



Using IT in a Changing Marketplace

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## Introduction

The CW Network was formed in 2006 as a partnership between WB Communications Inc., a subsidiary of Time Warner Inc., and CBS CW network Partner LLC, a subsidiary of CBS Corporation. It is a national broadcast television network that launched in the fall 2006 broadcast season with a programming line up containing legacy shows from The WB and UPN television networks. The CW's eclectic first season lineup line up included *Veronica Mars*, *Gilmore Girls*, *Smallville*, and World Wrestling Entertainment's *Smackdown*. The CW was created to take the best of WB and UPN programming to create a television network designed to appeal specifically to the profitable 18-34 age group (Seid 2006). Dawn Ostroff, former head of UPN, has been the CW's president of entertainment since the network's creation and was the longest-running sitting broadcast entertainment president, having been in her position for over nine years (Andreeva 2010). One of the reasons for Ostroff's long tenure was her inventive use of information technology to achieve the network's goals and her willingness to reverse decisions when it appeared that she made the wrong policy choices.

As a television network, the CW Network has two levels of customers that it has to satisfy. One might assume that the CW Network's primary customers are the people that view its programming, but this would be looking at the situation in the wrong direction. The network's clients are the studios who produce the programming aired by the CW Network and the advertisers who pay for advertising spots interspersed throughout that programming. The true product that the CW offers is the viewers who watch the programming and engage with both the shows produced by the studios and the

advertisements paid for by the advertisers. The CW Network must satisfy its two primary customers by accomplishing a couple key goals.

First, as a joint venture of CBS and Warner Bros., the CW must market the shows it airs that are produced by those studios sufficiently to build significant global brands around the studios' intellectual properties. For example, Warner Brothers and CBS Studios are the joint producers of the television show *Hellcats*. Both studios charge the CW a license fee to run the programming, but the licensing fees for a show rarely cover the costs of producing a show. Any profits to be made by a television program will be made through the secondary sales of DVDs and digital files distributed through services like iTunes (Ulin 2010, 247 - 250). It is incumbent upon the CW Network to build sufficient brand during the first season of an episode. Since the CW typically lacks syndication rights, this is the only time period that the network has a right to air episodes and promote the show in a manner that creates long term brand recognition for the studios. If the CW Network is successful in building sufficient brand for the studios' programming, then the studios will be able to make a profit from foreign license fees, DVD sales, syndication, and the sale of digital files through iTunes. The CW Network pays for the initial licensing fees with payment received from its second customer type, advertisers who purchase ad time during programming.

Second, the CW Network must provide its paying advertisers an audience who will be encounter the various ads, and who fit the desired advertisers' desired demographics. Sometimes the network will negotiate a special deal wherein a particular product is exclusively featured within a show through the use of product placement. This agreement will be an addition to traditional ad purchases. The CW Network has such a

relationship with Verizon for *Gossip Girl*. When Verizon pays the CW a fee for product placements within *Gossip Girl* episodes and additional fees for nationally aired advertisements, Verizon expects these advertisements to be seen by people who will buy Verizon phones. In the case of CW advertisements, the goal is to provide Verizon – and other advertisers – with as many viewers in the 18 – 34 age group.

When the network began airing episodes in the fall of 2006, the initial ratings weren't very impressive. This wasn't surprising, as the majority of the shows aired that fall were legacy shows from the former UPN and WB networks. It was up to the CW Network to find new ways of accessing the target demographic and providing “eyeball” value for its customers. CBS and Warner Studios needed strong brand identification in order to raise license fee revenue in the international market and direct revenue through retail chains. To meet this goal, CW put together a line up of programming that it thought would appeal to the desired demographics, and decided to go with a show by teen drama hotshot Josh Schwartz called *Gossip Girl* to jumpstart its efforts. The show was a “no brainer” for the demographic. *Gossip Girl* was armed with two great advantages. One was the fan base of Josh Schwartz who were giddily waiting to see how he'd follow up on *The O.C.* The other was the legion of young girls who had read the tawdry but addictive *Gossip Girl* book series by Nightingale-Bamford graduate Cecily von Ziegesar” (Pressler 2008). When the show aired, the network was shocked. The numbers were bad. New episodes pulled in an average of 2.5 million viewers, which was just over half *The O.C.*'s rating during the season that show was cancelled (Pressler 2008).

