

MOVE OVER, DRACULA: PR & MARKETING MEET ONLINE TO INTRODUCE FANS TO A CREEPY CREW OF CHARACTERS

client/agency partnership," says Jeremiah Rosen, partner/director of accounts at Campfire. "From the very first meeting, both parties need to be honest about their expectations and capabilities. Only then can the agency deliver a campaign concept that makes clear how these assets—PR, advertising, events—will play off each other and make a greater whole. This kind of integration must be planned for. It doesn't happen by accident and it doesn't happen in a vacuum."

THE LANGUAGE OF BLOOD

Campfire began working on the planning of the campaign in February 2008. Six Campfire staffers worked full time on the initial preliminary stages of the campaign, monitoring message boards, setting up a fake blog and conceiving new materials for development and timing of release.

On May 21, Campfire and HBO officially launched the campaign for True Blue with the first phase, which focused on the interactive prequel launch. The first thing the project team did was send ominous letters in black envelopes sealed with red wax to its chief influencers—vampire enthusiasts, horror film bloggers, subscribers to the magazine Fangoria and other members of the goth community. The letters, written in dead languages such as Babylonian and Ugaritic, actually targeted audiences who could translate them.

The team then launched two microsites—Chishio.jp, an in-story site created by "Japanese vampires," and RevenantOnes.com, an online forum for vampire chat. To drive traffic, the "dead language ads" ran in alternative weeklies and online. The translation of the cryptic letters were posted on blogs and message boards and used to drive traffic to RevenantOnes.com. (On July

1, both Chishio.jp and RevenantOnes.com shut down their sites.)

The second phase, launched on May 26, focused on the unveiling of Bloodcopy.com, a blog created by in-story characters to solve the mysteries surrounding the dead languages ad. This site is critical to the campaign because it acts as a central hub; it will also aggregate all elements throughout the campaign, including multiple in-story text/video postings per day.

'BLOOD' THIRSTY

On June 11, samples of the Tru Blood beverage (red sugar water in plastic vials) were sent to the same people who received the cryptic letters. "Want to Buy 'Tru Blood'" ads began running in alternative weeklies and online.

Two weeks later, the campaign launched "The Great Revelation" announcement, in which viral videos were seeded to disseminate news regarding the official "coming out" of the vampires.

In July, HBO began running "BloodCopy.com Reports," a weekly video recap of vampire happenings on HBO On Demand, HBO.com, YouTube and Apple/Zune. Later in the month, TV spots promoting the show began to appear. And, for vampires looking for love, the project team has just launched a faux vampire/human dating microsite, LoveBitten.net, to complement the on-air dating spots that have begun airing.

COMIC RELIEF

At the recent annual Comic-Con show in San Diego, which attracts a large audience of comic and sci-fi enthusiasts, HBO distributed comic books that recap story elements. They also had Tru Blood act as the official sponsor of the mas-

querade costume ball, while "members" of both the Vampire League and the Fellowship sought signatures for their petitions for or against the Vampire Rights Amendment.

Just last week, after a True Blood Web site was launched with episode guides, video teasers and behind-the-scenes information, HBO introduced the crown jewel of the campaign: an online True Blood comic book (see graphic on opposite page) with a serialized continuation to roll out on a weekly basis.

And, following the show's premiere on Sept. 7, HBO will release a True Blood wiki for vampire fans to update and edit information pertaining to the show. From Sept. 8 to Nov. 23, plans are in place to continue to market and publicize the show across all HBO platforms.

All of these elements comprise a campaign that truly integrates marketing, PR and communications. It was critical for both the agency and the client to view digital platforms as the gray area in which everyone's interests can meet. For the True Blood initiative, generating buzz online got people talking offline, and vice versa. Plus, knowing their target audience enabled the team to play off its consumption habits in ways that were enriching, but that wouldn't necessarily work if aimed at a broader audience.

STAY TUNED

It's still too early to quantify the campaign's return on investment, but Enterlin says he and the rest of his team have delighted in the audience engagement.

"We just want to have fun with it," he says. "[We want to] break through in a provocative way, have a wink with our tactical elements and bring consumers along for the ride."

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ORGANIC JUST TASTES BETTER

When considering the current viral campaign for HBO's upcoming show True Blood, HBO advertising/promotion VP Zach Enterlin says the most important element of any viral effort is making sure all the components feel organic.

"When we started working on this campaign and developing materials for it, it had to feel true to what Charlaine Harris and Alan Ball have created," he says. "It had to match that tone and feel. Staying true to the source material has been real key for us. We're looking to pique curiosity among our target audience and deliver materials they're interested in interacting with. We have a lot to live up to—this show is very fun and entertaining. More broadly, we have to live up to our brand here at HBO."