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A VERY MODERN MASON

Matthew Rhys stars in HBO's
Perry Mason, the origin story of
the dogged defense lawyer

Will & Grace
Really Love Lucy

Can't Stop at One at
Bob's Burgers

The Social Media
Masters of Space Force,
Upload and Little Fires
Everywhere

PLUS
MAURA TIERNEY
CHRIS EVANS
MICHELLE DOCKERY
THE CAST OF
MODERN FAMILY

BEHIND THE CYBER CURTAIN

No red carpet? No problem! To create buzz for *Space Force*, *Little Fires Everywhere* and *Upload*, social-media mavens came up with the likes of a TikTok space walk, a virtual party with Beyoncé's mom and postcards from the afterlife. BY HILARY HATTENBACH



amazon

NETFLIX

It's day eleventy hundred of the shelter-in-place order, and bleary-eyed shut-ins — glued to screens 24/7 — are desperate for something new to watch. But how do marketers find them?

Social-media campaigns have long played a crucial role in generating excitement around entertainment properties. And with red-carpet premieres, festivals and talk-show appearances canceled, those efforts have switched into hyperdrive. Marketing executives behind three shows — Netflix's *Space Force*, Hulu's *Little Fires Everywhere* and Amazon Prime's *Upload* — shared with Emmy how they drummed up interest and drove viewership in the midst of a global shutdown.

Topline takeaways? Some money was saved (no first-class travel or VIP parties), but more important, fans had unprecedented access to talent, brand social channels saw massive spikes in traffic and — best of all — targeted audiences tuned in for the shows' premieres.

SPACE FORCE

NETFLIX

In this new series from creator Greg Daniels (*The Office*, *Parks and Recreation*), a four-star general (Steve Carell) grudgingly teams up with an eccentric scientist (John Malkovich) to prepare the U.S. military's newest agency, *Space Force*, for liftoff.

Given that the show was inspired by the United States Space Force (USSF), a real-life branch of the military established last December, *Space Force* had to strike the right tone.

"We want to be incredibly respectful of the men and women working for [the real] *Space Force* while also having a little fun," says Kurt Graver, director, global creative marketing for comedy series at Netflix. "Our tone-of-voice plan was to represent those people like everyday people working in an office. It's just like another workplace comedy. They have to figure out what *Space Force* is. It's that energy of, *Here we go! We're all in this together.*"

As the biggest player in the streaming space (180 million-plus subscribers), Netflix has a massive presence on Instagram (22.8 million) and Twitter (8 million) for its main brand, in addition to genre-specific feeds like @NetflixIsAJoke, which caters to comedy fare. To determine if a show warrants its own social handle, Netflix considers whether the audience would enjoy an "in world" approach that blurs the line between fiction and real life. With *Space Force* it was a no-brainer.

Somehow the team managed to secure @spaceforce for both Instagram and Facebook. That handle had already been nabbed on Twitter, not by the Department of Defense, but by a civilian. The marketers ended up going with @realspaceforce (wink wink). The official USSF handle is @SpaceForceDoD.

"I do think there are some people who are still confused and following us for different reasons, but I get a chuckle out of that," Graver says.

The show's social channels launched with a video that trumpets its pedigree and premise on copy cards over stock footage, set to the tune of 2001: *A Space Odyssey's* unmistakable space anthem, "Also sprach Zarathustra."

"Ultimately it was huge, over 8 million views across all of our platforms. And it really set the stage for what we were doing," Graver notes.

What Netflix didn't anticipate was that the official USSF handles would launch their own campaign in the exact same window as the show's marketing efforts. This happy accident led to several funny Twitter moments, including one involving USSF's photo reveal of its official fatigues. Netflix followed suit with an image of the show's own "Moon Camo," along with the caption, "Here's what we're using. They'll never see us coming." USSF gave the "Moon Camo" tweet a "like."

