

Interview Betsy Scolnik

Carsey-Wolf Center at UC Santa Barbara

16-20 minutes

In May 2011, Betsy Scolnik, a consultant focused on community building and digital communications strategy, sat down with MIP for an interview. In the excerpts below, Scolnik argues traditional content strategies often overlook the opportunity to cultivate online fan communities because television networks underestimate (or misunderstand) the role of social media. In addition, Scolnik provides a behind-the-scenes glimpse into the digital communications strategy for the *Law & Order* brand.

Betsy Scolnik is a consultant focusing on community building, content strategy, and production, and digital business, communications, and strategy. She has worked for some of the world's leading commercial and philanthropic organizations, including Wolf Films, TED, The Paley Center for Media, National Geographic, The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and AOL Time Warner. For Wolf Films, Scolnik created the firm's first online presence, making the *Law & Order* brand more available to new and existing fans via YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. The overall audience for *Law & Order* online has more than

doubled and its online presence has represented the most consistent promotion week over week with a permanent presence on AOL TV, MSN TV, and TVGuide.com.

Leveraging Social Media

Monday, May, 23, 2011

SCOLNIK: If you only think of digital as a promotional tool you end up not leveraging the value of digital very well for the rest of your business. Lots of television networks are struggling to figure out how to be real players. They still can't separate what they are doing on TV to what they are doing online. A digital person at a network will tell you, "I'm constantly pulling teeth to be included and to sit at the table as an equal player inside the organization." We all have to sit at the table together. At Wolf Films we are starting to do that. We are all sitting together and we are putting in new pitches for a new show and pitching the whole package. Why? Because we've learned that if you don't pitch the whole package and instead let the network decide what you are going to do online to support a show, they won't do much or else they'll just take a cookie-cutter approach. Then you don't stand out and that brand that you created doesn't get the joy of a digital community in social media.

It's about thinking of your product as a brand and how you would treat that brand on multiple platforms instead of just thinking about the one piece of content that you produce and throw on as a transmit and hope it gets good ratings.

MIP: Who retains creative control in this scenario?

Creators? Networks?

An executive producer needs to own the brand and be able to leverage it to promote the show and build community. Executive producers also have to start integrating and defining online experiences as part of the show they sell versus letting the network determine the creative expression of that brand online for them. It benefits both the network and the executive producer. What I'm talking about is really brand ownership.

Here is a great one: *Mad Men*. Say I'm at Lionsgate and I, Matt Weiner, have created this amazing brand. The brand attributes are beautiful production values and amazing accuracy of everything from fashion to the cars to the vocabulary. It's just amazing accuracy to the time that it's meant to be in. I've now created a fan base that is obsessed with it. There is an entire fashion sort of thing that has happened because of it as well. I've created a brand.

Now in the traditional world of today, that brand is now pretty much owned by the network and the network is interested in making ratings. They say they want to do digital but really, they don't. All they do in digital is try to use digital to promote television shows and they don't even do that well. So there is no nurturing of the brand's fanatics. The brand's fanatics are actually abused. If you look at what a lot of networks do, they create network sites for a show. All shows have the same cookie cutter sites within that network site. No brand personality for each show. If the show is really successfully they start to invest a bit more in it. "Yeah, we are going to do Twitter and Facebook." They have millions of fans and what do they do?

They abuse those fans. They start marketing other shows to them that they think they should want to watch. They do that instead of treating those fans as part of an important social community, which is how the show creator would treat them. But the network doesn't see it that way. Now fast-forward: *Law & Order* syndication was all bought up and this is partly why *Law & Order* became so disjointed online. The syndication was on USA or TNT or wherever but no one cares about that online community as a community. No one is nurturing them.

Mad Men is about to go down that same path now that Netflix has bought that syndication. AMC is probably going, "Shoot, it's probably not worth my while to invest in that community because it will benefit Netflix and I don't want to benefit Netflix because that's not good for me." They're saying that instead of seeing the value in a community of brand loyalists who have become so engrossed in the show that they know who Weiner is and probably know who every director of every episode is too. It's the same with *Law & Order*. It's just incredible what they know. So if I'm a creator, I want to cultivate that audience. It's hard for me to do it in the first year because no one knows who I am; they just know my show and the network won't let me play and be a part of it officially. The network doesn't care about me or, really, my brand. They just care about making ratings to make up for the money they have spent in the very short term.

