

A D.I.Y. Approach to Making a Web Commercial

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Isaac Brekken for The New York Times

The Talk Market's Amanda Eilian, left, and Matt Singer with Donna Tomaszewski. The firm helps make commercials.

THE masses have flooded the Web with schlocky home movies. Big companies have added streams of more polished videos. But millions of businesses have sat out the revolution because they would rather not make fools of themselves trying to make their own commercials.

What they need is a crutch, and somebody is about to hand them one.

Online start-ups are percolating new methods to help companies create passable videos and commercials on the cheap, and distribute them across the Internet. For consumers, the trend promises a shopping experience more akin to QVC than eBay or Amazon.

"This won't transform the online experience, but it can really add value for customers, so companies will be interested in this," said Patti Freeman Evans, an online retail analyst with JupiterResearch. "And if they can get help from someone who's learning how video works online, that can be a great advantage."

That, Ms. Evans said, describes Matt Singer, a founder of The Talk Market (www.talkmarket.com) in New York, which bills itself as a sort of QVC for the masses. Mr. Singer helped clients sell "hundreds of thousands" of CDs on QVC from 2000 through 2007, he said, before deciding last year to take that expertise to smaller companies.

Merchants can sell huge quantities on QVC, Mr. Singer said, thanks largely to a highly personal sales approach where product designers or the channel's sales staff create a story around an item. Only those willing to bet big on their products can play on television, however.

"I basically lived in fear that some big current event would cause people to turn to another channel at that moment," he said, "and all those CDs would come back to me."

Mr. Singer joined last year with Amanda Eilian, a former Baker scholar at Harvard Business School, to build The Talk Market, which helps businesspeople shoot, edit and post videos to the Web. The service costs nothing, although users share with The Talk Market a 5 percent commission whenever someone clicks on the "buy" button in the video window.

The Talk Market begins with an online tutorial on how to shoot product demonstration videos: light well, change camera angles, speak as if you are talking to a friend and look directly into the lens "as if you're locking eyes with your audience."

On their home computers, users splice together a clip, typically two minutes or less, relying on background music and animated graphics from The Talk Market to lead into key moments in the presentation ("here's how I make it," for instance).

Users then upload the completed file to The Talk Market, where it is posted according to the product category. They may also post the video on their own Web sites. In the future, fans of a particular designer will be able to post the videos on their own sites and collect a bounty for whatever sales they help generate.

According to Nina Valenti, owner of naturevsfuture, an apparel company based in Brooklyn, The Talk Market approach "helps me explain a garment like I would if someone was one-on-one with me."

"I may not necessarily have TV charm, but I'm thorough," Ms. Valenti added. "And I think I can get people excited about the product by telling them about the concept, and about my background, or why I chose this fabric."

Mr. Singer and Ms. Eilian, who is also vice president of the Capitol Acquisition Corporation, a mergers and acquisitions company that raised roughly \$262 million in a public offering late last year, said they were in the midst of seeking financing to market the service more aggressively this spring.

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In the meantime, other companies are also taking aim at this category, with slightly different approaches. TurnHere, a company based in Emeryville, Calif., has an online network of about 3,500 freelance video producers who can shoot, produce and post videos of small businesses, typically for under \$1,000, according to Bradley J. Inman, TurnHere's chief executive.

Mr. Inman, who is the founder of Inman News, a real estate publisher, said the service, which had its debut in mid-2006, has produced roughly 3,500 of these minute-long "minidocumentaries" for clients. An increasing number of those clients are smaller companies.

"This can really capture the fabric of a small business, which has never been able to afford television advertising," he said.

In some cases, companies like IAC/InterActiveCorp's Citysearch unit will sell TurnHere's service to its advertising clients and post the videos on Citysearch. TurnHere pays freelance producers market rates, Mr. Inman said, and earns a premium on fees it collects from clients.

That model helped the company attract \$7.5 million in venture financing recently, from Hearst Interactive Media and Venrock, among others.

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Online merchants, who have experimented with video for years, are also beginning to see the value of letting manufacturers and designers pitch products themselves, rather than posting runway shows or conventional commercials.

At eBags, the online bag and apparel site, Scott Roon, a young employee in the marketing department, suggested to management last year that they shoot short profiles of designers and post those online. They suggested he try it himself.

Mr. Roon now has about 60 videos completed, and a new job, flying around the country shooting and producing video profiles. Peter Cobb, an eBags founder, said he had been unable to determine how many additional sales the company has made from the videos.

"But there are absolutely huge benefits," he said. "We've gotten great feedback from customers, and the brands love it."

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