

Howcast offers high-quality instructional videos on everything from fixing a leaky faucet and creating a living will to using Twitter and having sex in a car

BY JULIE CRESWELL
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Howcast's wide-ranging instructional videos include *How to Survive a Bear Attack*, above, *How to Create a Modern-Day Scavenger Hunt*, lower left, and *How to Make a Fruit Smoothie*.

PHOTOS: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE



How to start a company (and kiss like Angelina, or do the Moonwalk)

In their star turns in James Bond movies, Ursula Andress and Halle Berry perfected the art of emerging from an ocean swim and walking onto the beach in a dripping-wet bikini.

For everyone else? Not so easy. But there are some tricks for aspiring Bond girls, and they involve, among other things, waterproof mascara, Vaseline and double-sided tape. There are some finer points, too, to pull off such a feat, and words can't quite convey their subtleties.

Sometimes — and this is a difficult sentence for a newspaper to print — it's easier to learn from a video.

That notion led a handful of Google and YouTube veterans to start Howcast.com, and jump into the bustling and fast-growing crowd of Web sites offering how-to content.

Given the competition, from sites like Howdini and even YouTube, Howcast Media is betting that its particular blend of information and entertainment, presented in short and snappy video, will draw plenty of traffic and, most important, deliver a profit.

Certainly the demand is there. People like to watch videos, and, in a bad economy, the ranks of do-it-yourselfers and would-be MacGyvers are swelling.

Already, Howcast has 100,000 videos in its library, some that it has produced itself and many more from others like *Playboy*, *Popular Science*, Home Depot and the Ford modeling agency that share in the ad revenue.

The site offers instruction on a range of topics, from everyday issues — fixing a leaky faucet, creating a living will — to the more obscure, like how to survive a bear attack or how to have sex in a car. (Nothing on Howcast

is particularly graphic. Plenty of other sites, of course, already offer that sort of stuff.)

Given the ease of posting on sites like YouTube, where 20 hours of video are uploaded each minute, it takes more than a bunch of short clips to succeed. Part of the trick to winning on the Web is having a distinct personality.

Some industry executives give Howcast credit for finding a way to stand out.

"They understand that video is an incredible medium to share and instruct," says David Eun, a Google executive who oversees strategic partnerships. "But they also realize that they can use video to provide instruction in an environment that is entertaining, not dry."

One of the biggest challenges for a site like Howcast, though, is the same one that has vexed old-school media giants and survivors of the dot-com boom: How can content creators turn a profit on the Web?

Howcast's solution is to partner with advertisers and create instructional videos for their specific products or services.

Blurring the lines between editorial and advertising is a tricky endeavor, of course. Companies that try to be too stealthy or clever risk seeing their brand roasted on Facebook, Twitter and beyond.

"Users are sensitive to brands trying to muscle into what appears to be an organic social media environment," says Nick Thomas, an analyst at Forrester Research. "Yes, I want to learn how to cook something, but do I necessarily want to be taught by someone who makes the ingredients?"

Howcast's team of young executives argue that they can tap-dance along that fine line by making sure that any branding effort is in a supporting role, rather than a starring one, in its

instructional videos.

They are even forging relationships with the State Department as it looks for ways to use social networks and other media to communicate directly with people around the world. Among the videos they've produced for it are *How to Protest Without Violence* and *How to Launch a Human Rights Blog*.

Howcast executives are also quickly signing deals with the likes of Google, Facebook and Hulu to spread their videos across the Internet.

"Being a media company today means you can't exist inside a walled garden, just driving traffic to your own site," says Jason Liebman, 33, Howcast's chief executive. "You have to produce the content, distribute it all over the Web, develop the technology — all of which is hard to do. But you need to do everything in order to be successful today."

Sitting in a stifling office loft in the SoHo neighborhood of Manhattan, with a couple of air-conditioners chugging away in vain, Jeffrey Kaufman runs through the topics that are particularly popular on search engines these days. The list includes werewolves. And manboobs.

Kaufman is the head of programming at Howcast, and is supposed to have his fingertips on the nation's pulse through proprietary data-mining tools and information gathered from search engines.

Kaufman chalks up the werewolf craze to the coming movie *New Moon*, the second installment of the popular *Twilight* vampire series, based on the books by Stephenie Meyer.

Why manboobs? Everyone in the small room shrugs.

Then they have to figure out a how-to video spin on the topics (How to make a werewolf

costume? How to get rid of manboobs?). The final consideration is whether the subject will attract advertisers or, better yet, a corporation would pay to have its product or service appear in the video.

The how-to category is big and growing, but extremely fragmented. And while Howcast, whose Web site is just 17 months old, is watching its traffic soar, it lags far behind eHow and About.com (owned by The New York Times Co), according to Hitwise, a research firm.

Howcast says its videos were played more than 20 million times last month across all of its distribution network, including YouTube and Apple's iPhone. What may give Howcast a leg up on its competitors is the fact that the company is creating a library of high-quality content that could command higher ad rates, says Allen Weiner, an analyst at Gartner, the tech research firm.

