

## **The Utilization of Facebook as a Publicity Vehicle During the 2010 Final Season of ABC's *Lost***

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*Social media is the latest buzz word among professionals in the communication and marketing fields. Virtual environments like Facebook.com, Myspace.com, Friendster.com and Twitter.com are becoming increasingly important vehicles for brands to cultivate relationships with their publics. Large consumer good companies such as Procter & Gamble, Unilever and beverage giant Coca Cola as well as other household names like Honda, Ikea, Starbucks coffee and McDonald's are attempting to find their niche in the social media landscape, many choosing to join the band wagon with a "page" or presence on Facebook (Neff, 2010).*

*As this relatively new form of communications continues to develop and evolve, companies are investigating how to strategize their marketing plans to include social media sites and be able to tap into this targeted consumer base of close to 400 million members on Facebook alone (Fletcher, 2010). In February 2010, Procter & Gamble stated that by year's end all their brands would have a presence on Facebook (Neff, 2010). Starbucks and Wendy's have already experimented with Facebook by running various promotions during the 2009 calendar year. Vice President of online brand content for Starbucks, Chris Bruzzo, states that their promotional strategies on Facebook is a connection strategy, seeking out customers on social media environments like Twitter and Facebook. Bruzzo notes that it's not enough to market with a traditional approach but planning should be considered across all channels, including social media (Brandau, 2009) Companies, therefore, need to attempt to customize their own strategies in order to utilize some form or forms of social media in their efforts to cultivate present and potential relationships with consumers (Brandau, 2009). One key component of social media is the ability to immediately connect with a community of individuals who share similar likes and dislikes (Marken, 2008).*

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Those in the public relations profession recognize that a key element of their role is to maintain and cultivate relationships between corporate entities and their publics (Guth & Marsh, 2006; Vorvoreanu, 2008). Public relations scholars agree that the current movement in the profession is to include a significant presence on the internet for the brands they represent. Lordan (2006) stressed that public relations professionals should embrace the interactivity of the internet when the goal is a mutually "beneficial relationship between clients and audiences." (see also Freitag, 1999). A five-year trends report analyzing new communications media, conducted by Wright and Hinson (2010) reveals that 95% of public relations practitioners surveyed state that social media offers organizations "low-costs ways to develop relationships" with their various publics.

A study conducted by Eyrich, Padman and Sweetser (2008) shows that practitioners have clearly adopted the more traditional and established communication forms on the internet such as email, intranets and blogs but are “slower to integrate more technologically complicated tools that cater to niche audiences” such as social networks and virtual worlds. However, scholars agree that public relations practitioners need to actively embrace the potential of the internet, especially social media environments (Christ, 2005; Marken, 2008; Waters, 2009)

## **SITUATION ANALYSIS – NETWORK TELEVISION AND SOCIAL MEDIA**

One industry which has welcomed the potential of social media is network television. During the Spring 2010 television season, the top 25 rated shows all had a presence on Facebook, each creating an on-line environment for their viewers to post comments, view footage and receive periodical updates about their favorite series. Steinberg (2010) reported in *Advertising Age* that by “using social media tools, producers [are] trying to build up their old media offerings and beef up their audiences.” This translates into larger audiences for their advertisers and the ability of network TV to secure a steady stream of revenues (Croteau & Hoynes, 2003).

Networks have attempted to recreate the “watercooler” moments by utilizing Facebook. Their viewers can chat and gossip about their favorite shows via social network environments. Instead of co-workers literally chatting by the watercooler or copier, they have the opportunity to engage with others on Facebook and given our current economic climate where idleness may mean the underutilization of an employee, Facebook is the ideal venue to gossip about the latest happenings on their TV shows. Social media is becoming the new watercoolers, empowering individuals to address all their friends with a simple click instead of one-to-one conversations (Hampp, 2007).

### *Purpose*

The purpose of this study is to analyze how the public relations team of ABC’s *Lost* utilized Facebook as a publicity vehicle and how it compared to the traditional media tactics used during the final season of the series. The study will explore if ABC needed to create additional content to be used solely on Facebook to entice and excite *Lost*’s audiences, both current and past, to watch the show until the series finale.