Such antics are part of the company's ethos to always entertain, says Maya Banks, director of brand and editorial. "We don't think about what a brand would do. We think about what a fan would do or what a fan would want to see. How could we do that? We just jump in, and sometimes we get it right. And when we get it right, it's great."

To reach fans of all stripes, the campaign focused on activities that





Steve Carell in *Space Force*

tapped into social trends and leveraged the cast's social reach. Actor Ben Schwartz (1.2 million Twitter followers) introduced the #SpaceForceWalk TikTok Challenge, while castmate Jimmy O. Yang (207,000 Twitter followers) completed the challenge by space-walking across his living room to eat a brownie. With TikTok more popular than ever during lockdown, fans joined the Space Force challenge, including a trio of NASA engineers, a nurse putting on a mask and lots of dogs running in slo-mo. The week after the show premiered, #SpaceForceWalk had 2 billion views on TikTok.

Speaking of dogs, canine influencers were paid to encourage Instagram posts of furry friends strutting the right stuff to win moon-camo doggie merch. Netflix also partnered with Ben & Jerry's to debut a "boots on the moooon" flavor, supported by a stunt that sent one pint of ice cream into space via balloon — and others to journalists and influencers. But it wasn't all about dogs and dessert.

"We hosted a live trivia night with the cast on Netflix Is a Joke's YouTube channel," says Will Trowbridge, manager, brand marketing and editorial. "This was a great way to pull the cast together in an interactive format and allow fans to reach them via the chat function. They also interacted with each other in a really authentic way, while answering trivia questions and generating great conversation and excitement."

Shifting to online events offers significant savings, as talent can participate without leaving the house. That said, there's no way to avoid tech issues and spotty internet (despite lots of preparation), but Team Netflix tries to see the silver lining.

"You know what it does? It makes our talent super relatable," Banks says. "Even celebrities have to stop every five minutes and ask, 'Am I frozen?' You don't ever get to see that side of things. Obviously, we're always striving for creative excellence, but with live situations you just have to hold your breath — but it makes it really fun."

The day of the show's premiere, USSF tweeted, "Happy Launch Day, @realspaceforce! We hope your show brings laughter to people around the world just like the 'real' Space Force brings the benefits of #GPS to billions of people every day."

The show landed at number one on Netflix's Top 10 List, meaning it was the week's most-viewed show. Let's just call that #MissionAccomplished.

LITTLE FIRES EVERYWHERE

HULU

With stars Reese Witherspoon and Kerry Washington, *Little Fires Everywhere* follows the intertwined fates of the picture-perfect Richardson family and an enigmatic mother and daughter who upend their lives. Based on Celeste Ng's 2017 bestseller, the story explores the weight of secrets, the nature of identity and the ferocious pull of motherhood.

There's no denying that a series based on a popular book with an A-list cast gives marketers a leg up, but whether the show lives up to the hype — and the stars truly support the campaign — is another story.

Hulu lucked out on both fronts with *Little Fires Everywhere*.

"The campaign launched in December 2019, and we found ourselves in the enviable position of having talent and showrunners that were wildly popular and willing to engage with our social team on different ideas," says Ryan Crosby, vice-president of marketing. "That's a rare combination."

While the show was still in production, Washington and Witherspoon (whose fictional characters aren't exactly besties) began to share photographic evidence of their on-set lovefest. In one snapshot, the actresses sit side by side, holding monogrammed phones to their ears. Washington's caption read, "Hanging with the work wife," plus the laughing emoji, and Witherspoon's said, "When your work wife is on speed dial."

To build a social presence for the show, Hulu employed a multichannel approach. It reskinned the official @Hulu social handles with fiery images and brought fans "in world" to the town where the show is set with the message "Welcome to Shaker Heights." (The streamer has 6 million followers across Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and YouTube.)

Crosby's team worked closely with the two stars, whose combined channels reach about 36 million, and with Witherspoon's production company, Hello Sunshine, and Washington's company, Simpson Street, to help raise awareness. The actresses kept up their social banter long after production wrapped, helping to create a groundswell of anticipation for the series' launch.

