

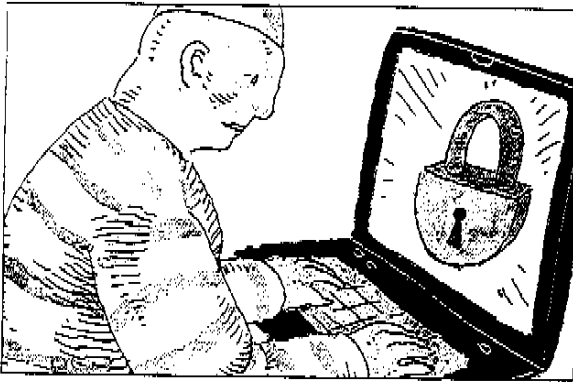
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E-learning site Shoot Out Online was built as a companion offering for a book and an offline class. Here's how a few Hollywood insiders with no budget built a successful promotional site and taught people a thing or two along the way.

case study

Gordon Bass

shoot to sell turn to Mandalay Entertainment for online education

Shoot Out, by Peter Bart and Peter Guber, is not just another book by Hollywood sycophants. Peter Bart is the outspoken editor in chief of *Variety*. ("It's the worst movie ever made!" Bart recently declared of *Jackass: The Movie*, which nevertheless did boffo at the box office.) And Peter Guber is the founder and chairman of Mandalay Entertainment, the production company behind films like *Enemy at the Gates* and *The Score*, which lured Marlon Brando out for one of his rare cinematic appearances.

Guber is also a full professor at the UCLA School of Theater, Film, and Television, and Bart is a visiting assistant professor. Together, they teach the popular course *Shoot Out*, which isn't so much about how to make movies as it is about how movies get made. Three years ago, Bart and Guber decided to write a book based on the course material. As they were working on the manuscript, in September 2000, Guber turned to Noam Dromi, Mandalay's executive vice president, and told him that he wanted to do something "out of the box" to promote the book. Since Guber has a strong interest in technology and Dromi is in charge of all the company's Internet properties, that suggested something online and interactive.

"Why don't we do the promotion of the book as an e-learning course?" asked Dromi. Guber agreed, and *Shoot Out Online* was born (www.shootoutonline.com). It was to be a twenty-week interactive course, based on the book that was based on the real-life course; it would be free; and it would have to be ready for the Putnam book release in May 2002.

it's who you know

The site was targeted at those who Dromi calls the "wannabes and wannasees": people

who want to be in the entertainment business, and people who just want to know more about it. Guber wanted it to reach the widest audience, and for that he enlisted the support of Yahoo Broadcast, which integrates commerce, communications, and media on a secure, scalable platform, and offers a plethora of on-demand audio and video content. It happens that Guber is a good friend of Yahoo CEO Terry Semel.

"It was a transactional relationship," says Dromi, who explains that Yahoo provided its services essentially at cost. "Utilizing Yahoo's technology and promotional engine, in theory, gave us the ability to reach over 200 million people." In return, Yahoo Broadcast got a branded entertainment case study of its own.

Mandalay also partnered with the online Global Film School, which was founded by the Australian Film Television and Radio School, the UK's National Film and Television School, and UCLA. Another connection: Guber is on the board of GFS.

"There's no remuneration involved," explains Dromi of this partnership. Global Film School had a mailing list of about 8,000 names that were used to promote the site. After *Shoot Out Online* finishes its run at the current URL at the end of February, its content will be repurposed for the GFS Web site. "It will become part of their archive

library," says Dromi. "The reason it's staying up until February is that we're hoping we'll win a Webby."

the production

In lesson one of *Shoot Out Online*, Peter Guber says it right up front: "Show business isn't a monk writing a poem in Tibet; it's a commercial enterprise. That's the dirty little secret: Every single person in the entire food chain is interested in how much money you make. It is the driving force." So that obviously goes for the site, right? Wrong. Because of the luminaries, including actor Matthew Perry, screenwriter William Goldman, and director Brett Ratner, who gave guest lectures that are streamed on the site, Mandalay could not in good conscience profit from their participation.

So what's the catch? "Everyone is out to make money, but branding and prestige are equally as important," says Dromi. "Doing this site and being forward-thinking and having it be a gift to aspiring filmmakers around the world, brought to you very clearly by Guber, Bart, and Mandalay, has long-term benefits for us that far exceed short-term profit. The site was never intended to make money. It's intended to sell more books, and it did that."

Dromi says he doesn't know how many book sales were spurred by the site, but does

"Everyone is out to make money, but branding and prestige are equally as important. The site was never intended to make money. It's intended to sell more books, and it did that."

CASE STUDY: MANDALAY

note that the book spent four weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list.

