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BRAD SPIRRISON

Entertainers don't need TV break to hit it big

Channel Awesome spots talent that just needs a Web stage

As the television networks cope with a 10-digit haircut in advertising commitments, smaller entertainment producers on the Web are learning how to make money.

"A lot of this is about keeping things small and simple," said Doug Walker, who delivers video monologues and satirical movie reviews on www.thatguywiththeglasses.com. "It's not about throwing money into huge productions."

From his home in Naperville, Walker, 27, produces and distributes 10 to 15 advertising-supported videos a month. Through series titles like "Nostalgia Critic," "5 Second Movies" and "Bum Reviews," Walker offers an irreverent and sometimes profane view of popular culture.

This includes improvised and scripted rants that dissect "the 11 Dumbest Superman Moments" and the cultural legacy of "Saved by the Bell." Most videos generate pages of online discussion commentary, and the site also features an active blog, regular podcasts and live chatting capabilities.

The site, which launched in April 2008, is attracting nearly 800,000 unique visitors per month. While nobody is concentrating on sponsorship sales, advertising network affiliate deals are generating more than \$10,000 in monthly revenue.

Even with all the production expenses, there is enough left over for Walker to quit his day job as an illustrator.

"Without the Internet, I would have given up on writing and performing," he said. "You don't have to travel for people to see you. With the Internet, you bring the performance to them."

Initially skeptical about online income opportunities, Walker was encouraged to give it a whirl by Michael Michaud, the founder of online media startup Channel Awesome. Michaud, a 27-year-old serial entrepreneur who started Channel Awesome after being laid off from Circuit City two years ago, is building a network around bringing niche talent and programming genres onto the Web.

Michaud says he has 300 show ideas in the works and is developing programs dedicated to Chicago bars, sports talk and video games. The upcoming "Bar Fiesta" show will explore Chicago area nightclubs and watering holes and will feature interviews with bartenders and a segment on best pickup lines. Michaud hopes to discover and promote more Internet celebrities like Walker and build a market around their craft.

"It's all about monetization and picking up new talent to expand the channels," said Michaud, who hopes to add sponsorships and merchandising to his ad network revenue. Channel Awesome has also raised more than \$11,000 in online donations from loyal fans.

While Channel Awesome by itself may never threaten a network or major studio, its ability to attract a meaningful audience on a shoestring is impacting how and where video entertainment is produced.

"Instead of people going to Hollywood, Hollywood is looking for people online," explained Walker. "These people are cheap to get because we are happy to see any amount of money."

Mayor honors young entrepreneurs

Last week, Mayor Daley honored four high school entrepreneurs who won the Chicagoland Entrepreneurial Center's fourth annual Future Founders Citywide Business Plan Competition. Honorees include first- and second-prize winners Ariell Buckingham and Corey Barksdale of Gwendolyn Brooks Preparatory Academy. Also cited were Anndriene Bell of Chicago Vocational Career Academy and Christopher Young of ACE Technical Charter High School.

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