

Babelgum courts factual indies

With its March 2008 consumer launch looming, broadband TV start-up Babelgum is intent on making its mark against competitors such as Joost, Vuze and even new entrants like Facebook by going after factual and documentary content from small to mid-size independent producers and distributors around the world. Jenn Kuzmyk reports.

You need a lot more than a catchy name to become a player in the present day Wild West of internet TV start-ups; you need content, and lots of it. So like its competitors, Babelgum, which is currently in beta test mode, has been steadily clocking up content agreements and bulk library deals with industry players in order to fill its online coffers.

Set up by Silvio Scaglia, founder of Italian IPTV business FastWeb, Babelgum has already signed with major partners such as IMG-owned sports specialist TWI; ITN for daily news, showbiz and weather feeds; Reuters, which will offer current affairs content; Associated Press, to feature daily news feeds, entertainment and weather content; and BBC Motion Gallery, which will contribute documentaries.

[Valerio Zingarelli -] "We want to have a huge library of content devoted to passions," says Valerio Zingarelli, CEO of Babelgum (left). He notes that although the company will have programming from major players in the TV and film world, content from smaller sources will differentiate the service. "The majors are already present across different platforms, so the viewers and customers have plenty of opportunities to get their content. However, content from the small independent producers is not so common," says Zingarelli.

Indie producers and distributors that have signed up with Babelgum include Journeyman Films and France's Zed for documentaries; Off The Fence for nature docs; **Canada's Rethink Entertainment for fact-ent product**; and 3DD for music content.

Deals have also been sealed with Film Chest, Breakthrough Films and Entertainment Rights, which will offer 'Saturday morning TV' and retro cartoons. The company attracted attention at MipTV in the spring by announcing it would feature Spike Lee's Unicef-commissioned HIV film Jesus Children of America on an exclusive basis for three months. Others offering content include sources such as the Kiteboard Pro World Tour and Ministry of Sound TV, a major UK- based dance music aggregator and distributor.

Much more content is needed, however. "When we start the commercial service in March 2008, we will need to have a huge library of content – at least 50,000 hours," says Zingarelli, noting that out of this about 80%, or 40,000 hours, will have come from indies that have voluntarily uploaded their wares. The remaining 10% will be curated or

sought out directly by Babelgum as it strives to reach an ultimate target of somewhere around 100,000 hours of independent and mainstream content from around the world.

The company concept is to offer video not easily available through traditional platforms – on-demand and free of charge to web users/consumers. The work of established filmmakers and newcomers will be promoted 'side by side' via peer-to-peer technology, a system by which content is broken up into 'packets' and delivered through a network of computers. Competitors such as Joost and Vuze also use this technology, which Babelgum says will "provide the immersive viewing and high resolution of traditional TV with the interactive capabilities of the internet."

Content is searchable by topic or keyword, but Babelgum is also publicising the fact that it will allow people to have personalised content streams programmed as per their own individual interests – something it calls 'smart channels.' The third prong of the offering is the facilitation of communities, allowing people of similar interests worldwide to converse about their passions.

Zingarelli pushes the fact that producers can use automatic upload tools to offer their content via Babelgum. "We will sign contracts with these producers but since we need a huge library that has to be refreshed very frequently, we cannot analyse each single minute of content. We will just have a framework contract describing the types of content we want, and then it is up to the producer to load their content through automatic upload and refresh it frequently according to the contract," he explains. But why would an indie do this – offer their content to the world online? What is the monetary return?

"In certain situations we will have a guaranteed payment, which for the small producer is very interesting," says Zingarelli, adding that the 'minimum guarantee' is applied against future revenues.

The main business model will work through revenue sharing from advertising, however. Essentially, because of the searchable nature of the content database, targeted ads can be aligned with specific topics and interests. Revenue will be counted according to the number of views, so niche content that is made available to global users could conceivably do very well if there is an appetite for it internationally.

While he wouldn't disclose specific numbers or deals with advertisers, Zingarelli said: "We are already receiving a lot of interest from advertising companies about this type of approach because they understand that through these innovative platforms it is possible to personalise the advertising." The goal is to start gleaning revenue from advertising in March 2008, at the time of the service's commercial launch.

For a major property that can make some noise, the company may want short-term exclusivity, a couple of weeks or months, but generally Babelgum's policy is to work on a non-exclusive basis. "On the web it is really difficult to talk about exclusivity and building fences around your content because these barriers are so easily overcome," says Zingarelli.

The company also plans to reach out to humanitarian and environmental organisations. "We want it to also be a platform for organisations like Unicef or the United Nations or Greenpeace," says Zingarelli. "We will give the platform to these organisations according to their strategy, content, initiatives and activities, and they will also get their money from advertising," he says, adding that Babelgum will not share in the ad proceeds.

The Babelgum banner will also be flown at film festivals around the world in the coming year, says Zingarelli. It recently agreed with the Soho Film Festival in London and the Giffoni Film Festival on content deals, and plans to host a Babelgum film festival online. According to Zingarelli, the service saw a 100% spike in its users after aligning with the Soho fest, with numbers immediately growing from 25,000 beta testers to 50,000 viewers.

Meanwhile, in the long term, original content commissioning is on the horizon. "We will facilitate specific production, perhaps if we think there is something missing within a particular topic," says Zingarelli, noting that commissions are likely to be tied to Babelgum branded events.

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