Besides driving book sales and generating global goodwill for Bart and Guber, Shoot Out Online has a less well-publicized benefit. In March 2002, Peter Guber announced the formation of Mandalay Branded Entertainment (MBE), which is a joint venture between Mandalay and Dayton, Ohio-based advertising firm Flynn, Sabatino and Day. MBE uses entertainment and communications services to offer advertising, marketing, and branding services for its corporate clients. The company's biggest project to date is the site for Health South Corporation (www.healthsouth.com) and the television show *Go For It!*, which is sponsored by Health South and promotes education and the benefits of athletics and healthy living. What does this have to do with Shoot Out Online? "The site becomes the ultimate case study [for MBE] in terms of our executional capabilities," says Dromi. So not only does Shoot Out Online promote a book and a partnership, it also promotes MBE.

Picking the right firm to design Shoot Out Online was critical. Dromi has high standards—when he recently decided that Mandalay Entertainment's corporate Web site was "lousy," he simply took it down indefinitely for retooling.

"We had a short list, given that we started this project at the eleventh hour, and we needed people who were really creative and could think outside of the box. I met with three or four companies, and they just didn't pass muster. They had egos. They thought they knew better than I did how to make the ultimate vision work."

Then Dromi met with Lainie Siegel and Michael Walsh, the cofounders of San Francisco-based Interactive Jungle, a full-service design house that focuses on Internet design, corporate identity and branding, multimedia, music, marketing, and advertising. Siegel and Walsh are business partners and close friends who'd met in 1996 at BoxTop Interactive, during the Wild West days of the Internet. Siegel had more recently been the design principal at SpongeLab, an e-learning site that focused on the creative arts.

Walsh recalls the initial meeting. "When Noam realized he was sitting across from the woman who'd created SpongeLab's art, he said, 'You're hired.'"

"Lainie came in and said, 'You're giving us a less than stellar budget and a less than stellar timetable, but we like you,'" says

Dromi. "They were more interested in building a relationship than a transaction. They so exceeded what I knew they were capable of—most of these people are frustrated hack filmmakers." Of course, Interactive Jungle already boasted a rather prestigious client roster, including *That '70s Show*, Disney, Frito-Lay, and Marilyn Manson.

"We strive to get to the core intention of every project," says Siegel. "We're not into making Web sites for the purpose of making Web sites. There must be a purpose to it." Siegel, Walsh, and their partners had previously worked in e-learning, but not with such Hollywood subject matter. Interactive Jungle's past experience had involved translating courses from stand-up courses or from textbooks. Shoot Out Online, in contrast, would involve a little of both—and more. The task was figuring out how to take that wealth of information and make it accessible and manageable.

final cut

Siegel and Walsh began by digging into the material to figure out what the user experience should be. They looked at competitors, primarily InsideSessions, an e-learning program created by the Universal Music Group and Penguin Putnam and directed at aspiring musicians. In addition to the Internet, InsideSessions utilizes CD-ROM, DVD, and VHS tapes. "That was really the only competitor, entertainment-wise," says Siegel. InsideSessions students also pay \$70 for each program.

Then Siegel and Walsh had to decide what the approach should be. "It's a book," says Siegel. "What was the best creative concept? Do we deal with the book? Do we deal with the two people that are giving the lesson? Do we deal with their notoriety? Do we deal with the fact that this is a course?"

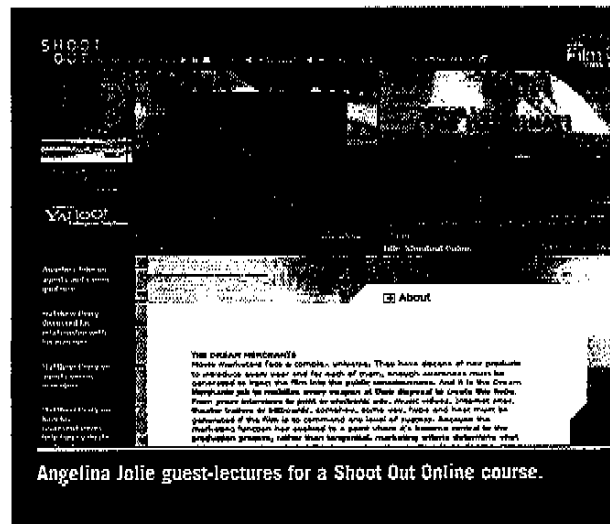
Promoting the book was the primary goal, but visually, the book didn't provide them with any cues about how the site should look—the

cover hadn't even been approved at this stage of site design. But that meant that the sky was the limit—there was no key art to follow. Interactive Jungle produced a set of comps, and Peter Guber chose the one he felt best represented the book and course.

The building phase, from initial meeting to live site, took three months. Interactive Jungle worked with Mandalay and Yahoo to design the look, feel, and layout using Training Management Studio, Yahoo's webcast training technology engine. The templated construction meant that content could be easily added months later—and that's the way it had to work. The launch of shootoutonline.com happened before the UCLA course on which it was based had finished. As classes unfolded in the spring 2002 semester, the site had to be flexible enough to accommodate whatever material might arise from the organic course. "You never know what's going to happen," says Siegel. "People don't rehearse teaching."

