

This article was printed from Animation World Magazine.

Visit this article online at ([http://mag.awn.com/?article\\_no=2936](http://mag.awn.com/?article_no=2936))

[Show Images](#) | [Print](#) | [Close Window](#)

## Licensing 2006 International: Exploring Alternative Distribution

Entertainment licensors increasingly look at alternative means, such as blogs, iPods or mobile devices, to create and maintain awareness and boost demand for licensed goods. This was one of the notable trends at this year's licensing show.

Many of the entertainment companies attending and exhibiting at Licensing International 2006 — the annual trade show held this year at New York's Javits Center, June 20 to 22 — had alternative modes of distribution on their minds. In the recent past, television was almost a necessity for an animated property to become licensable. But now animation studios and other property owners are looking at everything from mobile to broadband distribution as they try to jumpstart awareness and, ultimately, create demand for products.

"You're never launching a TV show, you're launching a property," says Malcolm Bird, AOL's svp/gm, kids and teens, who was a panelist in a seminar called, "What a Difference a Year Makes: Podcasts, Blogging, Mobile Video, Digi-Content & Other Things You Really Need to Know."

"There is a culture change happening," Bird adds. "It's not only about the platforms, it's also about what they can do for you." He notes that AOL's *Princess Natasha*, a webisodic series on the service's KOL kids channel, attracts two to three million unique viewers per episode, compared to 600,000 to 700,000 for the TV version that airs on Cartoon Network. (A series on the preschool channel KOL Jr., *Pilar's Adventures*, gets 250,000 views a week after just four weeks online and no TV exposure.) In addition, KOL viewers are able to interact with the property, play games based on it, and watch episodes repeatedly, all adding to children's experience and building their loyalty.

Still, TV remains a key means of building exposure. The number of unique users at *princessnatasha.com*, for example, went from 3,000 to 586,000 in one week after the *Princess Natasha* show debuted on Cartoon Network. And, during Licensing 2006, AOL and DIC announced a partnership for a programming block called "KOL's Saturday Morning Secret Slumber Party on CBS," which will include online and on-air co-production initiatives. "TV is and always will be important," Bird comments. "But we're in a multiplatform world."

### Multimedia Offerings

Podcasts are another area of interest for licensors looking to establish their properties. A preschool podcast named the *Wubbcast*, tied to an upcoming Nick Jr. show, *Wow! Wow! Wubbzy*, had generated more than 100,000 free downloads through iTunes by the time of the panel, prior to any TV exposure. This according to Fred Seibert, president and executive producer at Frederator Inc. and partner in Bolder Media for Boys & Girls, a preschool property development company. Seibert co-produces the show with Susan Miller, his partner in Bolder Media and president and founder of Mixed Media Group, who chaired the panel. The show will premiere on Nick Jr. this summer; Nickelodeon announced during the show that it would preview *Wubbzy* and other Nick Jr. shows on multiple platforms, including broadband and podcasts.

Two of Frederator's other free weekly podcasts, Channel Frederator, which features new animation shorts, and ReFrederator, which consists of classic cartoons, each generates about 100,000 downloads a week, according to Seibert.

He points out that alternative channels, such as podcasts and broadband distribution, have created a level playing field for independent producers. The major studios and distributors may have bigger pockets, but independent players have the advantage of speed and innovation, which can be more important in alternative environments. "There is no boundary between what you can do and what they can do," Seibert says.

On the show floor, several property owners large and small touted their own alternative and multimedia deals. Artist Nancy Wolff recently completed an original mini-pilot, *All Aboard*, for Nickelodeon. It is was one of three Nick Jr. series to roll out throughout the month of June, first on wireless, then on broadband, then on Nick Jr. as an interstitial. Wolff met Nickelodeon execs at a previous licensing show, which led to her creating new characters and a storyline for the pilot, which was incubated through Nick Jr.'s creative lab, the Institute of Applied Play. If the mini-pilots prove popular in these channels, they may be developed further for ongoing TV series.

The Crazy Pet Co., which exhibited at the booth of its agent, Dimensional Branding Group, announced a partnership for its property Crazy Pets with content packager Triple Take Media. The two will develop 52 humorous, one-minute mini-episodes, each focusing on a pet care tip. The partners plan to secure distribution for the animated shorts through cell phones, iPods, Internet TV, streaming video and PDAs, as well as on traditional television, starting in 2007.

Manga and anime specialist VIZ Media will introduce a handful of new Japanese properties to U.S. consumers through Toonami Jetstream, a broadband entertainment channel overseen by VIZ and its partner Cartoon Network. The VIZ properties to debut on this channel — the first to go the broadband route initially, rather than premiering on television — include *Hikaru No Go*, *MÁR*, and *The Prince of Tennis*.

Another way for animators and other property owners to generate awareness online is through weblogs, better known as blogs. Seibert says Bob Boyle, the creator and writer of

*Wubbsy!*, started a blog about the show and the creative process behind it. Within two weeks, he had 3,000 regular readers. Blogs' readership grows primarily due to word of mouth, and therefore is a good indication of grassroots interest behind a property, which is often an indication of future mainstream success.

