

It's Not Your Kid Sister's Tiger Beat

Voxyy thinks the way to a 14-year-old girl's heart – and wallet – is provocative content. But do teenyboppers really care? **BY LESSLEY ANDERSON**

YOU'VE GOT TO FORGIVE KRISTI Kaylor if she seems a little manic. After all, she's spent all day in the head of a teenybopper. Kaylor, along with the creative team at San Francisco-based agency Red Sky Interactive, has been brainstorming about the look and feel of her new Web site, Voxxy.

Aimed at teenage girls, Voxxy will launch this spring as a new kind of "network," complete with chat rooms, bulletin boards, shopping and, most important, a full slate of provocative streaming-video series that Kaylor promises will raise parents' eyebrows.

The characters, she says, "smoke, and they cuss, and they're real people."

Kaylor, a redhead with a Melanie-Griffith voice, has the infectious energy you'd expect from someone who at age 27 already has 18 TV projects under her belt. She got her start as a producer at MTV when, fresh out of college, she wowed execs with a homemade **CONTINUED ON PAGE 92**



Carlip, Kaylor and Lapiduss (front to back): They know what girls want - they think.



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 90 pilot. Called the *Cutting Edge*, Kaylor's reality-based show depicted stars like Christina Applegate hanging out with their best friends. "Even celebrities let their guard down when they're with their best friends," says Kaylor. "You get to see what their personalities are really like."

That's what Kaylor wants to recreate with Voxxxy, which will strip away the gloss of traditional media's teen programming. To do so, she's joined forces with Maxine Lapiduss, former writer and producer of *Ellen* and *Home Improvement*, and Hillary Carlip, author of *Girl Power: Young Women Speak Out*, a collection of interviews with a range of teens from sorority sisters to homegirls.

Kaylor, Lapiduss and Carlip are billing the company as a refuge for producers, actors and writers who are fed up with big-media bureaucracy and are looking to get their groove back.

Their spiel seems to have hit home in Hollywood. *Friends* star Jennifer Aniston has signed on to produce and host a reality-based series on Voxxxy. The creators of MTV's *Real World* are also talking about producing a show.

And Billie Jean King has claimed a seat on the board, joined by a roster of high-powered Hollywood women, including Nancy Josephson, copresident of ICM, and Nely Galan, president of Galan Entertainment and former president of entertainment at Telemundo.

Voxxxy launches this spring with its first four series, including what Lapiduss describes as a "dark, animat-

ed soap opera" featuring a girl who's in love with her best guy friend, another boy who's asexual, and a girl with a weight problem.

Among the other 19 shows Voxxxy has in production is a dating-game series with a twist: Instead of a girl asking questions of three boys behind a panel, she asks questions of the boys' mothers and sisters. A music show called Noise will explore the forbidden sanctums of 21-and-over Hollywood music clubs.

Voxxxy is jumping into a crowded field. A full lineup of Web sites are aimed at the powerful teen-girl sector that made Britney Spears one of the top-grossing artists of 1999. These sites run the gamut from baby-blue and butter-yellow teenybopper sites like Bolt.com and Alloy.com to edgier sites like iTurf and iFuse that are heavy on profanity and sex talk.

What Voxxxy's competitors share is the desire to be cool – through a mix of offbeat merchandise (perfume that smells like chocolate cake, hooded sweatshirts with cat ears, T-shirts emblazoned with Japanese characters) and a gossipy, gum-snapping editorial voice. Consider this recent poll on Bolt.com:

Have you ever had a crush on a teacher?

- a) No way. That's messed up.
- b) Not a crush, but I've had some attractive teachers before.
- c) Yes, but I did never did anything about it.
- d) Yes, I tried to get with them.

And the teen sites are aggressively expanding their turf. Bolt.com nabbed Columbia TriStar Interactive's former president Richard Glosser, and moved into the wireless market with a new service called Bolt Onebox. The product gives Bolt members a free local phone number to access voice-mail and wireless fax and e-mail messages. Bolt has filed to go public.

Though Alloy's stock has done only so-so on the public markets since its IPO last May (averaging a few dollars higher than its \$15 offering price), it too has forged ahead. It purchased a book publisher: 17th St. Productions. The latter's claim to fame is its popular paperback series, *Sweet Valley High*, about sun-kissed twins with turquoise eyes. It also acquired a competing teen site, CelebritySightings.com., whose appeal, says Alloy CEO Matt Diamond, was its streaming news show for teens, T.E.N. TV. Clearly Alloy, like Voxxxy, is betting on the future of streaming video.