The CW had to find out the reason for the failure and react to the situation, or it would fail to meet the demands of its customers. A failure to attract viewers could

mean the end of the fledgling network. The reason for the failure and a possible solution to the dilemma could be found in the changing marketplace: the behavior of viewers was changing. Young viewers were moving away from traditional viewing and toward an interactive “on demand” model that integrated the use of information technology and viewing behavior. Like many television networks, the CW had been experimenting with offering its shows “streaming” on the internet as a supplement to its broadcast episodes. Management at the CW found themselves in a struggle between two world views. It had to decide whether it would embrace the new interactive and communal “internet television” model and find ways to harness it to generate revenue, or double down on the traditional viewing model. Which paradigm would lead the way?

In the spring of 2008, Dawn Ostroff made the decision to test the traditional viewing model. The network removed *Gossip Girl* from the air in an effort to promote its core TV business, while keeping the majority of its other shows available as streaming episodes on the internet. For the first few weeks, things looked like they might be tipping in the direction of the older model. The first of the TV only episodes ended up as the third highest rated show of the season, and it scored 25% higher in the female 18 – 34 demographic than the season average (Whitney 2008). Though it looked like the old model might work at first, the numbers quickly dwindled as the next episodes aired. Meanwhile, the network’s digital numbers were growing. In March of 2008, CWTV.com – the CW Network’s website – delivered 3.5 million fully streamed episodes to viewers, up 1.1 million viewers from the year prior. This number was made up of 2 million unique users (Whitney 2008).

It looked like the future for the CW's demographic was digital, but how could it grow its viewership in the new model? The seeds for its strategy lie in the approach the network used when it began promoting itself for its initial launch. At that time Rick Haskins, the executive vice president of marketing and brand strategy, was already talking about the network in new terms. His view was that "Old media is about an audience; new media is about a community. We are trying to straddle old media and move into new media, just like our audience is" (Lisotta 2006). The time for "straddling" was over; it was time to fully embrace new information technologies to create the CW community, and that is what the network has done through the use of streaming video, social networking, mobile phone technology and Smartphone applications, and community generating activities.

### Streaming Video

The massive increase in the availability of high speed internet access, as well as the explosion of available bandwidth, have created an entirely new way for viewers to experience entertainment. Gone are the days of slow and jumpy Windows media files downloaded from websites onto users' hard drives. Now people can watch high definition video streaming real time from network servers to their home computers. The home computer is quickly incorporating the capabilities of the television, and surpassing them as it allows viewers to experience entertainment on their own timeline rather than at appointed times.

The CW was one of the first networks to begin to fully leverage this technology to provide content to viewers and build brand for its customers, and the web delivery of CW

Network programs is facilitated by Warner Bros. Inc. While the network used many traditional marketing campaign elements when launching the network, including on-air promotions, the network heavily engaged in what were at the time unconventional strategies. These strategies included mall tours of CW talent, a user content creation campaign where potential viewers submitted photographs that might lead to 15 second on-air spots featuring the viewers and previewing selected premiere episodes on MSN.com the week before they ran on air (Lisotta 2006).