### *Situation Analysis*

The television series *Lost* made its debut on ABC during the 2004 fall season. The show centers around a group of individuals who flew on a passenger jetliner from Australia to Los Angeles and crashed on a seemingly deserted island. As the hours tick by, the surviving passengers lose all hope of being rescued and realize they are not alone on the island and become increasingly menaced by the island’s inhabitants called the “others.” The first season of *Lost* averaged 16 million viewers or in the top 10 rated weekly TV shows among the 18 to 49 age bracket, “the currency of broadcast TV” (deMoraes, 2010). *Lost* stood out against the rules of traditionally scripted series, adopting a highly serialized approach that developed into a “cult following” among its

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viewers (Stanley, 2006). In May 2007 ABC announced the end of *Lost* scheduled for May 2010 (deMoraes, 2010).

The publicity efforts of the final season of ABC's *Lost* was chosen for analysis for several reasons. *Lost* was not cancelled because of declining ratings. The writers and producers of the show announced that for artistic reasons the series would need to end, unlike TV shows which are cancelled mid-season due to declining viewers (Longwell, 2009). This is an important distinction in terms of keeping and driving viewers for the final season and the potential for the network to increase advertising rates during the series finale.

Since the announcement in 2007 fans and critics of *Lost* have shared their various theories and speculated on how the show should end. Even ABC promised the ending would be a "highly anticipated and shocking finale" (deMoraes, 2010). Facebook proved to be the ideal environment to corral comments from fans, providing a clearinghouse for the writers and producers of the show to hear their comments. *Lost*'s script coordinator regularly followed fan comment boards and provided synopses to the show's writers, especially frequently raised questions pertaining to previously aired episodes (Longwell, 2009).

The series finale of ABC's *Lost* is historic in terms of being the first TV show to announce a highly anticipated final season during an era when Facebook and other social media environments are becoming popular. In May 2006, Facebook added an application which allowed various entities, including television shows to set up and create their own "fan" page. Facebook members can click on a particular page and become a fan of various groups in different categories which include: place, product, service, store, restaurant, bar/club, organization, politician, government official, non-profit, TV show, movie, game, sports team, celebrity/public figure, musician, or website.

An analysis of cancelled shows during the last four years indicates that cancellations were due to declining viewers contrary to the situation with *Lost*. (tv.ign.com; tvseriesfinale, 5/19/10). This created an immense opportunity for ABC to tap into Facebook members and cultivate current viewers and reconnect with viewers from previous seasons.

From a financial view point, the ability to deliver higher viewers, translates into charging a premium to advertisers during the series finale. In 1998, NBC's long-running *Seinfeld* and *ER* ended their respective series. *Seinfeld*'s 1997 advertising rate averaged \$575,000 for a 30 second spot, compared to the reported \$1.4-1.8 million for the May 14, 1998 series finale (Mandese, 1997; tvseriesfinale.com 3/30/10). *ER*'s average advertising cost for a 30 second spot in 1998 was \$560,000 compared to the season finale of \$800-850,000 for the same on-air time (Ross, 1998). In 2004, NBC announced the end of long-running series *Friends*. The reported 2002 average advertising rate for a 30 second spot was \$455,700. NBC took in \$1.7-2.0 million for the same air time during the May 2004 finale (Goetzl & Friedman 2002, Linnett 2004).

Throughout the 2010 spring season ABC sold a 30-second spot during *Lost*, for \$213,000 (tvseriesfinale 3/30/10, Steinberg, 2010). During the May 23, 2010 finale, ABC charged advertisers \$900,000 for the same air time, which attracted

13.6 million viewers (Steinberg, 2010; Porter, 2010). Given the potential advertising revenue of a series finale, it was crucial for the network to cultivate and maintain their fans and this becomes the objective of ABC's public relations efforts.

## **METHOD**

An analysis of *Lost*'s electronic press releases for the final season (releases dated November 19, 2009 to May 20, 2010) indicates a series of tactics implemented to achieve their objective (see chart A) (ABCMedianet, 2010). The method typically used by television networks is to “apply the principle of drip-drip-drip publicity when a show is being shot ... [offering] a steady output of information about the production” (Wilcox & Cameron 2007).