To help viewers navigate through the 100,000 videos on its site, Howcast divides them into 25 broad categories — such as technology, travel and food and drink — and then slices and dices those into smaller segments.

Viewers can rate the videos (a video teaching how to pick a lock rates disturbingly high). Videos on sex and relationships are among the most watched at the Howcast site. No.1 is *How to Have Sex in a Car*, followed by *How to Use Twitter* and *How to Kiss Like Angelina Jolie*. (Jolie is not in the video; it features two women in their underwear kissing on a bed.)

Liebman, the executive overseeing this start-up, seems somewhat embarrassed about this playlist. He prefers to talk about the Howcast videos that are the most popular across all the sites that distribute the company's content, including *How to Quit Smoking* and *How to Do the Moonwalk*.

[SOCIETY]

Japan's smokers-only cafes have health campaigners fuming

Inside Tokyo's Cafe Tobacco shops, customers indulge in a habit that's increasingly frowned upon in a country long seen as a smokers' paradise

BY MIWA SUZUKI
AFP, TOKYO

Japan has banned smoking from most public places, including many city streets, but one company has given refuge to the dwindling ranks of tobacco addicts — by opening smokers-only cafes.

Thick cigarette smoke wafts through the Cafe Tobacco shops in the heart of Tokyo, filled with office workers and shoppers looking to take a quick puff, a habit increasingly frowned upon in a country long seen as a smokers' paradise.

"Nowadays smoking is considered an evil," said Tadashi Horiguchi, a board director of the coffee shop operator Towa Food Service Co, which recently opened its second smokers-only cafe in Tokyo and hopes to grow the business.

"We want to provide an oasis for smokers," Horiguchi said as air purifiers overhead sucked up clouds of bluish smoke from the crowded cafe in Shinbashi, a bar-lined city district known as "salaryman town."

Outside, a red sign with a picture of a smoking cigarette drew more customers, about 600 a day according to the manager Kazuhiro Kawano.

Inhaling from his cigarette and sipping an

iced coffee, Koki Takeda, a 24-year-old property salesman, said he was pleasantly surprised when he first saw the "smokers only" sign outside, near a commuter railway station.

"I thought it's great," he said between drags from his cigarette. "Starbucks bans smoking, and many other coffee shops are non-smoking, or they have a limited number of smoking seats that are often occupied."

Coming to the smokers-only cafe takes the shame out of lighting up, Kawano said. "You don't have to feel guilty here," he said, as he sat surrounded by other smokers, all of them aged over 20 as stipulated by a sign outside.

Not everyone is as enthusiastic about the new tobacco-friendly cafes.

"Tobacco contains toxic substances and increases health risks," said Yosuke Hagimori, a health ministry official.

"We do not consider it positively when smoking places proliferate," he said, adding that the ministry has no control over the marketing strategies of individual businesses.

Official anti-smoking policies have reduced smoking rates in Japan, where the cigarette was once ubiquitous — but many campaigners



A Cafe Tobacco shop in Tokyo's Shinbashi, a bar-lined city district known as "salaryman town." PHOTO: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

say much remains to be done to stamp out the cancer-causing habit.

Japan's smoking rate is on the decline but still higher than in other developed countries,

with some 40 percent of men and 13 percent of women lighting up, according to Japan Tobacco, the former government monopoly.

The central government has yet to pass any wide-scale smoking bans.

The 2002 Health Promotion Law says schools, hospitals, department stores and other public places must make efforts to protect clients from second-hand smoke, but there is no punishment for non-compliance.

Instead many local governments and institutions have taken anti-smoking measures themselves. Central Tokyo districts have prohibited or strongly discouraged smoking on the streets except for designated areas.

Smoking has also been banned in most Tokyo taxis since last year and in railway stations as of earlier this year. Many bars, cafes and restaurants, however, still have smoking sections, to the annoyance of health campaigners.

Bungaku Watanabe, of the non-profit Tobacco Problems Information Center, said "people smoke because ashtrays are there. Their availability does harm to smokers who actually want to quit smoking."

He argued that Japan's problem with high smoking rates stems from the government, which still owns about half of Japan Tobacco, the country's only cigarette maker with almost 100 brands on the market.

Japanese law still stipulates the goal of a "healthy development" of the tobacco industry to generate income and for stable tax revenue — a position Watanabe said contradicts World Health Organization rules and is out of step with the public health policies of most other industrialized countries.

Japan Tobacco campaigns for "coexistence between smokers and non-smokers in public spaces" and has deployed at public events a so-called "SmoCar" camper truck equipped with air-purifiers and a deodorizer, to allow people to smoke.

Total cigarette sales fell five percent in Japan in the last fiscal year to March, but still came to US\$38 billion, according to data from the private Tobacco Institute of Japan.

Cigarettes now carry warning labels, but they remain much cheaper in Japan than in most other developed countries, with a pack of 20 cigarettes selling for about US\$3.