



PHOTO BY DAVID SPRAGUE

Beyond Melonville: SCTV alum Dave Thomas (center) with the executive team of Animax Entertainment, the Van Nuys production company he co-founded in 2001.

Animated to the Max

Animax bringing its unique animated content to cable channels and websites.

By **MARK R. MADLER** Staff Reporter

Four or five ideas had come out of the pitch session between Animax Entertainment and an executive from MTV and it was the last idea that drew the most interest.

Called "Popzilla" the animated show poked fun at Hollywood celebrities and it was just what Brent Haynes was looking for as the cable network takes a new direction with its programming.

"It was about pop culture," said Haynes, senior vice president of series development, East Coast. "We were biting the hand that feeds a little bit, which I think keeps a network or brand relevant to its audience to know that your unafraid to take on things that might seem dangerous even though it's comedy."

Now airing four nights a week, "Popzilla" is the latest offering from Animax, a Van Nuys-based studio producing original programming, branded entertainment, virtual worlds, advertising and games.

What brought Haynes to Animax was a past collaboration with executive creative director Dave Thomas on a project for Canadian television.

Thomas has a well-known reputation in comedy circles dating back to his days on "SCTV" where he and costar Rick Moranis created the beer-drinking, back bacon-eating, tuque-wearing McKenzie brothers, Bob and Doug. Thomas would later go on to voice characters on "The Simpsons" and become a regular on "Grace Under Fire" among other television and film work.

Thomas and entrepreneur Andrew Bain started Animax in 2001 and put Michael Bellavia in charge of the day to day operations. Early staffers came from Icehouse, a graphics business that had gone belly up after the dotcom bubble burst.

After a few years of "losing their shirts," Bellavia started to make the company some money.

"It was a shock to me," Thomas said. "Then Corey joined us when it was time to take it to another level."

The Corey that Thomas refers to is Corey V. Torrence, Animax's chief executive who commutes in from Boston for the work week. Torrence comes from a background of working for digital and technology companies and oversees new business development and client relationships for Animax.

Rounding out the executive team is Chief

Operating Officer Tim Jones, Tim Brady, vice president of technology, and Chief Financial Officer Michael Harrison.

Thomas considers himself to be one of the idea guys at Animax rather than the idea guy.

"I don't have every idea so they have to come up with ideas too," Thomas said. "Our roles are defined but they are not. Everybody's area links to everybody else's area."

Along with "Popzilla," Animax has also created an animated series for Canadian television featuring the McKenzie brothers; a spoof of NASCAR called "Slotcar," the Sports Emmy-award winning "Off-Mikes," a short-form comedy program streaming at ESPN.com; and children's programming, including "The Turtles."

Animax content gets divided between

pure entertainment and that which is promotional and marketing-driven. Branded entertainment is the step after product placement with a single sponsor of the content and its products and logo incorporated within the story line.

This has become necessary as viewers record programs using Tivo or other DVRs and then skip the commercials. With advertising dollars migrating online but banner ads an ineffective way to catch eyeballs, alternatives emerged to expose viewers to a sponsor's name and products.

With "Slotcars," for instance, Animax has built the short-form show around the Carl's Jr. burger brand. "Datemales" is a potential webisode series about the less-than-perfect dating adventures of a single woman the Animax team wants a cosmetics company attached to.

"That is the conversation we are having," Jones said. "What are more effective ways to reach audiences in the new media space."

Van Nuys base

The early years of the company saw much of the production outsourced. These days, the

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ANIMAX ENTERTAINMENT

Year Founded: 2001

Revenues in 2006: \$1.08 million

Revenues in 2008: \$7.4 million

Employees: 40

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Van Nuys offices is where the ideas are conceived, scripts written, and programs filmed. A 1/32-scale track was set up in a studio to add needed authenticity for "Slotcars."

"(Thomas) has a team of writers, he has strong creative people there and he can fill it out when needed," Haynes said.

For the Starlight Children's Foundation, Animax made a series of webisodes titled "Coping with Chemo" to explain to pre-teens and teens what they will experience when undergoing chemotherapy but doing with edgy humor.

The foundation provided a script that the Animax team then added to and changed around, said Joan Ford, a senior development officer.

The finished product did not shy away from the thought most on the mind of children diagnosed with a life-threatening illness – am I going to die?

"They hit that right on the head," Ford said. "Their editing was so good, their writing was so good and the creative they came up with was amazing."

The series won a WebAward for Healthcare

Standard of Excellence, One Show Interactive, Horizon Interactive Best of Category and a Gold Summit Creative Award.

Animax, however, is moving away from the work-for-hire project to focus on original content the company can own.

"More and more we are becoming an (intellectual property) shop," Torrence said. "That is why we are raising capital now."

The tightening on spending due to the recession has not made Torrence's job of finding investments for Animax easy.

At the beginning of the year, the venture capital and private equity firms were interested in distressed companies. Now there is a loosening of funding, with investors looking at companies that can stay positive in their markets.

Torrence has been knocking on a lot of doors and is slowly seeing results. In the past month, distributors are beginning to call, he said.

As Thomas, the long-time show business veteran, knows it takes tenacity to be successful. A pitch that gets thumbs down from a network, six months or a year later will be praised and picked up.

"You have to hang in there," Thomas said. "If you don't you might as well give up."