**Frequency of Publicity Topics Mentioned via Electronic Press Releases or via Facebook - (Chart A)**

<u>Topics</u>	<b>Electronic Press Releases</b> <b>11/19/09 to 5/20/10</b>	<b>Facebook Postings</b> <b>2/9/10 to 5/23/10</b>
<u>Events</u>		
Special screening on beach	1	0
Lost Live Symphony	1	2
Vilcek Foundation Props Exhibit	0	1
<u>Sweepstakes/Contests</u>		
Exclusive sneak peek of Premiere/ USB port	1	1
Design contest	1	2
Promo contest	1	3
<u>Promotional Items</u>		
Limited edition vintage prints of cast members/for sale	3	5
Lost tracks via iTunes	1	0
<u>Teasers of Upcoming episodes</u>	23	31
<u>Tie-in with ABC.com</u>		
Re-watch episodes with commentary	4	9
Live chat w/cast member	0	1
Music video with Lost cast members	1	2
Lost tracks via ABCmusiclounge.com	0	3
Episode viewers Stats	1	0
International viewers Stats	1	0
<u>Tie-in with Verizon to say good-bye</u>	1	0
<u>Tie-in with Direct TV</u>	1	0
<u>Miscellaneous Clips</u>		
Writers satire on youtube.com	0	1
Entertainment Weekly commentary on EW.com	0	1
<u>Posts exclusive to the series finale</u>	0	2

Publicity efforts via electronic press releases include teasers of upcoming episodes (23 releases), two fan-based events, three sweepstakes/contests, two promotional items available for sale to fans (vintage prints of LOST cast; Lost tracks available via iTunes), tie-in with ABC.com (to re-watch episodes with commentaries, Lost tracks and cast member music videos) and tie-in promotions with third parties (i.e., Verizon and Direct TV). Releases also directed the media to ABC.com for information on domestic and foreign viewership statistics (2 releases).

Posts on Facebook (new season was indicated as of February 9, 2010 and posts were made until the season finale on May 23, 2010) were addressed directly to their fan base, building on any publicity efforts distributed via press releases. The majority of posts were teasers of upcoming episodes (31 posts). Facebook fans were also encouraged to re-watch episodes via a link on ABC.com with commentaries made by various cast members (9 posts). Posts included links to video clips (i.e., an episode teaser or television promo) and links to ABC.com for a live chat with a cast member (1 post); to watch music videos with cast members or listen to Lost music tracks compiled for cast members (5 posts).

One of the publicity events were mentioned as a Facebook post (Lost Live Symphony) (2 posts) as well as an additional event mentioned exclusively on Facebook (New York City Vilcek Foundation Lost props exhibit) (1 post). The Vilcek Foundation organized and publicized the exhibit which was free to fans (docarzt.com). Fans were also encouraged to consider purchasing vintage prints of Lost cast members (5 posts) (Facebook.com). Facebook posts were utilized to announce and provide updates about Lost contests/sweepstakes (6 posts). Posts also directed fans to a Lost writer's satire clip on youtube.com (1 post) and an Entertainment Weekly commentary on EW.com (1 post).

Two final episode Facebook posts encouraged fans to say their good byes to Lost by including their comments on the day's post (post of May 22). The second post encouraged fans to access Lost music from ABCMusicLounge.com for good-bye/viewing parties (post of May 23). Facebook posts for the season averaged four a week (facebook.com).

A comparison of the press releases and Facebook postings indicates how each complemented the other, usually the postings echoing the information on the press releases. Postings regarding upcoming episodes, however, were more inclusive in feel, encouraging their fans to voice (or include their comments) underneath the day's posting. An example of such a post was made on May 20, which asked "If you could ask any character one question, who would you choose, and what would you ask them?" Ten similar "updates" were posted throughout the season. This helped to create the community feeling evident in social media environments. The use of links on various posts also encouraged fans to watch teasers of upcoming episodes, watch music videos or a previously aired episode with commentaries, allowing fans to post comments, once again contributing to the community feel of Facebook.

