

Scripting a Multiscreen Success Story

With Clearleap as a partner, Scripps Networks Interactive is pursuing an ambitious business agenda for multiscreen video – and reaping the rewards.

By Stewart Schley



When the television industry first began exploring the notion of multiscreen video delivery – the so-called “TV Everywhere” movement – the motivation sprang as much from anxiety as opportunity. Networks and their distribution partners were wary of losing momentum to online video services that had gotten out ahead in the fast-rising Internet video ecosystem. And incumbents were determined not to repeat the mistakes of the recorded music industry, which had suffered by failing to develop timely and legitimate alternatives to music piracy over the Internet.

These two motivators – concerns about missing out on an emerging market and legitimate fear over program piracy – led many networks to conclude the right strategy for the new multiscreen environment was to extend to new devices a subset of the same content that appeared on traditional television sets, without immediately pursuing new monetization approaches.

But at the corporate offices of Scripps Networks Interactive in Knoxville, Tenn., a different vision of TV Everywhere was emerging. Executives from the media company whose lifestyle brands include HGTV, Food Network and Travel Channel theorized that somewhere in the emerging multiscreen video mix was the foundation for a promising new twist on television’s longstanding business model.

If viewers prized the ability to watch the TV shows they loved on tablets and smartphones and over deeper on-demand

TV libraries, it seemed to Scripps Networks Interactive that there was new value being created. Breaking from prevailing industry thinking, Scripps Networks Interactive began to build an early business model around advertising-supported multiscreen video.

EXPLODING DEMAND

“It was clear to us that consumer demand for more content across more platforms was exploding,” says Alex Beach, Director of Video on Demand Operations for Scripps Networks Interactive. At the same time, distribution partners increasingly were asking Scripps Networks Interactive and other content providers for the rights to deliver content to PCs, tablets and other devices – and to supply more programs for television on-demand services.

As Beach recalls, Scripps Networks Interactive had two fundamental choices: satisfy minimum demands for wider rights or devise a more ambitious plan to produce fresh advertising revenue tied to wider distribution of the company’s content.

Scripps dismissed option No. 1. “We’ve always been a very forward-looking company in terms of products and technologies,” Beach says. “We decided to be aggressive, and to get ahead of the curve.” The company began to plan out a strategy for vastly expanding the multiscreen content available from five of its networks: Food Network, Travel Channel, HGTV, Cooking Channel and DIY Network.

Scripps Networks Interactive understood that building a new business in multiscreen distribution wouldn’t be an easy path. For one thing, audience measurement techniques that are essential to valuing on-demand and multiscreen advertising inventory were still in early development stages. For another, the rules of advertising insertion within multiscreen program streams – where commercial breaks would occur, and for how long – weren’t established.

OPERATIONAL FOCUS

But the biggest concern of all was operational. To make a significant early impact in multiscreen, ad-supported television, Scripps Networks Interactive recognized it would have to make a big commitment to processing, preparing, and delivering a large amount of content quickly and efficiently, in multiple formats, for multiple devices and through multiple distribution partners. And to do it over and over every day as new programs made their debut on Scripps Networks Interactive’s channels.

The progression has been impressive. In 2009, when the phrase “TV Everywhere” was just starting to percolate, Scripps Networks Interactive supplied video to its affiliated partners in just one digital video encoding format which was optimized for on-demand viewing over traditional television sets. Fast-forward to 2013. Reflecting one of the most prolific commitments to on-demand, multiscreen video in the television industry, Scripps

Networks Interactive is now supplying more content to more partners while applying multiple encoding schemes, metadata combinations and presentation instructions that vary by affiliates and by devices. Calculating for multiple variations of each program for partners, devices and formats, the number of video “assets” distributed by Scripps Networks Interactive has swelled to more than 50x the 2009 level.

Scripps Networks Interactive realized that managing that level of complexity while meeting the fast-turnaround requirements of the new multiscreen video presentation environment was beyond the capabilities of the company’s internal operations groups. “We realized that we had no desire to become a technology company,” says Beach. “We’re a programming company.”

But the demands of converting to an ambitious TV Everywhere agenda proved to be taxing for some outside providers. One of the key requirements was ability to get programs into the multiscreen/on-demand environment quickly, so that Scripps Networks Interactive and its partners could get credit for viewership occurring in the 75-hour “C3” measurement window immediately following a program’s linear debut. Without adequate support for that narrow window, Scripps Networks Interactive’s business model for TV Everywhere would be compromised.

Enter Clearleap. Beach had been impressed by work Clearleap had done to populate a dedicated on-demand service maintained by one of Scripps Networks Interactive’s cable affiliates. He invited Clearleap to consider how it might support the sort of high-volume, rapid-turnaround video delivery Scripps Networks Interactive needed. Clearleap began managing video file preparation and terrestrial IP delivery for Scripps Networks Interactive in 2012. Working in partnership since then, Scripps Networks Interactive and Clearleap have been pioneers in the emerging field of multiscreen video processing. “The advances we’ve made have been revelatory,” says Beach.

The workflow managed by Clearleap starts with real-time capturing of broadcast-quality program feeds from Scripps Networks Interactive’s channels as their on-air premier occurs. Among the processes

Clearleap’s multiscreen software platform accomplishes in the narrow time window immediately following a program’s linear debut are:

- Deletion of any extraneous material preceding or following the show
- Addition of digital markers indicating positions for commercials corresponding to business rules established by Scripps Networks Interactive and its distribution affiliates
- Affirmation that detectable codes are properly included for audience measurement purposes
- Transcoding of content into the multiple formats and metadata combinations needed to fulfill the differing protocols of various multichannel video providers and of various video playback devices

Once files are prepared, they’re whisked to affiliate partners over Clearleap’s high-speed terrestrial IP network, which enables simultaneous delivery to multiple ingest locations. It all has to happen fast, because Scripps Networks Interactive has to funnel on-demand content to its distribution channels in time to capture monetization opportunities occurring during the 75-hour C3 window. “That’s the key: speed to market and scalability,” says Beach.

Following the initial engagement, Clearleap has easily managed larger and more complex digital content models from Scripps Networks Interactive as the television programmer gains market traction for its multiscreen video offerings and as advertiser support for the its targeted program streams rises. As of October 2013 Clearleap was processing hundreds of different program asset derivatives weekly on behalf of Scripps Networks Interactive.

Beach says he’s especially impressed with Clearleap’s centralized processing and asset management workflows. These automated systems enable Scripps Networks Interactive to efficiently add and manage multiple digital codecs and varying metadata requirements that arise as more affiliates partner with Scripps Networks Interactive for TV Everywhere delivery, and as more digital devices come into the picture.

Since making its decision to pursue multiscreen video as a business opportunity, not simply a fulfilment obligation, Scripps Networks Interactive has seen steady increases in advertising revenue, along with a rising presence across digital devices and formats. Recent additions to the Scripps Networks Interactive multiscreen video category have included authenticated mobile applications for all five Scripps Networks Interactive brands on both Android and iOS platforms. Viewers can use them to order up shows like “House Hunters” from HGTV and “Restaurant Express” from Food Network on tablets and smartphones with just a few clicks.

“It’s taken a long time to get to this point,” says Beach. “But it’s working. We’re starting to make money, and we’re going to continue to be very aggressive.”

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