By the time the trailer dropped in February, excitement had reached a fever pitch. To keep fans glued to its social feeds for updates, Hulu partnered with Twitter to create a custom "heart to subscribe" campaign. More than 50,000 fans who clicked a heart icon on the trailer post (from the main feed or the talents' feeds) were opted in to receive weekly reminders about the release of new episodes every Wednesday.

Excellent trailer reactions from fans and press — many called it "the next *Big Little Lies*" — ignited even more of a frenzy leading up to the show's red-carpet premiere. Of course, that event was canceled due to the shelter-in-place order.

"Since we couldn't host a traditional premiere, we worked closely with our partners at Twitter and the show's cast and crew to create a virtual premiere watch party and Q&A," Crosby explains.

The shift to an online event proved to be a giant win for fans who flocked to Twitter to chat with their favorite stars, pose questions about the show and bond with like-minded viewers.

"After the great engagement and response we received from that effort," Crosby adds, "we continued the 'Shaker Heights Town Hall' Q&As every week, timed to new episode releases."

Twitter Q&As are nothing new, but a weekly Q&A with participation from almost every member of the cast went a long way toward building fan loyalty and driving tune-in. The lead actresses and supporting cast members recorded video responses to fans' questions, often addressing fans by name. Twitter conversation on Wednesdays increased by about 51 percent on average throughout the season, and weekly #FireQuestions Q&A



Kerry Washington, Celeste Ng and Reese Witherspoon in *Little Fires Everywhere*

AARON EPSTEIN/NETFLIX; ERIN SIMKIN/HULU

conversation increased by approximately 78 percent.

While Twitter served as the main hub for talent interactions and heated debates about plot points, the Hulu team saved a few surprises for Instagram. Over on IGTV, Washington hosted a weekly "Fireside Chat" series, where she interviewed writers, producers and members of the cast. Seated by a roaring fire, in a room torn from the pages of a West Elm catalog, Washington slipped easily into the role of talk-show host, offering the audience a window into the creative processes that made the show a success.

Then, for a special finale celebration surprise, fans were invited to attend a virtual "Art and Sip" party on Instagram Live. It was hosted by Tina Knowles-Lawson, aka Beyoncé's mom, and Kimberly Drew, an art instructor.

"We knew @MsTinaLawson was a big fan of the show, so we worked closely with her and our agency, Allied Moxy, to host the finale event," Crosby says. "Since Kerry Washington's character, Mia, is an artist, we thought the class would be a fun and interactive way to engage with fans and also encourage social sharing of their finished artwork. While we originally planned to have this event in person, we switched to an Instagram Live that included appearances from Kerry Washington, and special surprise guests/friends of the show, Kelly Rowland and Holly Robinson Peete." (They are both friends with Washington and Knowles-Lawson.)

Can we talk about that finale, though? Following the show's shocking ending, the internet lit up with fan reactions, including a very fired-up Kim Kardashian, who tweeted to her 65.2 million followers: "I just finished watching Little Fires Everywhere with @ReeseW and @KerryWashington. It's soooo good and crazy! Who's seen it?"

Hulu says it has no plans for a season two, but one thing's for certain: fan interest is flaming hot (insert fire emoji).

UPLOAD

AMAZON PRIME

In addition to *Space Force*, the prolific Greg Daniels has created this near-future sci-fi comedy, in which a person's consciousness can be uploaded to a digital afterlife. Party boy Nathan (Robbie Amell) gets uploaded to a ritzy virtual resort where he meets Nora (Andy Allo), who starts as his customer-service "angel" but becomes much more as she helps him find friendship, love and purpose.

The Amazon Studios team had planned to make a big splash for *Upload* at South by Southwest in March 2020.