## RESULTS AND IMPLICATIONS

The study reveals a series of publicity efforts implemented by ABC to create excitement among the print/electronic media in an attempt to garner awareness of *Lost* in traditional fashions... news outlets reporting on the final season, in turn creating awareness/excitement among fans. The series of tactics included upcoming episode teasers and trailer, episodic commentaries, *Lost* tracks and music videos, fan events, sweepstakes/contests, tie-ins with Verizon and Direct TV and the sale of promotional items. ABC also created content on their website, [www.ABC.com/Lost](http://www.ABC.com/Lost). Repeatedly ABC press releases encouraged the media, and by extension, *Lost* fans to visit their website. Facebook posts also encouraged fans to visit the site for videos clips and music tracks.

ABC utilized Facebook was an additional tactic to disburse information of all publicity efforts to its on-line community of fans. The use of Facebook provided a virtual venue to gather three million fans and stimulate dialogue among themselves (every fan has access to read all comments made to posts and comments can be made about comments) and with the series. ABC was able to cultivate excitement, momentum, and a virtual relationship up until the series finale. The laborious part of Facebook was creating the actual post updates (the copy) and the technical ability to import videos and links onto the post. Therefore, the combination of ABC's publicity efforts distributed via electronic press releases and [ABC.com/Lost](http://ABC.com/Lost) content were the materials used as posts on Facebook. However, as indicated above several publicity tactics apart from [ABC.com](http://ABC.com) were posted on Facebook (Youtube.com satire, EW.com commentary and the Vilcek Foundation exhibit).

Although causality cannot be shown between Facebook exposure and an increase in television viewership, it is nevertheless interesting to analyze the fan base growth on Facebook. ABC was able to grow *Lost*'s Facebook fans from 1,824,610 fans listed on March 3 (earliest retrievable date for the final season) to 3,745,546 listed on May 23, the evening of the season finale (Facebook.com). *Lost*'s television viewership of the series finale was the highest it achieved all season: ranked 10 with 13.6 million viewers (Seidman, 2010). The lowest viewership for the season was 8.9 million (Gorman, 2010).

It is worth noting, however, that highly ranked television series, according to Nielsen, does not automatically translate into a high number of Facebook fans. Highly rated 2010 spring television series similar in genre to *Lost*, a scripted drama, included but were not limited to: *NCIS LA* (rank 5, viewers 15.3 million, Facebook fans 117,081) *Grey's Anatomy* (rank 6, viewers 15.2 million, Facebook fans 4,336,684) *The Mentalist* (rank 6, viewers 15.2 million, Facebook fans 552,293) *CSI* (rank 9, viewers 14.3 million, Facebook fans 1,077,804) *Lost* (rank 10, viewers 13.6 million, Facebook fans 3,972,061) *The Good Wife* (rank 14, viewers 12 million, Facebook fans 122,206) *Castle* (rank 21, viewers 10 million, Facebook fans 276,436) *FOX 24* (ranked 27, viewers 8.9 million, Facebook fans 1,505,767). (The above noted Nielsen ranks and viewership

was for the week of May17-23, the time frame when many series were ending the season for the summer sabbatical. The number of Facebook fans was retrieved on May 26, 2010.) Two variables, however, may influence the number of Facebook fans, most notable the number of seasons the series has aired and the year a Facebook page was established for that particular series.

The very nature of Facebook allows individuals to see who their “friends” have selected to “Like” or follow as a fan, which helped to create a virtual community of Lost followers. It would, therefore, be advantageous for public relations practitioners to investigate and experiment with social media sites and how it can be utilized as a tool to disseminate information to various on-line publics. The Lost analysis illustrates the potential of viral growth this type of an environment can cultivate and shows how one single posting can be seen by upwards of a million individuals, a large number when compared to media impressions received from local media outlets. Many television shows as well as consumer good products encourage consumers to follow them on Facebook, a strategy commonly being used to help increase their on-line fan base. This approach helps to create and solidify relationships between corporate entities and those individuals who consume their products or services.

In future studies, it may be interesting to explore the number of traditional media impressions received against the number of Facebook fans amassed during a publicity campaign. A comparative analysis may validate the use of Facebook as a publicity tool. Additionally, an evaluation tool would be valuable in helping public relations practitioners measure the success of their social media posts. This tool will help legitimize the social media environment as a worthy tactic to be used in future publicity efforts.

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