



Campfire Sinks its Creative Teeth into True Blood

Independent agency goes beyond advertising to shape the back story of HBO's new show.

BY: JEFF BEER | PUBLISHED: AUG 5, 2008

Mysterious mailings in a dead language and vials of an unknown red liquid. Secretive websites with webcam gatekeepers and hidden passwords. A Scottish informer who ends up dead. A lauded screenwriter who allows a marketing company to contribute to his newest project.

All strange elements pondered on their own, and yet collectively add up to key plot points in the ad campaign for Alan Ball's new HBO series True Blood, based on the popular book series about vampires by Charlaine Harris. Ball, the Oscar-winning writer of American Beauty and the man behind Six Feet Under, wanted the lead-up marketing to this new show to prepare the audience for the world of True Blood through a back story series of prequels a comic book and more, essentially intertwining the advertising with the artistic property. For this particular challenge, there could hardly be a better match for an HBO show about vampires than a creative shop called Campfire.



True Blood Mailer

Founded by two of The Blair Witch Project creators, Campfire's highest profile calling card is 2005's "Art of the Heist" campaign for Audi, wherein the agency staged a mock robbery of a New York Audi and then enlisted online users to track down the thieves. But True Blood represents something of a perfect storm for the agency, considering its pedigree in horror and creative online marketing -- Blair Witch was made for \$22,000 and earned \$248 million, largely due to deft use of the internet.

Zach Enterlin, HBO's vice president of advertising and promotion says when Ball issued the marketing challenge to immerse viewers into the world of True Blood before the first episode even aired, Campfire immediately came to mind. "I'd read a lot about some of the campaigns they had done over the past few years, most notably with Audi," he says. "When True Blood came about

we thought it would be a great opportunity to flesh out this world further and deliver a really immersive experience. And I think that's Campfire's strong suit, the notion of storytelling through promotional content."

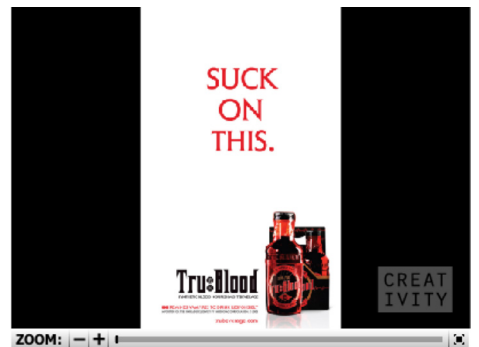
But Blair Witch was a personal project and "Art of the Heist" was selling cars. What makes the campaign behind True Blood intriguing is how it overlaps and embeds itself within the mythology of the show itself. To set the stage for the show's hemoglobin-heavy adventures in northern Louisiana, Campfire had to create a complex back story that would reveal how vampires have revealed their presence to the rest of the world, due in large part to the existence of a synthetic blood product manufactured by a mysterious Japanese company.



HBO True Blood: Gatekeeper

"It was really up our alley and I had read the books so there was definitely a place there that we could play in," says Campfire creative director Brian Cain. "The whole detailed back story, not covered in the TV series, was there for us to work with so it was pretty easy. Then the task was finding ways to make it happen over multiple formats, not only online but live interaction and things like that."

In May, the shop began seeding various goth and horror blogs and contacting other like-minded aficionados with subtle messages designed to raise eyebrows. This communication ranged from



HBO True Blood: Suck On This

the aforementioned dead language mailer to coaxing users to a supposedly vampire-only website. Much of the secrecy revolved around the synthetic blood beverage that would allow vampires to live among humans. HBO and fellow marketing partner And Company took care of the outdoor and poster campaign that began a month later that, instead of touting the arrival of a new show, revolved around a beverage called Tru Blood.



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Meanwhile, Campfire was gaining the interest of the genre's "deep divers" (those that approach fandom with a certain enthusiastic vigor) by stringing along a storyline based at the site BloodCopy.com that involved various vampire characters debating if the blood-sucking populace should reveal themselves to an unsuspecting human society or not. Marketing strategy aside, Campfire co-founder and creative director Gregg Hale says the storytelling took top priority.



HBO True Blood: Revelation

"It's like telling a story in any medium. If you're making a film, even a sci-fi or horror, you're trying to create a world that's realistic and believable enough that people are able to suspend their disbelief and get

sucked into the story," he says. "It just so happens that the internet is a medium that doesn't come with automatic disclaimers. You can go to bloodcopy.com just as easily as you can visit CNN.com, and there's nothing to necessarily tell you that CNN is real news and Blood Copy is fake news, so I think it's important to tell the story in the best way possible, which is making it seem fleshed out and believable."

How people consume their entertainment online is an integral aspect of Campfire's special brand of make believe. "I think right now there's some adjustment that society or people have to make in how we consume that type of entertainment," says Hale. "On TV, if I'm watching the news I know it's the news because it's framed a certain way, if I'm watching a sitcom, I know it's a sitcom because it's portrayed a certain way, but on the internet the rules aren't really defined. So even though we don't try to fool people, we do try to execute the story in the best way possible."

As perfect as the assignment may have seemed at the outset, there was still the small matter of convincing Ball that Campfire was up to the creative challenge and could hang with the show's level of story-telling. To prepare, Cain and Hale read all the Harris books and created their own reference "bible" of characters, plotlines and the like. Then dove headfirst into their part of the story.

"We started off looking at it big picture, inventing characters we always wanted to," says Cain. "I really liked the idea of a Scottish vampire who lives in New York and been alive for 700 years, or a vampire king of California and vampire corporations in Europe.



HBO True Blood: Lamar the Vampire King of California

American Beauty fan," says Hale. "So I was pretty nervous about our creative being put in front of this guy I think of as a very serious artist."

But there apparently wasn't much to be nervous about, as Enterlin says, "It was great, Alan got it right off the bat. It's rare you have a meeting when people clap at the end. He was so appreciative and so into it and ready to run with it and collaborate on it."

In addition to all the online video efforts, Campfire debuted its True Blood: The Great Revelation comic book at the San Diego Comic Con in July. The protagonist is Lamar, the vampire king of California, a character users had already met online, and the story goes deeper into the recent history of the world's vampire hierarchy. "HBO wanted the history to live outside of the show, so we actually wrote it to be about, really, just our characters," says Hale. "The whole comic is all about these characters that we created and the story is the back story we created for the show. It expands on our story in ways a comic book is able to that web videos and things like that aren't, just broadens the scope."

Expanding the universe of an existing property, whether a film or TV show, further through deeper stories involving marginal characters is not a new type of storytelling, witness the cottage industry of Star Wars and Star Trek literature. But True Blood's is an exceptional case in that the peripheral mythology has been written by an agency. The success of Campfire's latest creation is obviously based on the storytelling prowess of Cain and Hale, along with the agency's respect for the overall artistic integrity of the show. All that and not one vampire had to turn to the camera flashing a fang-filled smile saying, "Tune in Sundays at 9!"

Really, just shooting for the stars."

As challenging as the job was, an added pressure was the fact the agency wouldn't be presenting it to Ball, HBO would. "I'm a big Six Feet Under fan and a huge