

# NAVIGATING THE SOCIAL MEDIA LANDSCAPE TO IDENTIFY AND RECRUIT CREATIVE TALENT: STRATEGIC ADVICE TO CONTENT PRODUCERS IN FILM & TELEVISION

By **Marcus Badger**  
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Today, the ever-lower costs of computers, digital cameras and high-speed Internet access, combined with free or low-cost, easy-to-use editing software means that almost anyone can produce films. And thanks to video sharing and social networking sites such as YouTube and MySpace, individuals have a means of distributing their videos. More than 100 million downloads of videos occur every day on the video sharing website YouTube. There are more than 107 million members of the social network website MySpace, many of whom produce and share videos. Studio insiders fear that a mass migration of storytelling talent could put the Internet in a position to increasingly compete with television and theaters for the public's entertainment dollar. Therefore, the question arises: how can production studios navigate the social media landscape to identify the top online creative talent and bring them in-house?

## **Talent Filtering Through Online Social Media Outlets**

Despite its #2 market share in online video (behind YouTube), MySpace is currently the clear leader in "talent filtering" for aspiring directors, producers and actors. When joining MySpace, new members can identify themselves as "filmmakers." More than 50,000 MySpace members consider themselves to be "filmmakers" (McCarthy). Consequently, MySpace launched MySpace Film in the spring of 2005. The Film homepage rotates banners promoting five featured filmmakers each week in addition to running other content. *Filmmaker* magazine is a partner on the page and contributes a "pick of the week" each Friday. As with music, MySpace allows its filmmaker members to cut and paste their trailers and promo clips into their friends' comments sections, allowing news about a film to spread virally across its network (Delyle).

Sure, every 16 year-old with a digital camera can produce a video for MySpace. So how do films and filmmakers pop up on the MySpace film channel page? Christine Moore, MySpace Content Producer, states, "We are constantly scouring the site for filmmakers with great content who are actively promoting themselves to the community. The films in our Featured Filmmaker section sometimes come from festival associations and/or have been approached to provide exclusive MySpace content" (Delyle). MySpace also runs various contests, including the MySpace Film User's Choice Award. In January, MySpace entered a partnership with the National Television Academy of Arts & Sciences, encouraging MySpace users to enter their Web videos into the Emmy Awards' fledging "broadband" category. MySpace has introduced a promotional page onto which its members can submit their videos. Experts in each of the Broadband Emmy's categories – Entertainment, News & Documentary, Business & Financial, Public & Community Service and Sports – will chose a select number of finalists whose videos will be submitted directly to the Emmy Awards (McCarthy).

Like MySpace, YouTube offers filtering techniques that enable studios and talent agencies to identify and isolate quality work from the masses. YouTube allows users to search its vast amount of videos by selecting a channel category, such as "Directors" or "Comedians". On these channels,

users can select the “most viewed” or “most subscribed” user profiles to identify the YouTube members who have successfully demonstrated a market for their creative work. For instance, Carson Daily Productions signed Brook Brodack, a 20 year-old receptionist who lives in Massachusetts, to a production deal after her video diaries, comic shorts and music parodies attracted a wide following on YouTube (Clark). Furthermore, YouTube runs “featured contests,” usually with the sponsorship of other companies. Recent YouTube contests for aspiring filmmakers, such as “Miss HorrorFest 2006,” are prominently displayed on YouTube by clicking the “contests” link on the YouTube Groups main page.

MetaCafe, though significantly behind YouTube and MySpace in online video market share, is luring aspiring filmmakers through its recently launched “Producer Rewards” program. Under this program, after a video reaches 20,000 views on MetaCafe, the video creator starts receiving payments of \$5 per 1,000 views (Calore). MetaCafe also screens clips before they go online so they aren’t paying for pirated material; this ensures creative originality (Sandoval). Users can also view the “most watched,” “most discussed” and “highest rated” clips by selecting the corresponding link from the MetaCafe home page. MetaCafe is not alone in paying its submitters. Risé humor video site Break.com pays its submitters \$1,000 if their original video is popular enough to get promoted on the site’s front page (Calore).

### **Trends to Watch – Talent Agencies go Online, Online Talent Competitions**

In October, one of Hollywood’s top talent agencies created an online unit devoted to scouting up-and-coming creators of Internet content – particularly video – and finding work for them in Web-based advertising and entertainment, as well as in the “older” media. This move by United Talent Agency – best known as the home of comedians like Vince Vaughn and Jack Black and filmmakers like M. Night Shyamalan – amounts to a bet that online video is on a growth curve similar to that of cable television a generation ago. The goal, executives say, is not only to recruit the next generation of television and film writers and directors from the obscurity of sites like YouTube and MySpace. It is also to help the major Web portals that are hungry for original content to find the creative people they need – just as movies studios have long turned to talent agencies when looking for new directors, screenwriters and actors (Halbfinger).

United Talent’s online division, whose initial staff consists of three 26 year-old agents promoted from assistant, will operate independently from the main agency. Defying industry conventions, agents will welcome unsolicited submissions (preferably as Web links) and be free to sign clients without the approval of the more established departments. Already, the three agents have cut six-figure deals with major media portals and signed a handful of clients whose Web-based serials, recurring comedy features and short digital films have drawn one-time downloads in the millions and regular watchers, in some cases, in the tens of thousands (Halbfinger).

In January, Michael Eisner, former Disney chief executive, arranged a partnership between United Talent Agency and Veoh, the Internet TV operator in which Eisner holds a significant stake. The partnership calls for the creation of a new Internet TV channel (which will be supported by advertising) that will showcase new talent in an effort to discover the next generation of talent. The project brings Hollywood together with the amateur filmmaking talent producing online videos on user-generated websites. Dimitry Shapiro, chief executive of Veoh, said the deal with UTA would become “the new gateway for talent discovery in Hollywood” (Garrahan).

Yahoo has also entered the online talent market. In November, Yahoo announced the acquisition of Bix.com, a site that lets anyone create an online talent contest. Current contests can be easily viewed from the bix.com home page. Yahoo plans to maintain Bix's independent Website, though promote it through its massive audience. Bix President and CEO Mike Speiser commented on the deal, "This is huge folks! It means that every performer on Bix will be performing on essentially the world's largest stage with a potential audience in the hundreds of millions" (Speiser).

### **Conclusion**

Tens of thousands of online videos are posted every day to sites such as YouTube and MySpace, creating a massive amount of content to sift through. However, several social media sites provide filtering mechanisms to facilitate the discovery of new talent, albeit via relatively new programs. These sites provide production studios with a minor league system per se, from which they can identify and recruit new talent. Furthermore, the emerging trend of "online" divisions at talent agencies and online talent showcase channels provide production studios with another means of identifying new talent. Consequently, talent departments at production studios should opportunistically become increasingly Internet literate or hire people who are.

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