

# Multi-format means multiple headaches

Web streaming, video podcasts and mobile phone content are all providing new video distribution opportunities. But facilities, users and producers need to be aware of the issues, says *Michael Burns*

«Everything's multi-platform now,' Unit md David Peto told audiences at last month's Broadcast Live event in London. 'Someone makes a programme, someone else rips it and puts it on YouTube, then someone else downloads it and plays it on their iPhone.'

Broadcast Live and Video Forum put on a united front to form the new show, which took place in Earls Court 2 and, suitably, one of the major themes at the event was preparing content for and delivery on multiple platforms.

Speaking on the subject was Mark Foligno, md of Molinare, and David Peto, md of Unit – one of the oldest and one of the newest post-production facilities in London, respectively.

Their session, and others, highlighted the fact that, at present, the multi-platform market seems largely concerned with web video, rather than mobile devices. It also appears that there's been a staggered approach, with advertising agencies leading the charge by creating viral content for online delivery. Broadcasters have moved more slowly, but with greater market penetration, as well as the YouTube phenomenon, the BBC iPlayer and various on-demand services from Channel 4 and Sky have helped familiarise the public with the web as a viewing



'Real' corporate work, such as Dell's F1 campaign, is starting to take a hold, but viral ads such as Tern's Slabovia work are the most common use of multi-platform



David Peto, md, Unit: 'We have to get clients used to the fact that they have to cut the material, so that it suits the snacking environment that exists online'

medium. In comparison, the corporate market seems to be lagging behind, though interest is growing. Used to rapid technological change, post-production facilities and video production companies are ready to service the multi-platform world as it grows.

One such company is Tern Digital, newly formed to create cross-platform content. 'Broadband delivery for video content is a big push at the moment because our audience now regard the web as a platform for viewing televisual content,' says Simon Meek, who heads up the Tern Television digital division. 'One of Tern Digital's first projects was a tie-in with Dell Computers and BMW-F1 – it was a short-form documentary, exclusively for viewing over broadband internet. However, it's still early days, and non-broadcasting brands are still cautious about moving into territory they don't feel comfortable with.'

Often the facility needs to educate clients in the other options available.

'It's fairly typical for someone to come to us looking for a clip to go on their website,' says Arc Facilities md Brian Suttie. 'I've yet to receive a "no" when asking if they'd also like a

version that can be downloaded to a media player, when it's going to add less than one percent to the overall cost. The client, at that point, may well say that they'd like a few DVDs, too. The additional cost for another delivery format is minimal in relation to the overall production budget.'

## Technical issues and processes

Post-production facilities are used to thorny issues when dealing with video content for broadcast and cinema delivery, but Peto says clients first have to think about all the ways the content is going to be viewed when it leaves the facility.

'It's one thing to watch a beautifully shot drama on a big HD screen, but the viewing experience when you watch it on a mobile is completely different,' he says. 'The screen is tiny, so if someone is in a midshot, standing in the middle »





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of a field, you can't see the expression on their face if you're watching on a mobile.'

To remedy this, Peto suggests shooting slightly different versions of the content at the initial shoot. 'That means that they have something to play with to make that content make sense on a mobile,' he says. 'The same goes for the web. Unless users can expand it to full screen with something like the iPlayer, then people will be watching it on a small screen.'

However, thinking ahead isn't that common. 'What we're finding is that more people are coming to us with specific deliverables in mind,' says Danny Jones, head of production at Golden Square. 'For example, we recently completed a number of web virals for Mastercard. The client was so happy with the outcome that it then decided to adapt it to a TV commercial (TVC). It would have been easier had we known about the possibility of a TVC in the first place, but we did manage to repurpose the finished viral into a TVC. However, it came with framing issues, which we then had to address.'

Another challenge is getting people to be realistic about the process involved. 'There is a missing link in terms of people's expectations of how easy it is to convert from one format to another,' says Foligno. 'It's not a drag a drop world. You can't convert a 2K file to a 3G file and expect to see everything the same. You're also looking to encode audio at the highest quality.'