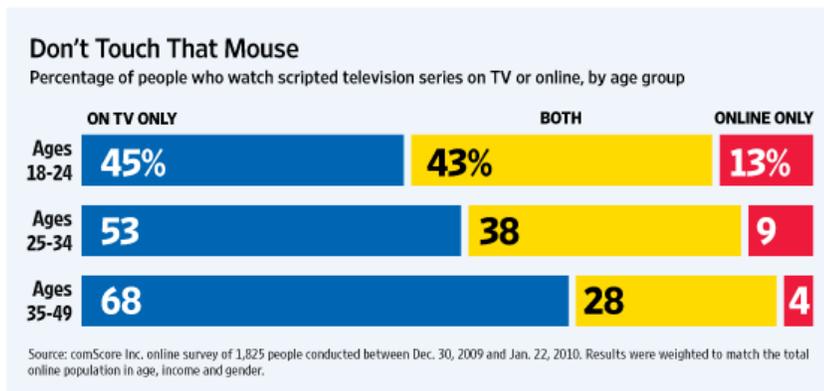
Since that launch, online streaming has moved from a promotional sneak peek gimmick to one of the central components of the CW's entertainment delivery efforts. The CW Network no longer limits streaming video to selected premiere episodes that are hosted on a partner company's website. In addition to the traditional broadcast model, CWTV makes its programming available online 3 days after the initial broadcast. According to Caty Burgess, advertising is sold for these streams at the same time as the national advertising is sold for the initial airing of the episodes (personal interview October 13, 2010). Dennis Dort, vice president legal for CW Network LLC, explained that the 3 day delay between broadcast and stream offerings allows the network to get realistic data from Nielsen's "C+3" ratings (personal correspondence November 29, 2010). These ratings measure both those who viewed the programming during its initial airing and those who watched the show on their DVRs within 3 days of the broadcast.

While it could be argued that the "C+3" ratings are a legacy of the older broadcast model, the CW Network benefits more than any other network from DVR+ numbers. During 2009's premiere week, the CW Network had five of the top 10 shows in terms of percentage increase in viewership with DVR ratings. For example, *Supernatural's*

ratings increased by approximately 600,000 viewers when DVR viewers are included (Kubicek 2009). It should also be noted that DVR viewers share some traits with their “internetelevision” counterparts. Their viewing behavior is on their own terms and is provided by a form of information technology. Additionally, the viewing behavior exhibits a deeper viewer commitment than a typical broadcast viewer. DVR viewers have to formally make the decision to record the show and then go back later to watch it. These are the kinds of fans who don’t miss an episode of a show and who aren’t passive watchers and the CW can use these viewers’ commitment to engage them in a community experience (Kubicek 2009).

Though the CW Network experimented early on with pulling its shows from the internet to increase traditional ratings, Dawn Ostroff came to understand that the internet is where the network’s target audience is going more and more often. Ostroff recently told the *Wall Street Journal* “we see more of our viewers are going online. Ultimately, I think it’s going to continue to spread” (Schechner 2010). She’s absolutely correct.

Within the 18-24 age group, 43% use the internet for at least some of its scripted television viewing and 13% strictly view shows on “internetelevision” (Schechner 2010). The trend is similar with the 25-34 age group with 38% watching shows both online and on TV and 9% pure “internetelevision” viewers.



According to InteractiveTV Today, “for CW Network shows... the time shifted audience is now as much as the total audience for some programs,” and internet streaming is second to DVR usage with regard to usage. This trend is likely to continue as products like Google TV become available for mass consumption. GoogleTV is an open platform for content distribution and innovation on Sony TVs that effectively turns televisions into “internetelevisions” (Collete, M 2010).

Viewers of streaming video are more likely to engage in interactive behavior with the shows they are viewing, and according to Caty Burgess the CW Network is looking into ways that it can embed links to iTunes songs or web retailers who sell products featured in the show in real time as viewers watch the episode (personal interview October 12, 2010). Viewers will be able to see a phone that a character is using and after a few clicks buy that model, or they might like a song and with one click of the mouse add it to its iTunes library. This is something that cannot be done when viewers watch the shows on old style televisions.

One of the primary sources of resistance to online streaming has been the fear that online viewers don’t engage with the advertisements streamed along with the programming. Online networks like Hulu use limited advertising during streaming episodes and often repeat the same advertisement. NBC Universal and Fox, two of the partners who own Hulu, sell the online ad space separately from traditional ad space for this exact reason. The CW Network is taking a different approach and straddling the fence a little less these days. The network now sells its online advertising simultaneous with its air time “buys.” It is also taking what is considered by some to be a brave step. “The CW Network is taking a route that other broadcasters have avoided; putting as

many ads in Web versions of its shows as it airs on TV” (Schechner 2010). This means that it will be doubling the number of advertisements airing in its streaming episodes. CW shows will air about “20 30-second commercials an hour” (Schechner 2010), quite a bold move by the network, but it is one that is looking likely to pay off. According to a study run by the CW Network, online fans “watched 95% of the commercials that accompanied streaming of the show to completion and 97% of them to their midpoint. And this is after the CW started this season to run nearly as many ads online as it does on TV” (Steinberg 2010). It appears that online audiences are as willing to view advertisements for free content as other viewers, and this is a positive sign for the network. This trend, combined with the ability to insert links “live,” make the online revenue generating picture look bright for the network’s advertising customers.