Each week's lesson plan includes video from the stand-up course (lectures by Bart and Guber, as well as invited actors, directors, and producers), multimedia pertaining to the week's guest (film clips, sound bites, and image galleries), and additional resources such as articles, papers, and suggested reading.

"It was amazing to me to put together an online learning course that had as much supporting material as this did," says Walsh. The user interface integrates audio, video, and text, all of which was provided by Mandalay. "For each lesson, there were approximately five segments plus support streams," says Siegel. "If Ali McGraw is talking about the making of



CASE STUDY: MANDALAY

Love Story, one of the support pieces might be a trailer for the film."

The site cost less than \$40,000 to develop—most of which went toward design—and costs less than \$5,000 per month to maintain.

roll credits

The site was promoted through several non-traditional channels. Peter Guber gave more than thirty interviews to promote the book, and in every interview he also mentioned the site. There were banner swaps on movie sites such as Internet Movie Database, Ifilm, and filmmaking.com. And Mandalay did street promotion at schools including NYU, UCLA, and USC.

Dromi says the site received 35,000 unique visitors during the first run of classes. About 9,400 people subscribed to the site, which gave them complete access to its content. Subscribers filled out questionnaires that provided Mandalay with detailed demographic information. Seventy percent of the audience was American, with the rest logging in from all over the world. They skewed more male than female, and the median age was in the mid-twenties.

The site was designed for broadband access, which is evident when you try to access it via dialup. In this case, the rich content can become a deterrent to exploration. "As a developer, I am challenged," says Dromi. "On the one hand, I believe you need to make a site accessible to the lowest common denominator. On the other hand, I take the attitude that I want to create the biggest and the best." As for the people who can't access it, Dromi argues that you need to "give them another reason to finally spring for broadband." Ultimately, more than half the visitors accessed the site via dialup, with another 35 percent connecting via DSL and the remainder via T-1 or better.

When I confess to Walsh that I live in upstate New York and had some frustration when I accessed the site via a 56Kbps connection, he asks, "What the hell are you doing on a dialup?" and then says to Siegel, "We're so oblivious to this in the city." But truth is, the wannabes and wannasees, the aspiring filmmakers who live in studio apartments around the country, aren't all hooked up to high-speed connections yet. InsideSessions addressed this issue by sending a supplemental CD-ROM to its students, providing dialup users with a pseudo-broadband experience.

Siegel and Walsh learned firsthand what was being taught in the course about business in Hollywood. "We saw that relationships were leveraged," says Siegel. "For example, Peter Guber has a very good relationship with Yahoo, so they leveraged that relationship to get back-end stuff done for the e-learning portion of the site."

"Things happen from who you know and what you know," adds Walsh. "In this industry, it's pretty potent."

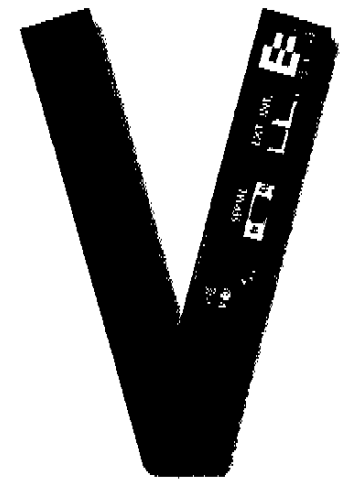
Dromi had only one complaint: "The site works for shit on Macs, and here's the problem I face as a developer time and time again: If you're producing *Friends*, it looks the same on a Sony television as it does on a Toshiba television. But a Web site on different operating systems, different browsers, looks completely different. There has to be rich, compelling content for the lowest common denominator so they don't feel like they're missing out. Yahoo has a great proprietary toolset in terms of streaming the assets, but so many people I talked to just couldn't get the site to work."

Overall, however, the experience of creating the site was positive for Dromi. "I still would have liked more planning time. There were a lot of things about the UI that I was completely wrong about." In particular, Dromi is less than satisfied with the way support materials, such as audio streams and stills, were linked to specific lessons. While Yahoo Broadcast makes it possible for hotlinks to these materials to appear in each lesson, Shoot Out Online users have to exit the lesson they're studying in order to find the relevant support materials.

Dromi found user feedback about this and other facets of the site invaluable, and the community aspect of it made Siegel happy, too. There was a message board where people talked about which lessons they liked and filmmakers looked for investors and advice. That provided the interaction students would get in a live classroom.

Following its run as a free offering, Shoot Out Online will be offered to registered students at Global Film School. "Shoot Out is a one-off, but that doesn't mean we won't revisit this in some capacity. Mandalay will continue to support Global Film School," says Dromi. "The amount of people who showed up far exceeded our wildest expectations." ■

Gordon Bass is based in upstate New York and writes about technology for numerous publications. Contact him at gwbass@att.net.



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