



## Creative Review: Phoenix Media Group

04.29.2015

Chris Phoenix, the founder and CEO of boutique agency and entertainment studio Phoenix Media Group, revealed his entrepreneurial side early in life.

As a student in New England, Phoenix simultaneously attended Boston Conservatory of Music and Boston University, where he found the time in between two collegiate programs to clear out his dorm room to set up a recording studio for local musicians. It wasn't long before he was writing and producing songs for contemporary artists such as Amy Grant, Christopher Cross and Vanessa Williams.

Later, having already become a music industry veteran in his 20s, Phoenix began branching out into soundtrack work for film and television. This led him to a company called Dennis Interactive, for whom Phoenix was hired to assist with the sound design of a Mercedes-Benz interactive kiosk. However, the businessman in him quickly picked up on a greater opportunity.

Dennis Interactive happened to be an offshoot of its parent company, Dennis Publishing - AKA the empire of hedonistic media magnate Felix Dennis, founder of, among other things, the controversial men's magazine Maxim. Now a global lifestyle brand with roots in dozens of countries, Maxim was then, in 1999, a relatively unknown UK lad mag looking to establish itself in the United States.

"As a brand it was very brash," said Phoenix, "but they didn't have a digital presence beyond what they were writingâ€¦ I saw this opportunity to get in and start creating branded entertainment for them."

Phoenix was a musician with next to zero experience in film or television production, but he had an idea that he could head up Maxim's fledgling digital video content department. At a time when many, if not most, print publications, were just beginning to do a terrible job of adapting to the Internet age, this idea would prove to be visionary.

The magazine was just beginning to gain a reputation for its star-studded events, and Phoenix's newfound team began its work by capturing that ascent. With Phoenix directing, executive producing and at times even composing music, they shot behind-the-scenes interviews, reported from the red carpet, and delivered event recaps that could then be packaged into sizzle reels to show current and future sponsors the value of their placement. That meant that in addition to pleasing a readership of increasingly tech-savvy young men, Phoenix's contributions were becoming a vital marketing tool for Maxim (and increasingly, its offshoot publications such as Stuff, Blender and Maxim Fashion), which led to co-branded spots with big-name companies such as Perry Ellis. From there, his team branched into original content such as the ongoing series "Dare Maxim," which saw the staff engaging in risky endeavors ranging from patrolling Times Square in a diaper to shooting Tabasco sauce.

It was, said Phoenix, "the birth of branded content and branded entertainment in the digital age for Maxim," a heady time when the culture of Internet video was still very much "the wild, wild Westâ€¦ We would just create anything we were interested in. Anything you could imagine, [Maxim was] willing to support it."

By 2004, Phoenix had helped grow Maxim's digital and branded entertainment division into a sizable production house, a force powerful enough to go up against Sports Illustrated with its own line of swimsuit DVDs, create its own television shows and even spur talks of starting a possible TV network to rival the likes of Spike. However, because starting a network is incredibly expensive and also because "the digital side was making almost as much money as print at this point," said Phoenix, "the push for Maxim to stay in the digital space was pretty big. They were less interested in TV."

Phoenix, however, was very interested in TV, and in applying to broadcast the skills he'd acquired with Maxim churning out massive amounts of quality content on a shoestring budget.

"Instead of having 20 people on set," he said, "we were able to do it with a DP who knew what they were doing, and then you might have audio and a director and maybe a PAâ€¦ It's a matter of trusting your teams and finding talented people who are excited about what you're creating."

Phoenix had spent five years cultivating a trustworthy team. He had also built relationships with companies like entertainment media behemoth IMG, who approached him around this time with a proposition: "They said, 'we're working with Jane Olson at NBC, and Andy Cohen, and they're launching a network called Bravo and they're looking for some original programming, and we would like you to come in and help us with that,'" said Phoenix. "So off we went."

In 2005, Phoenix transitioned from Maxim to working on two of the first original series ever produced by Bravo, *Battle of the Network Reality Stars* and *All-Star Reality Reunion*. It was enough momentum to get his own company off the ground and shortly thereafter, he founded Phoenix Media Group. Almost immediately, his young company won a pitch with ESPN to convert :30s the network was doing with brands like Motorola and T-Mobile into :15s and :10s. This led to what Phoenix described as the company's "big break:" the launch of an integrated marketing campaign with ESPN and Unilever for Vaseline Men, starring star athletes Chase Utley and Michael Strahan.

Additionally, Phoenix's team found itself working with Comedy Central on a new show from Jon Stewart's production company, *Important Things with Demetri Martin*. Originally pulled in to create branding and a show open, Phoenix Media's approach proved to be a perfect fit for the series' modular style, and the company found itself producing vignettes to run in the actual episodes as well. In the title sequence below, one can detect the kind of manic energy that once radiated from Maxim, a magazine so packed with ideas and jokes, its editors crammed them into every crack, crevice and border of the publication they could find.

Not long after that experience, the Clio Awards came calling, seeking help with a revitalization of the brand as the "pre-eminent dominant awards show for the advertising community," said Phoenix. His company has since worked with the Clios for five consecutive years, "and the brand has grown back to its old self. It's become the Academy Awards of advertising awards." Along the way, Phoenix's work with the brand has opened up a whole pillar within the awards space in general, resulting in clients including the Red Dress Awards, The Hollywood Reporter's Key Art Awards, Adweek's Brand Genius Awards and others.

With only six core staffers, Phoenix refers to his agency as an "accordion company" capable of expanding exponentially given the project at hand. The

team's small size allows for efficient and effective communal ideation and execution, as evidenced by a PromaxBDA Award-winning 2012 spot Phoenix produced for CCTV for the Chinese network's series Biz Asia America.

For this project, the team collectively conceived of the idea of using currency itself as a visual metaphor for the ways in which the global economy connects us all, then produced and animated it from start to finish.

"It's something we're very proud of because not only did we win the project as a team, we came up with the idea as a team and we executed and delivered as a team," said Phoenix. The spot also showcases the agency's impressive versatility, its ability to range from an impeccably designed promo of unrivaled elegance to intimate, off-the-cuff-feeling, sharply edited bits of behind-the-scenes magic.

"We are grounded in a production culture but we have a no-boundaries approach to the way we do everything," said Phoenix. "Advertising, branded entertainment, live eventsâ€¦ it doesn't matter. We dream out loud. We want to have really big ideas that are totally in the clouds and then let the rest of the stuff reign it in, whether it's budget or the client or whatever. We want to have a really big idea and then focus on the execution. My mentor Felix Dennis would always say, 'Great ideas are a dozen a penny; focus on great execution.'"