

COMEDY CENTRAL'S MARKETING STRATEGY IS **NO JOKE**

Engaging an audience that takes humor seriously requires an approach that's at the same time quick-witted and pervasive.



CASE STUDY

By Elyse Dupré

There are many ways to describe Walter Levitt. A quick look at his Twitter profile will tell you that he's the CMO of Comedy Central, a father, and a Montreal bagel lover. But, ironically, his brief bio says that there's also something that Levitt's never been: funny.

"My job is to recognize the funny, not to be the funny, necessarily," Levitt says.

Levitt joined Comedy Central in spring 2011 with two goals in mind for his first year: don't mess anything up; and continue to evolve Comedy Central from a television network to a full-fledged comedy brand.

"We're not just launching television shows anymore," adds Don Steele, SVP of

fan engagement and multiplatform marketing for Comedy Central. "[Our] television shows are franchises...with digital experiences, tours, and merchandise, and it's a 365-day-a-year life of these franchises. We're no longer hoping that someone gas to something at 10:30 on a Tuesday night. We're building a brand: a brand that lives, breathes, and goes beyond the television shows that it represents."

The goal of Comedy Central's brand evolution is to be available anywhere and everywhere that its core customers, males 18 to 34 years old, are looking for a laugh, Levitt says. But this anywhere/everywhere objective seems to be less of a mission statement and more of a direct order from consumers.

Take the 2014 "Digital Democracy Survey" by Deloitte's Technology, Media, and Telecommunications practice, for instance. Fifty-three percent of the time "leading millennials" (25 to 30 year olds) spend watching movies and TV shows is via actual televisions. "Trailing millennials" (14 to 24 years old) devote 44% of their TV time to doing the same. However, leading millennials also spend nearly a quarter (23%) of their time viewing shows and movies on their computers, and this figure jumps to almost one third (32%) for trailing millennials. Further, millennials often multitask while watching TV. Some of the most popular activities that trailing and leading millennials engage in, respectively, are browsing and surfing the Web (52 and 51%), texting (51%, 41%), using social networks (48%, 48%), and reading email (35%, 39%).

So, although television remains the most consumed and monetized part of Comedy Central's business, marketers for the brand know that its target audience is looking for content in other channels. This requires Comedy Central to produce what Steele refers to as content experiences: content that works on the right platforms, at the right times, and acknowledges users' behaviors. And while the brand is all about getting laughs, creating these experiences is serious business.



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Comedy Central

perian Marketing Services' 2014 Client Summit in Las Vegas this past July.

Tapping into talents' fan bases is a powerful way to reach new audiences that have a shared affinity. For instance, last year Comedy Central aired the *Road of James Franco*—a one-night show dedicated to poking fun at the actor. Comedy Central knew that Franco would resonate with millennial males who recognized him from movies like *This Is the End* and *Pineapple Express*, Steele said at the Summit. What the brand didn't expect was to find an entirely separate crowd of Franco fanatics: millennial women who know Franco from his role on the soap opera *General Hospital*. Comedy Central uses SocialGuide, a Nielsen tool that monitors TV viewers' social conversations and follower count, to uncover new affinity groups, Steele later told *Direct Marketing News*. Identifying these enthusiasts allows Comedy Central to shepherd new consumers into its franchises and, ultimately, grow its brand.

Facebook and Twitter ad products are particularly useful in finding people with affinities for specific celebrities, Steele says. But talent isn't the only way that Comedy Central finds fans. Geography can also be a key data point. For instance, Derek Waters is the creator of Comedy Central's program *Drunk History*, a show featuring "liquored-up narrations" of significant historical events and people. But he's also a Baltimore native. So, not only does Comedy Central aim to reach Waters' fans, but it also targets people living and working in Baltimore, Steele says. Comedy Central even puts up billboards in places where it filmed *Drunk History* episodes, Steele adds, regardless of whether they're in cities where the brand would traditionally advertise.

Comedy Central also relies on email and display to reach affinity audiences. For example, in addition to signing up for Comedy Central's master email, fans can opt to receive emails about specific shows like *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* or *The Colbert Report*. "We have incredibly high

It's about affinities, not demographics, M'kay?

Millennial males don't just want comedy content; they demand it. According to a 2012 *New York Times* article on a Comedy Central-commissioned research study, 88% of young men surveyed said that their sense of humor was "crucial" to their self-definition. Yet this group is no longer the only segment that Comedy Central pursues. Instead of simply targeting based on demographics, Comedy Central aims to reach groups that have specific affinities, Steele explained at the Ex-

THE NUMBERS

99M

→ The approximate number of domestic television households that Comedy Central reached in September 2013

6.8M

→ The average number of monthly unique visitors to Comedycentral.com in the quarter ending September 30, 2013

51.8M

→ The average number of monthly content video streams on Comedycentral.com in the quarter ending September 30, 2013

5.7M

→ The approximate number of downloads for Comedy Central-branded apps as of September 30, 2013

Source: Viacom's Fiscal Year 2013 Annual Report, Form 10-K

CASE STUDY

open rates, for example, for *The Daily Show*,” Levitt says, “because people who opt in to that email are obviously hugely loyal fans... If they missed last night’s episode, they want to know exactly what they missed.”