Lola Post has been asked to tweak graphics after production for delivery on different media. 'In general, clients want to have the option of being able to deliver on any format, and to be able to choose it later,' says md Grahame Andrew. 'However, you have to have the destination bandwidth in mind when you design the graphics. What

works on the cinema doesn't necessarily work for a mobile streaming delivery. I know that compression and up-rezzing is very sophisticated these days, but I've seen graphics that look great on the telly, but terrible when compressed for mobiles.'

Clients also need advice on how best to make money from multi-platform content. 'As well as getting them to shoot it so it looks good on a small screen, we have to get them used to the fact that they have to cut it, so it suits the snacking environment that exists online,' says Peto. 'People watch between 30 seconds and two-minute clips. It's very difficult to get them to watch for longer.'

## Chasing the corporates

Advertising agencies lead the way in the multi-platform world and certainly make up a large part of Unit's viral clientele, but facility director Luke Colson says big brands and brand design companies are also coming direct to Unit to create new and interesting ways in which to get their brand across. 'From an interactive online or mobile competition, to a looping film for a tube station, we have seen the lot,' he says. 'In the case of interactive virals, where the viewer can choose paths, drive a car, kick a ball and so on, then a great deal of planning is needed to set the boundaries and layers, so that everything fits together at the end.'

A lot of work at Arc Facilities is for major blue-chip companies. 'While a lot of their delivery is still via traditional methods, we are seeing an increase in demand for web and other forms of delivery,' says Suttie. 'One recent job was to encode a corporate film, so that it could be loaded onto flash drives to be given away to clients.'

Golden Square's Jones is also confident of this corporate market. 'We

recently delivered a QuickTime via FTP to Miami,' he says. 'It was then uploaded on to a server and projected in front of 1,000 people. Quite easy really, except that we were still rendering images in London a couple of hours before the start of the conference. We also delivered an Mpeg-4 for email delivery for all the attendees.'

Colson says: 'At the moment, our corporate clients are being less adventurous with interactivity, but the demand for viral content is enormous.' 'Every other corporate film we do is for the web.'

## Costing the job

Foligno is keen to stress that some investment is required for multi-platform content production. 'It does cost money to put those infrastructures in and we can't just give it free of charge,' he says. 'We have the technicians to build the infrastructure in the most cost-effective way, but getting the customer to understand the pricing structure has been more difficult for us, more difficult in some ways than undertaking the task of conversion itself.'

Richard Ayers, md of Magic Lantern, feels that, because this sector is new to most commissioners and content producers, there is a caution with budgets. 'As a result, paradoxically, although commissions may be for two or three platforms, the corresponding budgets are often only 50 per cent more than for broadcast,' he says. 'Planning, technical development and testing are the three areas which usually involve more work than the one-off spot/promo work. All these constraints mean that, even more than usual, you need experience to choose the right tool for the job.'

However, Suttie feels it's a big mistake to accept any compromises based

on the fact that the content is 'only for the web.' 'Yes, there are certain restrictions you need to bear in mind when shooting and post-producing material for compressed delivery and potentially different frame rates,' he says. 'But always remember - garbage in means garbage out.'

It's not all unrealistic on the budget front. 'We currently have four web and two mobile projects on the go,' says Colson. 'In each case, the client has come to us with a sensible budget, perhaps a little lower than they would expect to pay for a TV spot.'

It's obvious this is still a new world, but the post-production industry seems ready for the challenge.

'The demand for multi-platform delivery is increasing by the minute,' says Colson. 'With our constant investment in new technology, the boundaries can be continue to be pushed.' ■

## KEY FACTS

Ad agencies are leading the way in the use of multi-platform content delivery, while corporates are being slower to catch on to the opportunities than conventional broadcasters. But the facilities now exist to make multi-platform delivery both practical, timely and economically viable - as long as users think through what they want to do, so that post-production facilities can cope with the technical issues that arise.

- \* www.arc-facilities.co.uk
- \* www.goldensq.com
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