In response to a question about how to monetize content on the Web, Seibert said Frederator's initiatives — which are not ad-supported and are offered free to subscribers — are about generating awareness and learning about these new channels, not directly about making money. "To me, the web is the first step to making my thing more popular," he explained. Once a property gains a following online, the creator, armed with a track record, can bring it to a network and eventually generate revenues through traditional media.

Meanwhile, a web presence can indicate licensing or entertainment potential for underground or long-gone animated series that have never been marketed or have been off the radar for a while. In an off-site presentation to relaunch *Biker Mice From Mars*, an animated series that originally debuted in 1993, Criterion Licensing cited the property's popularity on blogs and MySpace as an indication of its continued strength among core fans. Criterion plans a U.S. TV launch in 2007; *Biker Mice* also will be available through mobile downloads and online video on demand.

Some mobile- and online-origin properties have generated enough awareness to warrant licensed merchandise, although this situation is still rare. AOL has signed 22 licensees for *Princess Natasha*, and was exhibiting several of its other properties on the show floor. Meanwhile, licensing agent Al Ovadia & Assoc. represented The Annoying Thing, a.k.a Crazy Frog, a British wireless property that has spurred several bestselling music albums, along with music videos that air on Cartoon Network in the U.S.

### **Multicultural Properties**

Several licensors and agents at Licensing 2006 International highlighted properties with multicultural themes or characters that appeal to certain ethnic groups. These follow in the footsteps of recent licenses such as Nick Jr.'s *Dora the Explorer*, Scholastic's *Maya & Miguel* and MGA Ent.'s *Bratz* and *L'il Bratz*.

In particular, exhibitors were interested in reaching the growing U.S. Hispanic market. United Media, for instance, represents *El Chavo* in the U.S. on behalf of Mexican television company Televisa. A 35-year-old live-action sitcom that later engendered an animated series, the property is well-known among the Latin community in the U.S. It has signed a number of promotional partners, including Kellogg's, as well as licensees for apparel, stationery, men's and boys' sleepwear, backpacks, headwear, coloring books and bedding. Products roll out in fall 2006 and spring 2007.

Al Ovadia & Assoc. was selling licenses for *Huevocartoon*, a Mexican Flash website that premiered in January 2002 and is billed as Latin America's top entertainment destination site. It attracts as many as 9 million unique visitors a month, 30% of whom are from the U.S. A *Huevocartoon* series launched on Telemundo's cable network, mun2, in 2005. The target age for licensed merchandise is 12 to 24.

Agency Moxie & Co. represents *La Cucaracha*, a United Press Syndicate comic strip that appears in newspapers in L.A., Chicago, Houston, Dallas, Detroit and other cities with significant Hispanic populations. A book will launch this year, and products will be geared to Latino teens, tweens and young adults, mostly in urban and suburban markets.

Licensing 2006 featured a handful of properties for the African-American market as well. They included *Thug A Boo*, an animated property from Wayans Bros. Ent. The series of DVDs and TV specials, which the three Wayans brothers are writing, producing and voicing, will air on Nickelodeon; announced licensees include Playmates, Betesh Group and Scholastic.

### **An International Perspective**

As has been the case increasingly over the last several years, there was a large contingent of international licensors and agents at the show, many of which exhibited animated properties. In the past few years, the highest-profile group consisted of Asian manga and anime property owners, but that was not the case this year. Several Asian companies were present, however; they included Toei Animation, Geneon/Pioneer and Japanese-owned VIZ, as well as pavilions for licensors from Taiwan and Korea, respectively.

European studios and agents included Entertainment Rights, which focused its attention on *Postman Pat*, a property it was debuting as a license to the U.S. market. The *Postman Pat* animated series airs on HBO Family. Entertainment Rights has forged a promotional partnership with the U.S. Postal Service, featuring initiatives that include educational outreach and a presence at stamp-collecting conventions.

Another British property hoping to make a splash in the U.S. is Chorion's *Noddy*, represented at the show by U.S. agent FUNimation. Noddy merchandise will begin to launch in the U.S. market this fall, rolling out through spring 2007. Like *Postman Pat*, the property is long-established overseas, with more than 80 licensees manufacturing and marketing 400 different products. Global retail sales of merchandise have exceeded \$120 million. PBS Kids is the U.S. broadcast partner for the television series *Make Way for Noddy*.

Jetix Europe introduced *Yin Yang Yo!*, an original co-production between Jetix Europe and sister company Walt Disney Television Animation. It will air on all Jetix networks worldwide. Jetix Europe also touted a deal with Breakthrough Ent. and Heroic Film for *Captain Flamingo*, a TV Canada original consisting of 52 11-minute episodes.

Other European companies with a presence at the show included Granada Ventures with *Pocoyo*, BRB Internacional (via Al Ovadia & Assoc.) with *Khudayana* and *Bernard*, TV France, HIT Ent., BBC Worldwide and Filmax/Radio Television España (RTE).

