quicker and easier. Users can save and manage all of their preferred settings for instant access at a later date.

All of TriCaster's functions are readily available to the operator via an intuitive interface and the ability to display all of the necessary video signals, buttons and control panels on a widescreen multiview display. The operator can monitor all of the video associated with each camera, as well as the preview and program signals.

There's also a live production switcher control panel on the interface giving the operator control over all 24 available channels, including eight external video sources, eight virtual mix/effects channels, five internal digital media players, two external network inputs, frame buffer and black. The interface also displays a full digital audio mixer and tools for creating digital video effects and transitions, as well as a virtual set system. All of the sources on the display can be named to avoid confusion.

With the addition of a third-party system for robotic camera control, a single operator could manage an entire multi-camera production with high-quality results using TriCaster. But it's also versatile enough to benefit a high-caliber, dynamic, primetime television show by streamlining the cost and technical complexity of the workflow.



According to Marc Scarpa, *The X Factor* gets 2,000 tweets per minute from fans during the show.

POWERFUL STORYTELLING TOOL

"TriCaster is a multi-faceted tool that allows me as a director to have one point of contact to execute multiple functions in the programming workflow. The compact nature of this unit frees up a seat or two in the control room so we can have a social media producer and others tasked with managing other non-traditional elements of the show," said Scarpa.

"And financially speaking, there's nothing on the market that comes even close to what TriCaster can do at that price point," he added. "HD trucks will not go away, but my guess is that you'll see more and more of them — especially smaller trucks and Sprinters — outfitted with TriCasters in the future."

The impact of TriCaster is "immeasurable" because it's empowering content creators to tell their stories and produce new kinds of programming quickly, inexpensively, and with high-quality — in many cases content that would otherwise never get produced, he said.

"This is especially true for younger producers just starting out who don't have million-dollar budgets to get their multi-camera shows done using conventional HD trucks and studios," said Scarpa. "In my opinion, TriCaster is ushering in a complete paradigm shift, helping people to tell their stories. It's got the 'X Factor.'"