But Comedy Central wants *all* of its master email account subscribers to have relevant experiences. To achieve this, it links cookies to its customers’ email addresses, Levitt explains. So, if Comedy Central detects that users are spending a lot of time on the *Task 0* blog, he says, it may email them or show them display ads about the new season of *Task 0*.

Of course, once its customers develop an affinity for one show, it’s Comedy Central’s aim to coax them into loving another. Levitt says that Comedy Central intends to use digital targeting techniques for its launch this winter of *The Minority Report with Larry Wilmore*, a half-hour program that will fill the departing *Colbert Report*’s 11:30 p.m. time slot. So, fans of *The Daily Show*, which airs before *The Colbert Report*, may see ads for *The Minority Report* while browsing entertainment sites, Levitt explains. But fans of *The Colbert Report* will see different messages.

“If you’re a *Daily Show* fan and you haven’t necessarily spent a lot of time with *The Colbert Report*, we may message you in a way that makes *The Minority Report* particularly relevant to you as a *Daily Show* fan,” Levitt says. “If you’re a fan who’s been watching *The Colbert Report*, and we know that you’re already a Comedy Central 11:30 viewer, for example, the messaging may be around, ‘Hey, you love Stephen [Colbert]. Here’s what’s now going to be on at 11:30, and here’s why you’ll love it.’”

Comedy Central also relies on other forms of marketing to develop affinities for new entertainment properties, such as conversing with fans on social, word of mouth, TV, and outdoor advertising. But what really separates Comedy Central from its competitors, according to

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Walter Levitt
Comedy Central

Levitt, is its permission to push boundaries and get people’s attention. Consider Comedy Central’s “Finger Blasters” food truck—a vehicle that served finger-shaped chicken tenders—based on a parody ad from *Inside Amy Schumer*.

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Content that’s in sync with consumers? Nooieee!

But if Comedy Central wants consumers to engage with its content experiences, then it needs to make those experiences valuable and accessible. So, instead of forcing consumers to search for its content, Comedy Central puts the right content in front of them on the right platforms.

One way Comedy Central does this is through email. By working with real-time email marketing company Movable Ink, Comedy Central updates its email content dynamically based on its subscribers’ open times. For instance, if customers open a *Colbert Report* email in the afternoon before the show airs, Comedy Central can include a tune-in-tonight message with a preview link, Steele explains. But if they don’t open the email until the next day, Comedy Central can change its message to information about last night’s show and include a link to the full episode.

“Our engagement rates and open rates have gone up dramatically [as a result],” Steele says.

Adjusting email content based on device is another way Comedy Central stays in step with its fans. If consumers open a *Daily Show* email on an iOS device and they have the Comedy Central app, they can click on the email and go straight to the app to watch a full episode, Levitt





Fans can opt in to receive emails about specific shows, like *The Daily Show*.

says. However, if fans haven't downloaded the app, the network can include a link inviting them to do so. Comedy Central launched its app this past April and received more than one million downloads in less than six weeks.

"We're being strategic in terms of what options we give you and how we make it easier for you to find the content that you love," Levitt says.

The network also puts content in front of users via social. For the first few weeks of the second season of *Drunk History*, Comedy Central blurred, or as Steele calls it "drunkified," social followers' pictures. Instead of depending on its fans to find the tool, use it, and then share it with their friends, the network started drunkifying fans' images on its own. And if fans asked Comedy Central to drunkify their pictures, it would try to oblige.

Not only does Comedy Central put social content in front of fans, but it actively seeks out and rewards enthusiasts for their acts of loyalty. For example, Comedy Central posts pictures of fans dressed up as *South Park* characters at Comic-Con on Instagram, and is hosting a DIY *Drunk History* contest on Facebook, in which the fan with the best episode reenactment wins the chance to be featured on the season's finale.

Acknowledging fan engagement allows Comedy Central to be a part of viewers' lives 24/7, Steele says, which results in shared social experiences and a bigger Comedy Central brand. "When someone makes the effort to dress up as a *South Park* character for Halloween and we go through the effort of then finding them and acknowledging them on Instagram, the

relationship that we now have with that person is not a passive TV watcher," Steele says. "It's a person we're friends with."

Future funnies

So, is Comedy Central successfully transitioning from a television network to a comedy brand? Recent research suggests that it is.

"[In] the most recent research study we did, we just asked point blank: If you're looking for comedy content—no matter what the source, what the screen, [or] what the platform—who's your favorite brand?" Levitt asks. "Comedy Central continues to be top of every one of those lists."

As for the future of Comedy Central, Levitt is ready to tune the changes necessary to keep engaging its viewers.

"The great thing and the scary thing about being a marketer in 2014 is that everything is changing so quickly," he says. "In marketing you have to be aware of the change, you have to keep up with the change, and you have to try to be ahead of the change. What we did a year ago with marketing and what we're doing now has evolved. I can't imagine in a year from now we won't be doing different things, as well. And that's what invigorates me as a marketer: the opportunity to continue to evolve with the fans, continue to evolve with the platform, and to never sit back and say, 'We're done.' Our job is to say, 'What's next a year from now?'" ■



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Comedy Central

ACTION ITEMS:

ONE

→ Avoid complacency. Evolve as consumers evolve.

TWO

→ Target based on affinities, not just on demographics

THREE

→ Don't rely on consumers to find your content. Direct them to the right content on their preferred platforms.

FOUR

→ Seek out and reward loyal fans

FIVE

→ Never say, "We're done." Keep asking, "What's next?"