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CASTING ONE'S LOT WITH THE NET

Web Sites Provide Aspiring Actors, Artists and Techies With a
New Avenue for Shameless Self-Promotion

BY MARTHA GROVES • TIMES STAFF WRITER

Strictly in a career sense, it was a dark and stormy night for sitcom writer Gary Apple. After five years of working for television comedy series in Los Angeles, the New York native realized last June that nobody had hired him for the coming season.

His solution? Put up a zany home page on the World Wide Web, hoping to spotlight his talents and thereby land a job. Alas, no sitcom producer took the cyber-bait, and Apple headed back to the Big Apple. But his page (<http://www.verbaljudo.com/apple>) got so much attention—including a coveted Cool Site of the Day award—that he now has a budding career writing humorous advertisements for the Internet and creating Web sites.

"I love it," said Apple, 41. "I'm having such a good time."

Welcome to the brave new world of shameless self-promotion, Internet-style. For struggling artists and techies, the global computer network provides a new avenue for being discovered any time of day or stormy night.

As actors, musicians and other creative types see it, the technology has the potential to change fundamentally the way people get hired in entertainment and technology fields, if not throughout corporate America.

"It's really, in the truest sense of the word, a big digital billboard," said Mark Baker, co-founder with his twin, Matthew, of World Wide Stars, a Web site (<http://www.worldstars.com>) where aspiring actors post resumes in the hope of piquing the interest of casting directors.

Josh Smith, a 27-year-old actor from Princeton, N.J., discovered the power of the young medium recently when he was tapped to audition for ads for a Calvin Klein fragrance and Chrysler's Jeep. He didn't get either gig, but he enjoyed being part of a revolution. In the case of both ads, the casting director selected prospects exclusively from the World Wide Stars site—a first.

In Baker's view, one big problem with the way casting is now done is that agents tend to send out the same few hand-picked, front-burner people for all possible jobs. If the agents haven't correctly assessed the casting director's specifications, it's back to the drawing board, and every-

body has wasted a lot of time.

This way, said Baker, the casting director can have a direct line to the talent, saving time and money—and heartache for actors.

With a \$10,000 investment, the 29-year-old Baker boys created World Wide Stars, based in Los Angeles, about 18 months ago as a free resource for union-affiliated performers with agents.

The impetus was conversations with a number of frustrated actor friends who were having a tough go of it because they weren't getting enough exposure. A month ago, the Bakers began charging new members a \$99 annual fee, which entitles them to unlimited updates of resumes and photos. The site also plans a section for unrepresented talent, something that could enhance a talented novice's chances of breaking into this tough business.

From 250 members, Baker expects the site to grow to as many as 325 by month's end. He boasts that 15,000 people log on to the site daily, browsing through lists of actors and actresses with thumbnail pictures, resumes and contact information.

Other similar sites exist. Some, such as Internet Stage and Screen Resources (<http://www.stagenet.com>) and Center-stage@Buzz (<http://www.buzznyc.com>), post job listings and offer movie and play reviews.

Daryl Dunbar, an agent with Color Me Bright, a new agency in Beverly Hills, sees the technology as capable of changing the way Hollywood does business. For starters, many photos on the Web are in color, an improvement over the traditional black-and-white versions that get passed from actor to agent to casting director.

"This is the way the business is going to go," Dunbar said.

Actor Smith agrees. "I'd be really surprised in five years if they're still casting the same way," he said. "You can [now] market yourself sitting at your computer. We're still banging on doors, but now they're electronic."

Not everyone is so enamored of the technology.

"It's an interesting concept, but it will never take the place of an interview," said Helen MacKinnon, president of Technical Connections Inc., a West Los Angeles executive search company that places software and information

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technology professionals.

Very few hiring managers, she said, have the time to browse the fast-growing number of Web pages. And the savvy ones familiar with Web page development recognize how easy it is to lift great gimmicks from other people's sites and pass them off as one's own. MacKinnon knows from experience: Her firm "borrowed" a few good ideas—such as a spinning logo—in setting up its own page (<http://www.technicalconnections.com>).

Her advice to candidates who want to promote themselves is first to secure an interview through traditional methods and then refer the prospective employer to a Web page for a taste of the talent. In other words, the page itself might not get your foot in the door, but it can help keep it there.

Initially, hiring executives at E! Entertainment Television in Los Angeles perused the Internet for talent. But recently the company posted its e-mail address. With that step, "we put the burden on the candidate to locate the company," said Patty Robinson, the company's senior vice president of human resources.

