

NYC Production & Post News

By: Dan Ochiva

(Image: Vidblogger Nation's Ann Spade gives viewers the low down on Sacramento.)

With an economy that's not getting any better and alternatives like Netflix and Hulu continuing to garner loyalty, cable TV execs worry that a new generation of viewers might not show up.

That's not a universally held idea. Time Warner's Jeff Bewkes is among the cable CEOs who spots monthly cable fees as among the [last items](#) to feel the hit of a tighter personal budget. But that still doesn't mean any of the major cable systems view the rise of the Internet lightly.

Case in point: Comcast On Demand Local service recently launched Vidblogger Nation; these short three-to-five-minute episodes by Facebook-aware video bloggers offer takes on local people, places and things. No mystery to this effort: it's an attempt to pull the younger smartphone-obsessed generation back into the fold. Headed by participatory media director-producer New Yorker Marc Scarpa, the project is available in some 10 markets nationwide at launch.

(To fix its battered customer service [reputation](#), Comcast, the No. 1 U.S. cable TV provider, launched Xfinity early last year. Pushed through by Comcast CEO Brian Roberts, Xfinity re-brands the company's triple-play service for bundled Internet, telephone and TV, adding tweaks like live sports on the web, improved download speeds and the ability to watch some shows online.)

Heralded by Scarpa as the "first-ever Social TV Network", local talent with "strong Facebook and Twitter followings" create short diary-style segments on local topics such as fun places to go, local personalities, things to do and other topics not so unlike those that show up in the color segments of local news stations.

Scarpa has built his name on finding ways to use computers, the Internet, cellphone and other technologies to make more interactive experiences for viewers. His varied background includes a gig as the first New York Chair of the Producers Guild of America New Media Council and producing the web show 'Grammy Live' for the 52nd Annual Grammy Awards. For a 2007 MySpace streaming of a Linkin Park concert, Scarpa says that he was the first to pull off the intercutting of realtime video from fan's mobile phones with the concert's live HD TV feed.

"It's not a video log, it's not a reality show, it's just folks sharing their adventures and experiences with the viewer, who are also participants in the programming," says Marc Scarpa, founder of SimplyNew Studios, producer of the shows. Comcast ordered some 360 episodes in all, with a

decision by the end of November whether to commit to the series.

Scarpa says that TV is moving towards an all-IP universe, with an immersive web presence key to blurring the boundaries between web TV and cable TV. Finding a social TV look-and-feel for the cable giant's current local fare, which hasn't changed from standard studio presentations in years, is key.

One major hurdle, however, hasn't changed since the earliest days of TV and Internet video: whoever is in front of the camera needs to be a compelling actor who can put a narrative across. Scarpa faces an added barrier: a huge corporate structure with layers of management ready to nix content that might be too cutting or salacious, the very spice that pulls in hundreds of thousands of viewers to YouTube and other social media sites.

Would be viewers are left with segments such as "Off Limits", where erstwhile video blogger Jeff Wisenbaugh "sneaks into Spartan Stadium at Michigan State" and makes a go at not getting arrested, or "Beach Front Fun" where one Ann Spade is "off to the waters!" of the sluggish Sacramento River, which, we're advised, is the city's "beach." Viewers may be unsure if they are instead watching a health report, as they face a number of perky reminders to "put on your sunscreen!"

These are still heady times for the cable industry. But as the main audience for broadcast TV ages, growth is hard to come by—profits are high because a push to offer premium services brings in more money, not more viewers.

Comcast, Cablevision, HBO, Turner and other major cable companies now offer TV Everywhere, which allows subscribers to watch TV shows online. But the audience that watches on a 50-inch plasma in the living room isn't necessarily the same as those who will watch on a laptop or smartphone.

Cable continues to fight a rearguard action. As new generations turn to Netflix, Hulu and newer options for video entertainment, will they also toss in \$100 per month for a cable subscription?

About the author

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