

Building the Virtual Audition Room

Companies like AuditionHost and MyStudio are taking casting to the Web, but are users following?

By Daniel Lehman

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If a tree falls in the forest and no one hears it, does it make a sound? If you invent a brilliant new technology but no one uses it, how can it make people's lives easier?

That's what Scott Weiss must be wondering. Weiss is co-founder and president of AuditionHost, a new website designed to simplify casting by allowing casting directors to manage

audition videos online and share them with their clients. The goal is "to automate the first round of the audition process," Weiss says. "It's a business tool. There's an emerging trend: How can we use the Internet to make things easier and faster, to focus on more stuff? For a casting director, maybe they can take the few hours this would save them sitting in an audition room and put it toward the next project."

One obstacle for start-ups like AuditionHost, which launched in February, is that in order to become viable, it must first be widely adopted by casting directors. The service costs CDs \$299 for one 30-day online casting call (prices for long-term plans vary). For casting offices without their own studios, Weiss notes, that's cheaper than renting audition space. The service is free for actors, who can also get feedback from casting directors on the site.

Cast It Systems is another online management tool for casting, and after five years in business it boasts more than 400 clients, including major studios and networks such as 20th Century Fox and HBO and producers like Bad Robot, Happy Madison, and the

Weinstein Co. Producers post casting needs and production details, CDs upload audition videos and actor profiles, and both sides interact, comment on the material, and make decisions faster.

"I think you'll always have those smaller projects that take YouTube auditions," says Cast It co-founder Eric Hayes. "But for it to be a viable system, it has to be standardized for the big studios. That's kind of the advantage of Cast It. Casting directors know that if they use Cast It, they can work with any studio or network."

While the site is primarily for CDs and producers, Cast It recently launched ActorCast as a way to link its clients with actors. The company has also hosted exclusive online open calls for upcoming feature films and TV series, including "The Twilight Saga: Eclipse," "Diary of a Wimpy Kid," "The Smurfs," and "Sons of Tucson." Actors pay a one-time fee to submit, though Hayes admits that many producers end up casting through agent submissions. The producers of "Diary of a Wimpy Kid," for example, accepted actor submissions for a child role, but in the end none of those actors was cast. Julia Jones and BooBoo Stewart, on the other hand, were cast in "Eclipse" after submitting themselves to Cast It's online audition.

Geography Lessons

AuditionHost and Cast It are designed to break down geographic barriers and give casting directors access to actors worldwide. Of course, Weiss and Hayes both realize that their products can't entirely replace in-person auditions and face-to-face meetings. CDs in Los Angeles and New York are less likely to consider a video audition from an actor in, say, Milwaukee if they'll have to cover his or her travel expenses. And however useful these sites may be, they're unlikely to increase the odds that a major producer or studio will cast an unknown actor based on a videotape.

But there are other ways these sites can speed up the casting process, according to Weiss. While it might take a casting director five hours to see 50 actors for an under-five role on a soap opera, he says, the CD can find the right person in minutes using online videos. With a dozen or more roles to cast every week, the show could save hundreds of hours a year. Productions that shoot in multiple locations can also benefit, Weiss says: "Say you're going to go to Austin for three weeks. The casting director will have to fly out there, set up camp, and partner with an agent on the ground floor there or set up their own shop." With AuditionHost, local actors could initially audition online, saving time and money.

MyStudio, on the other hand, is a new casting service that's defined by geography. With partners including Mark Burnett Productions and the Grammy Foundation, MyStudio holds regional casting contests in conjunction with traditional auditions. Performers must enter an octagonal 4-foot-by-7-foot studio to record their videos—the company opened

its first recording studio at a mall in Scottsdale, Ariz., in September 2008—and cannot upload material from an offsite computer. But MyStudio recently opened a second studio in Hollywood, Calif., with another planned for the New York City area and more to come in high-traffic areas across the country. Actors pay \$20 for each five-minute session, and CDs access the videos online.

"With only one or two studios, obviously there's a limit," says Anna Madrid, vice president of business development for MyStudio's parent company, Studio One Media. "We're only going to service, for the most part, the people in Arizona. But that gives them the extra leg up, so instead of having to drive to L.A., they can step in here and instantly send something." And while an actor's home-recorded audition is unlikely to have the best audio and video quality—making it easy for a busy CD to skip while sifting through hundreds of submissions—high-quality HD video and sound are two of MyStudio's greatest strengths, Madrid points out.

Not a Cure-All

None of these new services is aimed at theatrical auditions. "It's not a field I want to go after," Weiss says. Everyone seems to agree that theater remains a live medium and that theater CDs still strongly prefer to be in the room with an auditioning performer.

And unlike YouTube, these sites don't allow strangers to watch and comment on submissions; only authorized users can access them for professional use. (Hayes emphasizes that Cast It is not a way for actors to simply post a video and "get discovered.")

"Casting directors might resist because they like to coach," Weiss says. "But it won't make a major difference, because in our system they have the ability to message back to the person. You could also argue, in theory, there are missed opportunities in a live setting anyway. What if someone comes in and they're not putting their best foot forward, or the director is burnt out from working all day? Both sides will miss opportunities. We see that doing it this way, there is a lot of anxiety and pressure removed."