

THE ACTOR'S RESOURCE

BACKSTAGE

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SPOTLIGHT ON SOCIAL NETWORKING

LINKED IN

How actors are using social networking and self-promotional tools online

By Laura A. Butler

"You need to use the Internet to have any career at all," says actor **David Blue**, who plays the recurring role of Cliff, Marc St. James' (Michael Urie) love interest on *Ugly Betty*. What was once the domain of paper and ink now fills cyberspace. Casting has gone from the hand-to-stack exercise of sorting through headshots to the click-and-scroll of digital images and videos. And in direct response, actors are turning to the Internet for support, social networking, and self-promotion. They are creating new roles for themselves: that of a "cyber self." Blue uses his **MySpace** page combo-style — personally and professionally. "MySpace has acted as a site where fans and people interested in keeping up with me can hear what's happening on a regular basis," he says.



Actor and comedian **Jason Stuart**, who played the recurring role of Dr. Steven Michael Thomas on *My Wife and Kids* and co-stars in the independent films *Coffee Date* and *10 Attitudes*, heeded Web advice back in 1994. "I was in Texas doing a standup show at the Laugh Stop," Stuart recalls. "And the promotions director of the show said, 'You must have a website,' and I said, 'I don't even have a computer.' He said, 'You should buy your name and own your domain.' Right then and there, he talked me into it. My website became

a tool of, No. 1, having a place where people could find me and, No. 2, a place where I could house photos and have a virtual demo reel. Back when I first had my site, I used to have a friend send me an email just so I'd get something. Now I get hundreds of emails from fans. It's crazy."

Of course, the Internet has become a solid resource for the actor. Well-known subscription-based websites, such as BackStage.com and Actors Access, are considered must-haves. Websites for acting schools, coaches, and representation, as well as sites for diction lessons or relocating to a major acting market, have been bookmarked as actor favorites for years. For the generation submersed in the Internet and captivated with online and offline role-playing games that require a good degree of imagination, creating the new role of cyber self is not a stretch.

Australian-born director Adrian Carr (www.tallordersproductions.com) teaches on-camera technique for Boldi, Cardwell, and Carr in **Los Angeles**. He preps students on how to create a cyber presence and make the Web work for them. "To begin, websites like Back Stage, Actors Access, Now Casting — they are all valuable tools. Get your headshot up," he suggests. "When you understand how the system works, it is to your advantage to have videotape, because on most of these sites, there's a little icon by your name that says something like 'got video' that will sort you to the top. However, you better make sure that video is good."

Market Value

MySpace, considered by most the original social-networking site for teens and college students, recognized the promotional potential of its site early on and expanded to include what are in essence self-marketing content areas like music and film. L.A.-based actor-writer **Nate Barlow** quickly made the most of the site's broad exposure. "I've never viewed any of these pages as existing for 'social' purposes," he says. "To me, they've always been for marketing only. I keep the content related almost exclusively to career-building materials, and the friend requests I make are to people who would be good to know from a business standpoint, whether that be producers, agents, or other actors." Recently, MySpace also announced the launch of its new MySpace MyAds service, described as "an easy, inexpensive way to promote yourself, your band, or your business on MySpace," in an effort to capitalize on the existing trend.

Looking for out-of-the-box ways to connect with producers, casting directors, managers, and agents, savvy actors began hunting through the

pages of MySpace and Facebook for connections in common. On the hiring side — particularly in commercials — casting associates, casting assistants, and producers started browsing MySpace and Facebook in search of a certain type or a fresh face.

As the number of actors online grows, popular sites add more bells and whistles: tools and templates that allow for multiple headshots, demo reels, and résumés; virtual studios for casting directors. "[The Internet] has really revolutionized the way casting is done," says L.A.-based commercial casting director **Stuart Stone**. "You can prep and cast a job from anywhere. It also allows people that don't have agents to get online, be recognized, and submit themselves."

Stone trolls the networking and acting sites for new talent. "Your pictures say a lot; they are your calling card," he says. But he cautions, "The problem is, many people have too much up on the Web, and too much can get you deselected," specifically referring to actors who clutter their sites with dozens of pictures.

Site Specific

"First, I took a weeklong vacation to come out to Los Angeles to get an idea of where would be a good place to live, what would fit," shares Rhode Island transplant and aspiring actor **Jessica Gardner** (www.jessicagardner.com). "A friend also recommended doing research online, some websites, like Back Stage, Now Casting, and Actors Access. Then I bought the Judy Kerr book *Acting Is Everything: An Actor's Guidebook for a Successful Career in Los Angeles*. That thing became my bible. I read it cover to cover before I got here." The enthusiastic Gardner then contacted Kerr. They met, and Kerr eventually acted as her mentor — something Gardner credits with giving her a head's up on what CDs, agents, managers, and producers were looking for and how to actively self-promote on the Internet.