What is the best way forward?

I believe the answer is that the creator should maintain control of the brand because we are in a new world where creators are probably at a place where they can start leveraging more power

and ownership around how their brands are treated. Because deals like the one with Netflix are starting to change that landscape. It's just so different now. Who thought Netflix would do that? There are two digital experiences but only one is dealt with clearly and contractually—the digital streaming rights. But the digital brand experience for audiences online is not dealt with well.

Now with Hulu, everything has changed. The problem is that the legal side of things hasn't caught up to reality. I was just talking about this with [*Law & Order* Creator] Dick Wolf's lawyer. I said, "Is there a way contractually to separate digital? There are digital rights to the episodic content and then there is how you handle the brand online. Those are two different digital things to me." Even he was struggling with that. "What do you mean?" he asked. I said, "Well, I understand contractually that the way to retain digital rights in negotiation with a network is to be paid less and you keep the digital rights. And I understand that's probably not going to happen because right now networks will say that if you don't give them the digital rights, they're not interested. No creator is going to walk away from an entire deal over digital rights just because that business model has not made it lucrative enough."

Dick's lawyer and I have discussed this a lot, how to deal with this other digital "right and experience." The problem is the networks are still trying to figure out a way to make the digital platform another revenue stream. It is one now, but it's so small compared to the rest of what they do. They are afraid to give anything up and they are afraid to lose whatever it is they'd lose.

But the creator would lose the deal if he came to the table and said, “I want to be in charge of executing how all of the digital stuff goes. You still have to pay for it, Mr. Network, but I as creator want to manage that.”

Now, you could go in and say, “I will manage it, I will pay for it, and therefore this.” But even then I think they would say no and walk away from the deal because they still see a value in owning that part of digital. They have figured out how to monetize that through ad banners and whatever, right? Or you can go in and say, “I will be responsible to execute on that for you as a show creator and I have to meet certain targets for you. I have to make a certain amount of inventory, whatever. You monetize it, that’s fine, but I get to own that experience.” In my discussions with Dick’s lawyer he has said, “They will all walk. They will walk because they are just not willing to go there.”

So, in summary, I separate two things digitally: one is the brand love and joy online and the other is the streaming of an episode. Those are just two different things to me. I think the lines of understanding one is very clear now but the other one is still very mixed up.

Law & Order Online

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MIP: What are looking for from the audience when you are doing a two- to three-hour lead-up before the show?

SCOLNIK: On a week-by-week basis we look for volumes of

conversation. If the conversation is of a certain volume, then I know where we are headed for ratings that week. If the volume isn't at a certain level, we might want to think of doing other things, hence tweeting live or whatever.

Unfortunately, because things don't work with networks as quickly as I would like I can't respond to that stuff quickly enough. So a lot of that I'll just watch and wait and continue to have knowledge as the world progresses. I also schedule things on a regular basis for events whether or not I'm sure I will need it because it would be too hard to get the USA network people and everybody on board fast enough to say, "Hey, it's Thursday. I'm not seeing the volumes I want." I look for volume and I also look for consistency of comments. I look at what they are saying and if there are consistent themes that are popping up for more than a couple weeks then I think it's very important to talk about that with Dick and the show runner and writers. So, I look for volumes and I look for themes.

I also look to see what other television shows or what other things people are talking about that aren't related to *Law & Order* but are within the *Law & Order* conversation, just to see what that means. If a show trends on Twitter, if it only trends for a short period of time, that doesn't necessarily translate into ratings. Trending is much more a factor of velocity. **[Editor's note: Social media "velocity" refers to the distance and speed at which a common idea travels across unrelated conversations]**. As an example, John Stamos, who starred as Uncle Jesse in *Full House*, was on *SVU*. I'm watching and I'm thinking, my God, the volume of conversation is nuts, and I'm

looking at Twitter trends and normally this volume and velocity results in trending. Why are we not trending? Because normally, if you trend for the entire length of the show and after, that almost always means ratings are going to be higher. I realized what was trending wasn't *SVU* but Uncle Jesse. Freaking Uncle Jesse was trending for like two hours! Now, by the time people on the West Coast saw Uncle Jesse trending they were curious. They went to the Uncle Jesse hash tag and people who never watched *Law & Order* were saying, "I'm going to watch this."