Things look bright for its studio customers as well. Episodes of *Gossip Girl* routinely arrive at the number 1 most downloaded spot on iTunes (Pressler 2008). The benefit to the studios likely comes from the network’s aggressive use of social networking sites.

### Social Networking

The CW Network has used information technology not only to promote the intellectual properties of the studios, but it has also engaged in an active effort to create a sense of community for the fans of these properties. CWTV extensively uses social networking to promote its programming. When the network launched, it partnered with MySpace.com and featured video interviews, behind-the-scenes footage, and a competition for music groups that culminated with a guest spot on the CW Network drama *Supernatural* (Lisotta 2006). As the favorite social networking sites of its fan base

have changed, the network has adapted. The CW Network once had a *Gossip Girl* area on Second Life, and The CW Network currently have 20 million fans or likes on Facebook for its programs. One of the ways that it uses these social networking sites is to cross-pollinate interest among shows. For example, when it were preparing to launch the show *Vampire Diaries* last year, it sent messages on Facebook to everyone who was a *One Tree Hill* fan that the new show was “*One Tree Hill* with fangs.”

But the network knows better than to crassly use social networking sites as the internet equivalent of billboards. It uses social networking as a way to meet its goal of building community. For example, according to Katy Burgess, the CW incorporates the use of Twitter to make the "live viewing" experience more intimate. When possible, episodes of CW programming feature simultaneous viewing/tweeting by "talent" involved with the show as the episode is broadcast. This talent might be a screenwriter, director, or actor, and this individual tweets throughout the episode providing a real-time commentary track. Currently, this kind of interaction is limited to the live broadcast of episodes, and primarily timed to coincide with the East Coast broadcast of the episodes, but the concept has great potential if done correctly (personal interview, October 13, 2010). While live tweeting currently does little for the streaming audience, it greatly benefits the local affiliates, who are entirely dependent on live viewing for their revenue. With over half of CW's viewership coming from traditional television viewing, it is still greatly dependent on the affiliates and this is a good way to include them in the process.

The network is savvy about how it uses functions like Twitter. These online networks can get cluttered quickly, so CWTV limits itself to a single network Twitter account used to promote all shows. If fans wish to engage in conversations about CW

Network shows, and don't want the tweets to get lost in the noise, they can visit the CW website's "Lounge" which features tweets discussing its programming at <http://www.cwtv.com/thecw/cwlounge> and the "Watch and Tweet" site at <http://www.cwtv.com/thecw/itweevee>. Or if they are obsessive, the network provides Twitter feeds for show-related talent at <http://www.cwtv.com/thecw/twitter>. The CW Network wants to use these functions to build mass, pushing shows beyond a "tipping point" and into the public consciousness. This is best done from a single jumping point, the CW website and the single Twitter account. Katy Burgess described the average CWTV twitter follower as an extremely active participant who is deeply vested in the programming, and the network is continually working on ways to promote follower activity to increase buzz (personal interview October 13, 2010).

