

## Screen Test

**Venice agency's TV series for Red Bull is an example of the new role firms play in entertainment production.**



Photo by [Ringo Chiu](#)

Partner Scott Harris, who supervised TV series ‘On the Wings of Glory,’ at the ad firm’s Venice office.

By [Joel Russell](#)

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The marketing executives at Red Bull had an assignment: make a TV series that’s entertaining, not a half-hour infomercial.

Mistress Creative, an advertising agency in Venice, answered the call and produced a show based on outdoor events the energy drink company staged in cities across the country. The five-episode series is airing nationally on Fox Sports Network.

The show, titled “On the Wings of Glory,” illustrates a trend: ad agencies producing TV shows.

Indeed, Red Bull isn’t the only brand pushing its ad shop into show business. TBWA/Chiat/Day in Playa del Rey produced a Web series that moved to cable TV for its client, Gatorade, for example.

Mistress’ “On the Wings of Glory” is based on four outdoor contests at harbors or on rivers that Red Bull staged across the country called Flugtag, or “flying day” in German. At these events, teams built ridiculous “flying” crafts and then tried to launch them off a flight deck – a pier or a

barge – only to crash into the water. The events promoted the brand’s tagline: “Red Bull Gives You Wings.”

Last year, Red Bull hired 5th House Productions in Santa Monica to film behind-the-scenes footage of the Flugtags. The beverage maker then turned the footage over to Mistress Creative and asked the agency to turn it into a TV show.

“We proposed adding a scripted comedic aspect to ensure the show was as fresh and crazy as the event itself,” said Scott Harris, the Mistress partner who supervised the series.

Mistress came up with the name of the show, wrote the script, cast comic Bert Kreischer as host, supervised editing, and produced all the promotions for TV and online.

Red Bull executives, who handled the arrangements to air it on Fox, did not return calls for this article.

Fox sells commercial time for the show to other advertisers. In the program, the Red Bull logo appears on helmets of the Flugtag team members and on the 30-foot flight deck. However, the script does not mention the Red Bull product or brand.

Rob Frankel, a brand consultant in Encino and author of the book “The Revenge of Brand X,” said agencies are looking for nontraditional ways to reach consumers, including making their own shows. But those nontraditional methods may not be as effective as traditional advertising.

“If you give a brand 30 seconds, it should state its case and sell the product,” Frankel said.

Harris countered that the current TV market with hundreds of channels demands a more subtle approach.

“Whether the program comes from a commercial network, a cable channel or an advertiser, if the content isn’t compelling, no one will watch it,” he said.

TBWACHiatDay produced an Internet documentary called “Replay” for Gatorade that evolved into a TV series.

The original documentary reassembled the teams for a rematch of a controversial high school football championship game played 15 years earlier. The film proved so popular it was later aired on Fox Sports Network in January. TBWA followed up with another show about a hockey title in Detroit, and is now presenting a basketball story.

Another example is Santa Monica ad agency RPA, which made a series of short films for the Internet on behalf of Honda called “Power of Dreams.” The final installment of the series will debut on TV during “Great Migrations,” a miniseries on the National Geographic Channel that Honda will sponsor.

Mistress Creative is set to produce another show for ESPN, a unit of Walt Disney Co. in Burbank. The as-yet-unnamed series will showcase stories from non-U.S. countries to promote ESPN viewership in those markets.

### **Only in L.A.?**

The trend is a 21st century version of the way TV operated in its early days.

Frankel said in the 1950s, many large agencies had in-house production departments to develop shows. Their most famous creation was the daytime melodramas for Procter & Gamble, which came to be called “soap operas.”

Agency production departments declined as TV time grew more expensive; 30-second ads became the conventional marketing tool. But in recent years, new technology has dramatically lowered the cost of making shows and multiplying cable channels has created more hours to fill with programs. As a result, agencies are moving back into show production.

“The industry has come full circle,” said Brian Sheehan, associate professor of advertising at Syracuse University and former chairman of Team One Advertising in Los Angeles. “Because consumers have more opportunities to block advertising, it becomes critical for advertisers to be closely involved or actually ingrained in the content. Ad agencies by necessity are getting back into the content business.”

Christian Jacobsen, a partner at Mistress, believes Los Angeles is the natural habitat for this type of programming.

“We’re trying to bridge the gap between marketing and entertainment, and you can only do it in L.A.,” he said. “I used to work in New York and London, and you couldn’t connect with entertainment the way you can in L.A.”

Sheehan sees proximity to Hollywood as an advantage for agencies in Los Angeles – if the television talent pool can adapt to the demands of the ad world.

“What you have in Los Angeles is a highly qualified group of people who know how to write and produce entertainment,” he said. “L.A. has the talent to do it well, but that talent will have to learn how to work on smaller budgets and quicker timelines.”