A snazzy gimmick is certainly no guarantee of success. By figuring out how to compress sound, Tim Cooney, a production sound mixer who lives in Frazier Park, was a pioneer in offering audio on a Web page (<http://members.aol.com/tim695>). But he realized recently that his 8-month-old page was out of date because the standard for "sound bites" had changed. He did an update. By clicking on the audio icons, browsers can listen to highlights from Cooney's projects, such as Sandra Bullock singing in "Demolition Man" and Sylvester Stallone losing his grip on the hapless female climber in "Cliffhanger."

That feat, however, has yet to bring him any offers, other than entry-level opportunities. Yet Cooney, 45, plans to stick with it because it "costs you nothing to do it" and it helps him look more hip to the younger producers and directors coming out of film schools.

In her extravagant Web page (<http://www.playskewl.factory.net/people/toone>), self-described "dedicated Webhead," "drag king" and onetime punk rocker Annie Toone of San Francisco states her employment objective as a "position with an exciting Web and/or multimedia company."

"At first," she said, "it was a way to spread the word about my music." And, indeed, the page has brought orders for her tapes and a

let in Iowa." But of more interest is the leads she has gotten to do work on the Web, opportunities that put her officially in career-transition mode.

"It has changed my life fundamentally," she said.

Apple, whose sitcom writing lies dormant as he spends most waking hours developing himself into a Webmeister, feels much the

same—even though he is making far less than the "stupid money" he earned in Hollywood.

"The Internet allows you to create new ways to be funny," he said. "It's really empowering. A technology like this has never existed. A creative person can reach millions of people without much money.

"The hours just fly by."

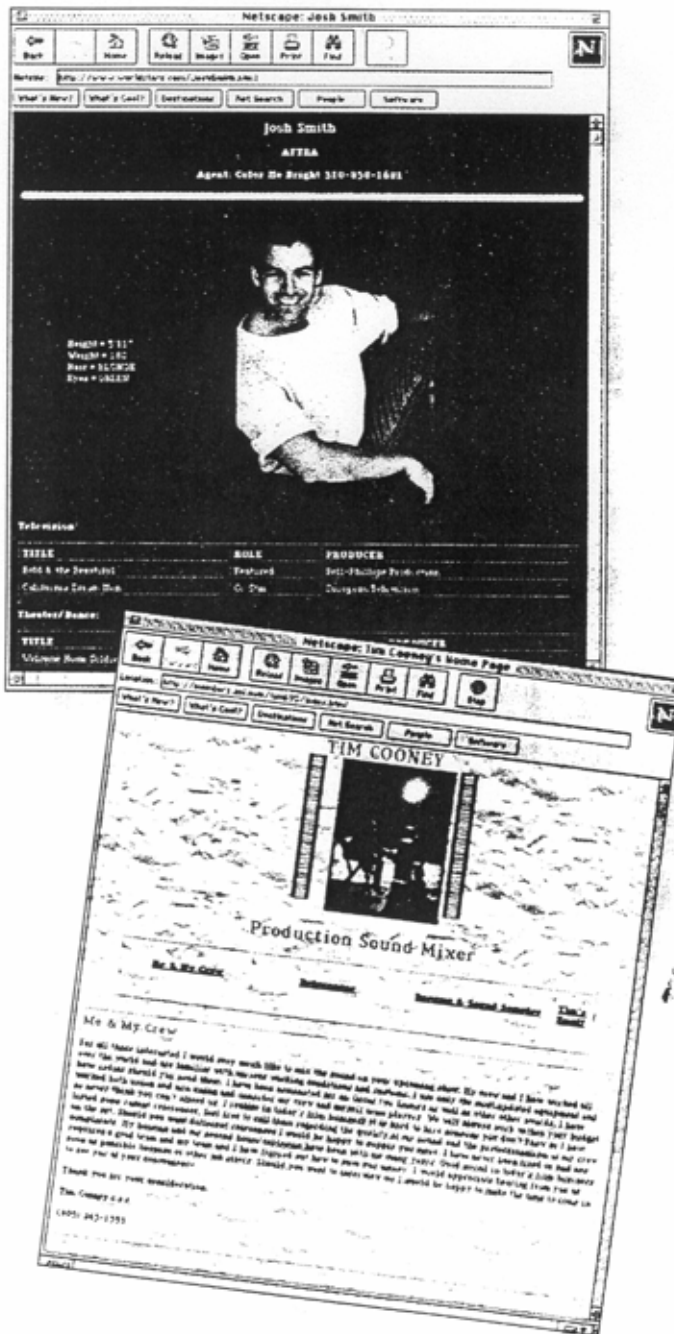


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