"We had talent lined up to participate in screenings and Q&As and to create content at the Facebook Content House," says Dave Perry, global director of social media. "Our marquee event was a truly immersive activation, where fans could 'experience' what it'd be like to upload themselves into Lakeview, the digital afterlife featured in the show. Fans would enter a room very similar to the hospital room where Nathan uploaded and, after some visual light magic that simulated the upload process, a door opened, revealing a fully built-out replica of Lakeview that fans could explore — including Instagram-friendly stations that simulated walking on water or interacting with a virtual therapy dog. But then, Covid-19 happened."

#Frownyface.

City officials called off SXSW, the ten-day music and film festival, on March 6, just one week before hundreds of thousands of tech-savvy attendees were scheduled to descend on Austin, Texas. This unforeseen development caused Perry's team to pivot all their efforts online and push their launch closer to release.

Lacking the help of thousands of selfie-crazed convention attendees, Amazon Studios needed a surefire way to amplify word of mouth. The team ended up paying a group of macro-influencers with 500,000-plus followers and micro-influencers (usually less than 20,000 followers) to post content about the show across Instagram, Twitter, YouTube and TikTok.

Most of the "content creators" cranked out short videos encouraging their own fans to tune in to the show, but iJustine, a YouTube personality with



Robbie Amell and Andy Allo in *Upload*

6.5 million subscribers, took the assignment to the next level.

In her video, iJustine sits at her desk and logs into the virtual Lakeview lobby. There she's greeted by actor Robbie Amell, in character as Nathan, who gives her a rundown of the resort and discusses the various data plans she might want to consider for her future stay. That video has logged more than 110,000 views, a decent showing considering her videos average between 89,000 and 350,000 views. In the comments section, several of her followers posted that they'd already binged and loved the show, a good sign that her fans were the right target audience.

"We know word of mouth is so critical for new comedies, so our main priority was to drive buzz for a show that we were all really proud of, and one that we knew people would love once they saw it," Perry says.

Absent a physical *Upload* attraction à la SXSW, fans were still able to escape the doldrums of their living rooms via Lakeview Zoom backgrounds, a Snap lens that inserted one's selfie into an idyllic lakefront photo and a microsite that yielded custom images of simulated experiences in the digital afterlife. Campaign elements were shared via Amazon's suite of social channels, which reach about 50 million people across Twitter, Instagram and Facebook.

"Fans could virtually see themselves hiking an active volcano, surfing on the wing of a fighter jet, floating above the ground while doing yoga, or eating the tallest ice cream cone you could ever imagine," Perry says. "The site rendered a dynamic video using a picture of the user's head and inserting it into a fully formed virtual video postcard that fans could then post on their social handles."

And then there was the power of the cast. A close-knit group that's active on social, the *Upload* actors amped up their fan-engagement efforts to make some noise for the show's pre-launch. Andy Allo, the actress-singer who plays the show's heroine, took over Prime Video's Instagram for a live concert, bringing some of her 110,000 followers across Twitter and Instagram. She was joined by Amell, whose followers number 1.8 million on Instagram and 480,000 on Twitter.

"Their chemistry is unmistakable even off camera, and fans loved seeing them interact," Perry says. "This only grew post-launch, once people started to fall in love with their characters. In lieu of a premiere event for *Upload*, on the day of launch, we were able to arrange a virtual Q&A with Greg Daniels and our series regulars hosted by none other than Conan O'Brien. This was followed by a Twitter Watch Party with the cast, which allowed fans of @PrimeVideo to see what makes this cast so special. This event was really well received by fans and press, not only helping us bring visibility to our cast, but jumpstarting the launch weekend."

Since *Upload*'s debut, fans have binged and praised the show, and Amazon has already announced a season two. That's a relief, because there are so many unanswered questions. What is Nathan going to do about Ingrid? Will he and Nora end up together? And what happened to dogged amateur detective Cousin Fran?

"We love Fran!" Perry says. "Fans are also loving Fran, and having a great time debating whether we've seen the last of her. Clearly, fans want more!" @