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Q&A: Marc Scarpa, Executive Producer, *VidBlogger Nation*

Show Creator Scarpa Explains How to Let Content Go Rogue While Keeping Tabs on Editorial and Deliverables

By Beth Marchant / Sep 26, 2011

Marc Scarpa, executive producer at New York and L.A.-based Simplynew Studios, has long been trying to step outside the box of traditional broadcast entertainment by creating live programming for television, social networks, fashion labels and even the White House. Last year, he won a Webby Award for his live Webcast of the 52nd Annual Grammy Awards, bringing a “dual-screen” experience and social networking to the previously staid annual event. He hopes his newest show, *VidBlogger Nation*, which he executive produces and created, will go one step further and create a brand new category: social TV networks. The series premiered on Comcast On-Demand last week.

In essence a network of 12 high-profile video bloggers shooting and editing content for their own regional channels, *VidBlogger Nation* features tips and scoops about the “people, places and things” that most interest its localized “tastemakers” – and their circles on Facebook and Twitter – in their respective cities. To keep things broadcast-quality, Scarpa and his team supply the hosts with a firm set of technical specs, an ongoing choice of segment theme ideas and plenty of post advice along the way.

We talked to him about the challenges of bringing first-person storytelling to TV and the process of managing creative, editorial and deliverables on a show that gets its rough cuts straight from the video bloggers themselves.

Q: You’ve got lots of experience producing live events, specifically “live participatory programming” featuring everything from musical performances to presidential town hall meetings. Why do you think the concept of an “audience,” as we know it, is dead?

I think the notion of “audience” is evolving. They are not just a disengaged viewer, they are engaged and they are a participant, and that’s the direction we’re moving in more and more, especially with the notion of social television.

Q: What do you mean by “social television,” which could potentially be coming from any screen?

There are a lot of different ways, first, to define social. To me, social means a conversation that’s happened between and amongst individuals, and social TV is a catalyst for that conversation. But it’s not necessarily the focal point of the conversation. It’s about the individuals, the content creators themselves, who are participating in the dialogue. A lot of folks will define social simply as a platform or technology. Those are legitimate, but as a content creator, I see it another way.

Q: And not to be confused with “Interactive TV” or “Web TV,” which are pretty much outdated terms at this point.

I couldn’t agree more. I always tell people that interactive is something you do with your remote control. The term doesn’t mean anything any more. Whatever you call it, it’s all programming in the end. And in my opinion, you have to respect each platform as its own medium: the Web, TV and mobile are all media unto themselves. That doesn’t mean you can’t have something that transcends those media, with a unified story or voice. But you always have to customize and modify the content so it works in whichever medium it’s headed for.

Q: How did the idea for *VidBlogger Nation* come about?

During the very first discussions we had with Comcast, we envisioned something that had a higher level of engagement but also a very different approach in terms of storytelling. This notion of first-person storytelling is a pretty pervasive on the Web but on traditional TV, you just don’t see it. The primary reason why you don’t see it is television just isn’t a user-generated platform, despite a few recent efforts from news shows trying to incorporate Twitter and Facebook feeds into live broadcasts. So we are taking our cue from that storytelling language of the Web and applying it to our show to get a first-person perspective on people, places and things in the local markets. It becomes social by engaging the viewers to become involved in the decisions of the kind of programming we make, and more importantly, they then become invested in the lives of the video bloggers themselves. When one of our video bloggers responds to a tweet during one of the segments, it’s just part of his or her DNA. So when Sarah Austin goes out to check something out or meet someone new that she heard about through one of her many Internet friends, she’s also bringing along her video camera and say on camera who told her about this new cool thing she’s now discovering. These are not reporters, they are not doing travel video, and this is definitely not a reality TV network. It’s really them sharing their experiences and it’s about their stories and not the network itself.



VidBlogger Jessica Berry shoots and hosts a show from Los Angeles

Q: How do you find the final 16, as much hosts as they are directors of their own shows? This obviously wasn't a simple casting call.

We went through a really lengthy process to find them. If we had cast these people, that would have been a very traditional TV approach, for sure. But we don't have any actors. These people are portraying themselves and are their own individual storytellers. Yea, in the space of about three months, several production assistants and I went out, scanning through roughly 3,000 or so videos across the Web, and found them.

Q: You must have had a pretty long list of required skills, starting with some very necessary production experience.

I created a detailed production architecture for the show and there was specific criteria we used to discover those people. For starters, they had to be living in or from one of the local markets we would be featured in and they had to have a passion for the subjects they'd be talking about. They also had to have a record of making quality content on a consistent basis and they have to live and breathe the social media lifestyle. We narrowed it down from the original 3,000 to about 100, or 10 per market, and then began our outreach. There were people we had our eyes on, but we did it very stealth. In terms of production, we've figured out ways to make it work. We have them all shooting in HD: some are shooting with the Canon 5D or 7D and others who are using the Kodak Z1U, or Flips or small Panasonic cameras. From an editing and post perspective, most all of them are using Final Cut, some are using Sony Vegas. We did have one person using iMovie but we've graduated them to Final Cut Pro. We're using the Avid codec as our export codec, which we then send down to Comcast once all the episodes are put together and we've had time to vet them and make any necessary polishes. My team generates all the ideas for the episode topics, like "Hot, Hot, Hot" or "Awesome WiFi". There are 12 episodes per season and we're currently producing Season Three, even though it just began airing. So we're launching with 360 episodes already in the can and we're currently shooting the other 120. We give them 20 topical ideas and they will choose 12 that resonate with them. They'll write up treatments, we'll have creative discussions at Simplynew and scratch whatever we don't think will work and massage what still needs work. Most of them work with another person, who is the shooter/editor, and they'll shoot on their own and then begin the editing process. So when we get those initial rough cuts, we want that original voice to come through, so we'll make comments and they'll deliver to us what is final in their eyes. From that point, we'll make sure we've got all the releases but we'll also do some additional editorial on the segments. We then export to the HD deliverables Comcast requires and ship it down to them to put into the On-Demand system.



Jersey boy Rocco Leo Gaglioti reports from the garden state.

Q: So the VidBloggers aren't just solo, and often have their own mini production teams in place?

Yes. It can be one to a handful of folks supporting each of the hosts, though they often shoot a fair amount of additional material. One my team, in addition to an associate producer, we also have a post-production supervisor who works with all the video bloggers to help them work out their technical issues and workflow problems. I also have two editors on my team who media manage and edit content as it comes in. We also, very importantly, have a music adviser who helps all the vidbloggers make intelligent music selections and find the right feeling and emotion for their segments. We have a database of several hundred thousand tracks that they can choose from. And we've got the lawyer and the insurance that every other traditional show has, of course. So our whole team, including the vidbloggers, is about 25 people. If you look at traditional Web video channels doing this kind of first-person storytelling, they don't have this kind of infrastructure at all. We're providing these seasoned storytellers with better infrastructure than they ever would have had in the Web echosphere. But we think this will only make them better storytellers, and help them gain a better understanding of why intellectual property and copyrights are so important.

Q: What's next for *VidBlogger Nation*?

As we grow this talent and the network grows, we hope to expand into further Comcast markets and add additional vbloggers. We're already getting requests from people asking how to become a vlogger, and as the show airs across the country, we expect even more. We really want to nurture that community and together, we know it can only grow. This is an XFINITY project from Comcast, so anywhere XFINITY goes -Web, tablet, mobile and traditional broadcast – *VidBlogger Nation* will go. As we work with Comcast on this, we hope to bring the network to all of those platforms.

(Marc Scarpa photo by Mark Coleman)

