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## Major Agency Shops For Talent Online

But filmmakers, not actors, will be UTA's top priority.

February 08, 2007

By **ANDREW SALOMON**

This time last year, Chris Hampel was just another writer-director trying to establish himself in L.A. As the personal assistant to Michael Mann, he had a better chance than most to cultivate contacts; but for Hampel, it has always been the work that mattered.

So after Mann was finished with Miami Vice last spring, Hampel amicably left his position with the director to join four of his friends in making Sam Has 7 Friends, an 80-part online series of 90-second shorts that detail the life and death of a young actor in L.A.

It was a hit, attracting 2 million total viewers over several websites, including YouTube, Revver.com, and its own site, [www.samhas7friends.com](http://www.samhas7friends.com). Among those viewers were agents at United Talent Agency, a top-five firm that represents some of the biggest names in the industry, including Johnny Depp, Ben Stiller, David Chase, and Dick Wolf.

In October, before the series finished its run, the five filmmakers were signed by UTA Online, the agency's new division devoted exclusively to Web-based artists and their content. In addition to having a small cadre of agents scouring cyberspace for new-media talent, the firm announced in mid-January it will launch a website within the next two weeks that will allow anyone to submit online work.

This does not mean, however, that one of Hollywood's most exclusive agencies will suddenly represent anyone with a camera, a computer, and a dream. Brent Weinstein, the head of UTA Online, wants to help establish the Web as its own legitimate medium, one that has both creative and financial merit. The agency, for example, isn't about to sign that guy on YouTube who puts golf balls in a blender.

As Weinstein said, "99.99999 percent of the content that's on the Web isn't any good. Even the stuff that is good or at least popular, the person behind it doesn't have the ambition or the skill set that's going to lead to a long, sustained career in entertainment."

And though actors such as Jessica Lee Rose (aka "lonelygirl15") have achieved international recognition via the Web, they will not be UTA Online's top priority.

"The division was started for us to recognize that there are a lot of original, fantastic voices coming up on the Internet," Weinstein said. "The original voices we're talking about are more about content creators than actors. In some cases the people who create the content may also appear in it, and that's fantastic.... What we're really focused on is identifying people who are developing new content."

In that regard, Weinstein's vision is perfectly aligned with Hampel and his collaborators—Douglas Cheney, Chris McCaleb, Ryan Wise, and Marcus Blakely—whose production company is called Big Fantastic.

"When we started Sam Has 7 Friends, we wanted to legitimize the Internet medium," Hampel said. "We wanted it to be taken seriously as a form of



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entertainment, not just to use it as a calling card and to get noticed."

Among the top 10 agencies in Hollywood, UTA has been the most aggressive in trying to help establish the Web as an entertainment medium that can consistently generate money, rather than using it as just a marketing tool for film and television. Firms such as Creative Artists Agency, International Creative Management, William Morris, and Endeavor have launched online initiatives to varying degrees over the past several years—according to a report in *The New York Times*, ICM and Endeavor are also aggressively pursuing Web talent—but none has taken such overt steps as UTA in recognizing the Web as a medium in its own right.

With more ad dollars going to the Web every day—a recent report on *BusinessWeek.com* put overall ad growth at 7.7 percent and online ad growth at 28.8 percent annually—it would seem to be an obvious move. But in a town where no one wants to be first and everyone wants to be second, the rest of Hollywood isn't exactly following UTA's lead—yet.

For example, the agency has set up several meetings between Big Fantastic and studio executives. The overwhelming refrain from the executives has been, Hampel said, "Come see us next year," meaning 2008.

"Some of the [responses] we can excuse as polite dismissals," he added. "But a lot of people [at the studios] get it, and they're serious and enthusiastic."

In the world of Web-video developments, however, a year can seem like a decade. The best example is the progression of YouTube: This time last year, three months after its official launch, the website got into a dustup with NBC over the posting of a pirated Saturday Night Live sketch, "Lazy Sunday." Four months later, YouTube signed an agreement with the network to broadcast NBC content, a move that gave the site the legitimacy of traditional media. By the end of October, when UTA announced its online division, Google had purchased YouTube for \$1.65 billion.

Weinstein acknowledged the breakneck pace of Web-video development in an interview with *The New York Times*, when he remarked about the field, "In the old days, i.e., two months ago..." As a result, actors can feel whipsawed by the changes, unsure about the best way to pursue their careers and get signed by a major talent agency.

"I'm at a crossroads as to what the hell should I be doing," said Karl Jacob, an actor who lives in Queens. "Should I be going to Equity to hang out and going to open calls, or should I be sitting down to work on a script that is shot and put on the Web and nothing else happens to it? I'm trying to figure out how to allocate the time. I'm in the middle of editing something right now, in fact. I gotta weigh the options."

Other artists have taken a more methodical approach. Like Hampel, Joe Swanberg created an online serial, *Young American Bodies* ([www.youngamericanbodies.com](http://www.youngamericanbodies.com)), a 12-part rumination about 20-somethings in Chicago that debuted on the Web last year. He is about to begin filming a second season (which will include Jacob). Swanberg estimated that about 600,000 people viewed the episodes, superlative numbers in the online world. But he's not in any hurry to post his offerings on UTA Online's new site.

"I don't have an agent, and I'm not actively seeking representation at this point," said Swanberg, who also acts in the series. "It hasn't been too appealing to me right now. I've been able to do the work I want to do on my own.... I'm in Chicago and off the radar a little bit and able to work at my own pace right now."


For Hampel, however, having UTA agents on his side is a potential boon, and not just for the possibility of making a nice living doing what he loves. "They will help us bridge the gap between the Internet and Hollywood," he said. "If we get a little Hollywood money, we can bring professional quality storytelling to the Internet." <

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