For the über-organized Gardner, the pursuit of work is a structured business. She breaks days down into sections: searching through online casting notices, submitting to appropriate projects, following up on things she has in the pipeline, and checking in with her representation. Dedicated and passionate, Gardner continues to submit herself for auditions even though she has a pair of agents and a manager, because "you still have to do that for yourself," she says.

She adds, "I update my website with what's going on with me. It's definitely a great social-networking tool. You move to Los Angeles and you're taking classes and you're meeting people, other actors or casting people, and they ask for a card or headshot, and you can direct them to your website."

"I first set up my personal website in 2002," says Barlow. "It wasn't a great website by any means. I was only just learning the basics of Web design, but since not every actor had a site back then, it was great publicity. I was cast in two films — *Creatures of Hollywood* and *Pie2K* — straight off the first reel that I posted on my site. I never even auditioned for the role. I continually redesign and re-create my site to keep it fresh and visually interesting. I also post career updates both on my personal site and on all my social-networking pages, to make sure that they pass as many eyes as possible."

Next Wave

Several alternative websites for actors and other artists have sprung up recently, including IMPnow.com, the stated purpose of which is "to empower aspiring artists and promote their work, while providing the necessary tools to help them turn their artistic passions into careers." Founded in 2007, IMPnow currently boasts an online community of more than 4,000 members. IMPnow says it hopes to reach actors and others "wanting to connect with each other and learn from one another." With the well-known YouTube, FunnyOrDie, and Atom.com sites often serving as amateur demo-reel theatres, IMPnow considers itself a more professionally crafted alternative. Romain Rousseau, its chief of operations, says, "The audience we have on our site is composed of real artists and art professionals. That's what makes the difference."

IMPnow has streamlined search options and categorized member uploads. Its member-portfolio service is free. Member-page format is uncomplicated and user-friendly, divided into information and portfolio areas that can handle multiple headshots and video streams for actors, as well as an area for people connections. There are basic how-to interviews on technique and expert tutorial videos in a separate section. Support among actors appears to be a running theme as well; critique and other feedback areas offer genuine, helpful advice.

The social- and professional-networking website LinkedIn.com capitalizes on the six-degrees-of-separation concept of who is linked to whom. For actors,

LinkedIn can serve as rich resource when looking for an edge in the audition process or tracking down a possible "in" for a role. You can upload a photo along with a résumé or curriculum vitae. Sign-up is free, but there is a fee to view most of the important branches of the LinkedIn tree. And you need to be discreet. Repeated attempts to contact people not interested in linking to you can get you booted off the system. When you register, you'll also see a disclaimer about usage.

From Facebook to Faceless

For as much success as Blue has enjoyed, and as much fan and friend traffic his MySpace page garners, he says he strongly believes there are limitations to what an actor can accomplish online. "Living far away from where the auditions are will always be a hindrance no matter what you do," he says. "Can you, every once in a while, send in a self-taped audition? Sure. Will it get you anywhere? Maybe, if you're incredibly lucky. But if you are pursuing this career, there's a certain level of commitment, location-specific, that you need to be willing to dedicate."

Carr agrees. "For an actor, it's still getting to the places to be seen, and I don't think the Internet is that place. It's still a people business," says the director. "You can't convey your personality on MySpace. The computer has a lot to answer for and has a lot of advantages, but to a degree it's faceless and behind closed doors. You can't tell when people are lying. In person, you can still look people in the eye and recognize if they're genuine. There's still a lot to be said for good old contact."

There are also privacy concerns. Says Blue, "I posted a blog for my friends only, after being mugged, very close to when Ugly Betty started airing. I had no idea that so many people would copy and paste that blog, and the next thing you know, it's on all the gossip sites. I just wanted to vent, tell my friends what happened. It was then I realized I need to not be completely open with everything and keep my personal life separate."

For Stuart, Barlow, and Gardner, however, the creation and promotion of the cyber self has been nothing but extremely positive. Says Stuart, "Fourteen years later, my Web presence still continues to work for me. I'm on Facebook, MySpace, and LinkedIn, and basically the people just come to me."

Barlow says, "My most recent Web promotion success came in the form of a

call from a manager seeking new clients. The call came completely out of the blue. The manager had found my materials online — whether from my personal website or from a social-networking site, he couldn't remember. And from that manager I quickly landed a new agent too. I've been very fortunate; nothing bad has happened to me either socially or careerwise from my Internet promotion. I attribute that to a combination of very good luck and careful control of exactly what I present about myself."

Gardner was cast in the *It Is Written: Mother's Day Special* television program directly from an Internet submission. She continues to build strong professional and personal contacts from her website and her MySpace page. "Online, whatever group you are in, if it's a school site, a social-networking site, or an Oprah's Book Club, it doesn't matter," says Gardner. "Everyone should know you're an actor."