### **Going Goth**

Goth properties, mainly for teen and tween girls, have had a presence at the show for several years, led by licenses such as Comic Debris' *Emily Strange* and Mighty Fine's *Ruby Gloom*. With the mainstreaming of Goth images in fashion and entertainment, there were over a dozen such properties showcased at Licensing 2006. Most were positioned as slightly "edgy" but cute and humorous at the same time. They tend to come from the world of art and design, but they often have a presence in, or plans for, other media and entertainment

exposure, including in publishing, interactive games and animation.

Some of the many examples of Goth licenses at the show included American Greetings' *Pretty Freekin Scary*; HIP Designs' *Bad Alice*, represented by The Joester-Loria Group; Applehead Factory's *Teddy Scares*; Jim Benton's *Sweetypuss*, represented by COP Corp.; Star Farm Productions' *Edgar & Ellen*, which has a Simon & Schuster book series and an upcoming TV series on Nicktoons Network; *Skelanimals*, represented by Art Impressions; the Japanese character *Hestia*; and *Death Jr.*, the Backbone Ent. game published by Konami, represented by Quattro Licensing.

### Studios Stress Animation

Animation properties, particularly films, were among the most visible at the major U.S. studios' and agents' booths. "[Licensed products] are so important in helping us establish the characters," says Jerry Schmitz, vp marketing at Sony Pictures Animation. "The people at Sony Pictures Consumer Products are great at translating our animated films into products. It's a huge collaboration between the designers here and the designers at Sony Imageworks and Sony Pictures Animation."

SPCP was exhibiting merchandise tied to *Open Season*, Sony Pictures Animation's first feature, and previewing *Surf's Up*, SPA's second release, scheduled for next year. It also was highlighting *It's a Big, Big World*, a preschool TV series combining puppetry, CGI and animatronics in a style called Shadowmation, for which it recently signed Fisher-Price as its master toy licensee.

Disney focused on its new *Disney Fairies* franchise, particularly the direct-to-video production *Tinker Bell and the Ring of Belief*, for which Brittany Murphy was announced as the voice of Tinker Bell; the film will mark the first time the character has spoken. CG animation will be produced by DisneyToon Studios and Walt Disney Home Ent.

Disney Consumer Products' chairman Andy Mooney announced in a speech for the press that retail sales of merchandise from his division would reach \$23 billion in 2006, up 10% from 2005. The *Disney Princesses* franchise, which skews toward a slightly younger girl than *Fairies*, accounts for \$3.4 billion, or 15%, of the total, with sales up 15% from 2005 levels.

Universal was promoting its long-running direct-to-video franchise *The Land Before Time* — more than 60 million units have sold in 17 years — which will premiere as an episodic TV series on Cartoon Network in 2007. Two additional DVD titles will come out in the next two years as well; there have been 11 installments so far. Universal also previewed two upcoming animated film properties based on books, namely *Coraline* by Neil Gaiman and *Tale of Despereaux* by Kate DiCamillo.

At the Warner Bros. Consumer Products booth, the main focus was Tweety. WBSP announced a line of fashion apparel and accessories for tweens designed by celebrity Nicky Hilton, among other initiatives. Meanwhile, upcoming Warner films that will have significant licensing programs include the animated feature *Where the Wild Things Are*, based on Maurice Sendak's classic children's book, as well as the next *Harry Potter* movie.

MGM highlighted *Team Galaxy*, Marathon's male-skewing follow-up to *Totally Spies*. MGM announced it was representing the property in North America and that Bandai has been named the master toy licensee. MGM also recently took on licensing responsibilities for the *Highlander* franchise, which is adding an anime version to its extensive roster of film and television productions, and *Storm Hawks*, an animated property for boys 6-12 that will debut on Cartoon Network and YTV in 2007, followed by a merchandise roll-out in 2008.

United Media was commemorating the 40th anniversary of *It's the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown*. It has signed several licensees and retail partners for the event, including HarperCollins, Sababa and Kroger, and planned an essay contest on Snoopy.com as part of the promotional activity surrounding the birthday.

At Pokémon USA, the focus was on the 10th anniversary of that property, which has generated more than \$25 billion in retail sales worldwide, according to the company. Several Pokémon entertainment initiatives are in preparation, including several new videogames, a TV special, the eighth *Pokémon* feature film (this time for direct-to-DVD release), an expansion of publishing, and a mobile phone program. The property's new master toy licensee is Jakks Pacific and its new television partner is Cartoon Network.

Nickelodeon & Viacom Consumer Products took note of the 10th anniversary season of *South Park*, for which it plans new and refreshed merchandise including collectible figures, plush, apparel and home décor. The release of the anniversary products will be timed to an on-air event in September. Another studio, DreamWorks, showcased several upcoming animated features, including *Shrek the Third* and *Bee Movie* (both set for 2007 release), as well as *Kung Fu Panda* (2008).

DIC Ent. showcased *Horseland*, an animated series based on a website. It was one of several properties at the show aiming for the tween market.

*Karen Raugust is a Minneapolis-based freelance business writer specializing in animation, publishing, licensing and art. She is the author of The Licensing Business Handbook (EPM Communications).*

---

© 1996 - 2006 AWN, Inc. All rights reserved.

No part of this article may be reproduced without the written consent of AWN, Inc.