MXGOnline, buzzed from a \$26 million investment from USA Networks, made an even bigger leap into the teen streaming-media world that Voxxxy plans to rule. It just launched Fashion Junkies – a show that features up-and-coming teen celebrities modeling clothing – which will have built-in e-commerce capabilities. Thanks to a partnership with a San Francisco video-based e-commerce company called Veon, a Fashion Junkies viewer can roll her mouse over the screen and icons will appear over the items for sale. Clicking on icons brings up a second window that lists such details as color and size.

Though

CONTINUED ON PAGE 94

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 92 Voxxy plans to peddle merchandise, Lapiduss stresses that sophisticated story lines will be the site's focus and draw. The money will flow from advertising and sponsorships; the site will also get a cut from its series-related book and music recommendations.

MXGOnline CEO Rob Schwartz defends Fashion Junkies' commercials-as-entertainment approach. "Given the constraints of this medium, we're not at the point that people are going to buy actors to star in fictional programming," says Schwartz. "You can make compelling reality-based programming by having the subject ... be an entity or a brand that the audience already knows."

His company has already had success with this smudgy blend of advertising and content. MXG publishes a "magalog," which looks like a magazine, featuring a star on the cover and articles, but it's free. And everything mentioned in the pages is for sale. Schwartz says the magalog is circulated to 2 million girls.

No matter how banal or candy-coated, a market exists for pretty pictures of teen stars and interviews. Just look at the typical newsstand, with its selection of teen pulp magazines lining the racks.

Same story when it comes to the Web. ArtistDirect, an online music company not normally associated with the teen girl market, gets over half of its traffic from Backstreet-Boys.com. The site, which draws some 350,000 visitors a month, is by far the most popular of ArtistDirect's official band sites, beating those devoted to Korn and the Rolling Stones. If the cheesy formula works as well for streaming-video Web programming, Voxxy will have its work cut out for it.

ArtistDirect, like MXGOnline, is betting on fluff. The company decided to test its TV ambitions on the popular Backstreet Boys site with a

new streaming series called Millennium TV. The shows feature ambient shots of the Boys at their public appearances (being photographed for the cover of *Rolling Stone* magazine, meeting fans before a concert), with music dubbed over the top.

Unfortunately for Voxxy, early signs look good for this *Tiger Beat* school of online teen programming. Though MXG TV's Fashion Junkies is only a few weeks old, the company already

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has advertising deals with Neutrogena, Levi's, Billabong and Kodak. Kaylor says Voxxy is in talks with several big name advertisers, but declined to name names.

In a case of denial, or maybe idealism – Voxxy's founders believe teen girls want something more. "Do you know that the actual average reader of *Teen People* is 9 years old?" protests Carlip. "We're programming for a lot older girl, and we're not going to talk down to anyone."

Voxxy's approach is reminiscent of another teen media play that attempted to give girls a smarter, sassier voice. That's right – the infamous *Sassy* magazine, which gained a following in the late 1980s but wasn't large enough to placate advertisers who were spooked by some of its sexier content. *Sassy* was sold to *Teen* magazine, the staff was replaced and the magazine was cleaned up. Eventually, *Sassy* died.

Still, that was 1993, and things have changed. Christina Kelly, an editor at *Jane* magazine and former editor at *Sassy*, says that while the teenage mainstream has circled back toward bubblegum (Backstreet Boys, as opposed to Grunge music), the media world at large is less conservative.

"I think the climate is different than it was back then. Everybody wants to be edgy, and 'what the kids are doing,'" says Kelly. "I don't think advertisers are afraid to take the risks they once were."

Advertisers will certainly be happy with the aggressive distribution strategy Kaylor is pursuing for Voxxy. The plan is for the company's programming to stream on the Web, at first,



but ultimately become interactive TV. Kaylor is a longtime advocate of the medium, and is a partner with Steeplechase Media, which creates Web-based enhancements for TV shows. (Steeplechase, for instance, programs interactive elements for the show *Judge Judy* that are clickable for WebTV viewers.) Kaylor is pushing for a spot as a featured channel on AT&T's soon-to-be-expanded broadband service for cable modem users.

Voxxy also has plans for a branded cell phone service and calling card, interactive kiosks in shopping malls, a line of beauty products and even a record label that will sign young bands discovered on Voxxy.

"We're creating another movement," says Carlip. "You've heard of GenX? This is GenXX, as in the chromosome." Maybe this time, the revolution will succeed. ■

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