So I look for trending and I look for volume and velocity, especially on something like *Law & Order: Los Angeles* because it was a brand new show. For an existing show like *SVU* or *CI*, I'm looking for how to drive ratings. For example, I have noticed *CI* fans forget when episodes are on because they have been stuck in front of the TV doing an *SVU* marathon and they are tired and they are about to go have dinner and it's 9 p.m. So 20 minutes before a new episode I send out a tweet: "Don't forget: new *Criminal Intent* with Katie and Vince in 20 minutes."

Thank God. If you don't remind them, they are literally going to die. They haven't had a thing to eat or drink for hours. They haven't move from their couch. It's crazy. I don't think they peed. It's unbelievable. But they have to go, right? So I have to remind them that they have 20 minutes to come back, and they do.

But with a new show like *Law & Order: Los Angeles*, we looked for more input from the audience. We first identified who the influential fans were—who are the fans who were re-tweeted the most, who were the fans who had the most followers, who were the fans that were showing up more often, and were there any

consistencies in what they were saying about the show. And there were. The very first week of that show, the fans said, “Where is the *Law & Order* stuff?” The show’s creative team had removed the intro music by Mike Posner. They had also removed “the voice” that says, “And these are their stories.” There were some “cha-chings” but they weren’t consistent. And people were like, “What the hell is that? What the hell are they doing? It was bad enough they took away my New York show. What the hell are they doing? This isn’t even ‘our’ show. What is this?” Crazy. They didn’t relate to the detectives from the very first episode. The fans didn’t stop telling us that until it was announced that the cast would be changed. Some might say it was too late then.

So, anyway, week over week, these trends became very consistent. It even started to be consistent which detective was liked more than the other and why. All of those things obviously Dick had in his mind and he used them when he made major changes to the show. In fact, the bringing back of “the voice” and the “cha-chings” happened almost immediately. Retooling the show actually took more time, but the other thing that kept coming up week over week was this absolutely painful missing of anything from the original *Law & Order*. It’s almost like you could taste how upset everybody still was, and I kept saying, “I don’t know how you can bring that back for them, Dick. Part of what they love about *Law & Order* in New York is it’s New York and they recognize it. They see everything.” Over time they started asking point blank, “Can’t you bring back at least a character?” Well, ultimately, a character from the original *Law &*

Order did come back, and all the graphics came back, and a new intro with a version of the old song came back. Alfred [Molina] and Fred [Thompson] were on every single episode and the detective that was resonating the least was gone.

That's a lot of labor just being in front of the screen. How do you craft a voice for your interactions with the fans? You never say that it's Dick's voice ...

Because it not. That would be a lie. Every once in a while we'll send something out in Dick's name, but that's only if I have talked about it with Dick and he has something he wants to say. It's Wolf Films, and we've created a voice for Wolf Films that is all about nurturing, providing information, being enthusiastic and authoritative. We don't actually participate much in the conversation as it's happening unless there is a recurring question. That sometimes can happen, where the fans will get really caught up in something and I can tell they are no longer watching the show. They are focused on some question and they can't stop. "Didn't I see that person in another episode and didn't they play so-and-so?"

So Heather, the other person who does this with me, will sometimes call me and say, "Can anyone verify this?" We have to fix it. We have to tell people and if we can't, sometimes we'll chime in and say, "We'll let you know tomorrow." We do this so that people will focus back on the show.

During the show, I might do little things to help spike a trend or something like that, but for the most part we are not in the conversation but are watching it and listening to it. Our work is

about leading up to that. It's about making sure people know when the new episodes are on, and it's about providing them with cool content. It's a constant reminder that we are still around and that we care and we are giving them things that they have never seen before that no one gave them in the past.

The time that I spend leading up to a show is probably more for my knowledge to understand how to predict ratings on a show and to figure out that labor balance, how much do we need to be doing that week for tune-in awareness, etc. Leading up to a show I just want to make sure that the conversation is attending to the next show coming up. If it's not we are going to interject. We are going to send something out, we are going to do something to every hash tag we know of, to every conversation. We have worked hard to aggregate most *Law & Order* conversations to a few hashtags so that we can be effective communicators and so that the fans can really enjoy a robust and diverse conversation and interaction.

[Read the complete transcript of our conversation with Betsy Scolnik in *Distribution Revolution: Conversations about the Digital Future of Film and Television.*](#)