The CW Network has attempted to use social media to create community and engage viewers in other ways as well, with mixed success. In 2006 and 2007, the network teamed up with Sunkist Beverage Company for a user-generated video competition aimed at viewers of its popular *One Tree Hill* program. Contestants were asked to submit 30-second videos through the CW website that explained why their city would make a good setting for an upcoming episode of *One Tree Hill* (itvt 2007). In 2007, viewers from the town of Honey Grove, TX, won the contest and their city of 1,746 was used in the episode with the fans who submitted the video starring in the episode (Futon Critic 2007). This particular marketing effort was successful, but The CW Network's recent attempt to promote its 2010 series *Hellcats* by breaking the Guinness World Record for "Largest Cheerleading Dance" was less successful. The network attempted a two-week marketing campaign to recruit cheerleading squads, fans, and

family to come to Frisco Memorial Stadium in Frisco, TX, to participate in a 5 minute choreographed *Hellcats* dance routine. The network offered a \$4,000 donation to the squad that brought the most participants, and early indications were that the event would be successful. It had 2400 individuals RSVP, far in excess of the 297 in the current world record (Hibberd 2010). The event was done in partnership with the Cheer Channel online cheerleading social network (<http://www.cheerchannel.com/>), and the dance routine was uploaded to YouTube so that groups could practice before the event. When date of the event arrived “a little more than 100 dancers” arrived on the field ranging from “4-year-olds to 30-something moms who hadn’t cheered since high school.” The short time frame of the advertising campaign (participants had only 2 weeks notice) and putting the event on Labor Day weekend on a Saturday at the start of football season affected the number of participants who were actually able to attend (Hacker 2010). Though the event was unsuccessful at breaking the record, it is this kind of event that involves fans in an intellectual property.

### Mobile Phones and Applications

Increasingly the delivery of, and interaction with, narrative shows and entertainment is emerging on an IT format that might not seem like a good fit at first glance: mobile phone technology. Mobile phone technology, in particular “smart phones,” is a huge part of CW Network’s brand building endeavors. Wireless carriers are the network’s primary advertisers, making this a potential tech marriage made in heaven. Where Warner Bros. handles the CW Network’s web duties, designing the website and supplying technical support, CBS is in charge of CW’s mobile distribution.

One of the primary ways that the CW Network uses mobile technology to build brand and promote its shows is through interactive mobile campaigns. In the second season of *Supernatural*, the show included a real phone number during a conversation in one of the episodes. Calling that number began an interaction between fans of the show and the network. It wasn't an extensive campaign, but it opened the door for more involved campaigns for later CW Network programming. Starting in the spring of 2008, *Gossip Girl* hinted that it would be engaging in an SMS text and voice messaging system to alert fans about upcoming events. The show began featuring the text message OMFG as a superimposed image in its web ads and outdoor billboards. It wasn't long before the network provided a number where fans could text the "Gossip Girl" and opt-in to promotional text messages. These messages were particularly clever. They fit within the theme of the show as they presented themselves as text messages "in character" and provided clues to events coming up in the series. According to Caty Burgess, these text messages, which were also supported by voice messaging alerts, would be sent to fans while the episodes aired. The messages could be timed to coincide with commercial breaks, and unlike "live Tweeting," these messages could be delivered by an automated system to ensure that fans received the message on time regardless of time zone. When the fans "opted in," their phone's SIM card transmitted time zone data that was used by the network (personal interview October 13, 2010).

In October 2009, the CW Network teamed up with mobile marketer ChaCha to promote its new teen television drama *The Vampire Diaries*. Starting the week before Halloween, ChaCha began distributing more than two dozen interactive scripts that directed viewers to catch the Halloween episode of the show based on the book series of

the same name by L.J. Smith (Harnick 2009). According to ChaCha, the campaign resulted in a 323% increase in *Vampire Diaries* related questions and served nearly four million text ads during the six-day campaign. Caty Burgess praised the campaign, stating, “The CW Network has some of the most passionate and tech-savvy fans of any. This means we need to fuel their love of our shows on innovative platforms such as ChaCha’s to get our messages out in a highly targeted, effective manner” (ChaCha 2010).

Expanding its smart phone efforts beyond direct SMS and voice campaigns, the CW Network has created a number of iPhone applications in support of its shows. In addition to playful apps for *Hellcats* and *Vampire Diaries*, neither of which is particularly impressive on its own, the network has created two very robust applications. The first is the official CWTV iPhone application. This application features episode clips, photographs, show schedules, streaming versions of recent episodes, and an opportunity to purchase previously aired episodes through iTunes with one touch of the screen. The application also incorporates advertising from CW network advertisers. Unlike the two playful apps, this application is both professional and has long term usefulness to viewers. In 2009, the network partnered with Target stores with the CW City Wize application. This particular app highlighted locations, restaurants, and spas where characters from various CW shows had been “seen” in broadcast episodes. The application allowed viewers to simulate the experience of existing CW characters. It also featured local Target stores as a part of the promotion (Harnick 2009). The application was interesting, but due to the geographic limitations – the featured locations were solely in Los Angeles and New York City – there was limited appeal to a large percentage of CW viewers. Eventually the application was dropped, though I could see something like

this coming up again in the future, even though Caty Burgess expressed some skepticism in using an existing application like Foursquare to simulate the City Wize app.

When the network was promoting its brand new show *Nikita*, it created a scavenger hunt game where individuals could text into “Operation Nikita” locations where they had seen advertisements for the show or images of the title character. The premise of the ad campaign was that the viewers were “hunting” for the title character. The campaign ended with individuals winning iPads or trips to the Spy Museum in Washington, DC for their participation in the program.

One of the advantages that iPhone applications give the network is that the network itself gets full sales information about who is purchasing the applications. It is one of the few chances the network has to see raw data regarding its fans, the other being Facebook interaction. Though the applications are free to “purchase,” the information about the viewer can be useful in designing future advertising campaigns. Surprisingly the data, and the revenue, for episodes sold on iTunes go directly to the studio that filmed the show and none of that revenue or data is seen by the network.

In addition to applications, the network used QR codes for the launch of *Vampire Diaries* when the CW Network promoted the show at the San Diego Comic Con popular culture event. According to Caty Burgess, the promotion was successful, but so far the technology has only limited use as a marketing tool. The same is true of any attempts at creating an Alternate Reality Game (ARG) to promote CW properties. ARGs are deeply immersive for those who participate in them, but they are expensive to implement and have a limited appeal at this point, so the CW hasn’t engaged in these kinds of interactive activities. The first ARG was done in support of the Steven Spielberg film *AI*, and more

recent implementations of ARGs include promotions surrounding the upcoming Disney *Tron: Legacy*.

### Conclusions

As a small actor in a massive industry, the CW Network has to continually adapt to, and adopt, new information technologies in order to create a competitive advantage for the network and to keep up with its young and tech-savvy fan base. As a joint venture of CBS and Warner Bros., the network doesn't always have to be successful in the implementations of IT that it engages in to create brand for the studios. Instead, it can serve as a test laboratory where the best uses and marketing practices leveraging new technologies can be examined for their usefulness and then implemented by the studios' larger network partners. The CW Network is on the front line of an interesting time in the television industry.

Piracy is rampant, and the studios are looking for ways other than legal action to combat the revenue loss that piracy generates. Networks like the CW are testing media and technology that will shape the decisions of other networks. Surprisingly, even though the CW offers all of its programming for free on the internet three days after it airs, its shows are among the top ten most pirated shows according to The Pirate Bay website (Gardner 2010). It's not all doom and gloom though, as the high rate of piracy on CW shows may be a sign that it have succeeded in creating brand in foreign markets, which are currently prevented from watching shows streaming on American based websites due to current industry standards and the licensing fee model. In a way, it is flattering that in a world where most shows have little to no traction in the torrent universe, CW shows are the exception (Gardner 2010).

As the network moves forward, it will continue to air shows targeted at an increasingly tech savvy audience and the ability to create community will be key to its ongoing success. As technology and the way we view television changes, the CW Network will have significant advantages with regard to its ability to promote shows and build audience. One of the most significant signs that this is true is the fact that the CW Network is the only network that airs the same number of ads, and the same ads, on its televised content as it does in its online episodes. While others are scrambling to react to the growing digital viewing environment, the CW is trying to find ways to shape, and take advantage of, viewing habits in the digital future. If viewers continue to be willing to watch full ads while watching interactive programming that allows for more intimate interaction with advertisers, the future of television will be bright indeed, and the other networks will be looking at the CW to say thanks.

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