**TELEVISION**

**‘Lost’ is easy to find**

FANS can get fixes from iPods, blogs, podcasts, and soon, cellphones. It’s a new media model.

By Maria Elena Fernandez, Times Staff Writer

In its monster hit “Lost,” ABC has found more than just a highly rated, award-winning television show with the potential to spin off sequels. “Lost” has become a world of its own, albeit fictional, that, with its labyrinth of clues and multilayered plots, has become the test case for the marriage between new technology and creative content.

Getting “Lost” has never been easier. It’s on your TV set, your DVR, your iPod and DVD collection — and that’s just the Wednesday-night program itself. Surf the Web and there are countless “Lost” sites — some designed by ABC or the show’s creators and others by the legions of fans of the island castaways drama. Soon there will be “Lost Video Diaries” on Verizon cellphones, two-minute episodes that will chronicle the stories of characters who were on the doomed Oceanic Flight 815 but who do not appear on the show.

What’s happening with “Lost” is also a harbinger of the changing nature of TV watching itself, dividing its followers into two groups: the loyal audience that tunes in every week and the fans who devour every bit of information made available to them on the Internet, books and magazines.

“The show is the mother ship, but I think with all the new emerging technology, what we’ve discovered is that the world of ‘Lost’ is not basically circumscribed by the actual show itself,” executive producer Carlton Cuse said.

Other networks and producers are following “Lost” closely to see if this multimedia franchising model can work for them. As technology allows more viewers to tune in how and when they want — most noticeably, commercial free — networks are looking for new ways to distribute their shows as well as spark buzz about them. To that end, network marketers are working closer than ever with the writers and producers to generate campaigns that blend content with marketing strategies.

Billboards and TV commercial spots? Pasé. Taking cues from high-profile promotional campaigns for big movies, ABC mounted an Internet assault last year, which paid off and taught its competitors a thing or two about marketing in this new age. (Fox and NBC followed suit this year with highly successful launches of “Prison Break” and “My Name Is Earl”). Instead of sucking life out of “Lost” by playing clips on the air ad nauseam, ABC went to town creating even more intrigue about the airliner that crashed than co-creators J.J. Abrams and Damon Lindelof managed to pack into their $11-million, two-hour pilot.

“You have to be judicious about not letting the technology wag the dog of content, if you will,” said Stephen McPherson, president of ABC prime-time entertainment. “There are so many different aspects that go into all of these multiple platforms that you just can’t say it’s a successful show, so let’s put it on 20 platforms. But the idea that great content can be used in a multitude of different ways is a wonderful challenge and a wonderful opportunity.”

The new platforms provide myriad ways for the networks to sell their shows. “I actually look at marketing more like developing content for the show,” said Mike Benson, ABC’s senior vice president of marketing. “We’re really setting out in our marketing to prove what these shows are. And while we can hype and sell, I’d rather tell a
story than sell a story."

ABC is developing an interactive website to delve into aspects of the show's mythology that will never be explored on air. Content for the site is being created by a "Lost" staff writer.

"We obviously come up with these ideas based on the storytelling, what's cool to us," Lindelof said. "But then our masters will provide us with resources to do this stuff if there's a potential revenue stream down the line. So we're scratching each other's backs."

Fans such as Rob Eichenlaub, a Web designer who clicks on the fan website lost-tv.comas soon as "Lost" goes off the air, can't wait to log on to get more clues.

"There's something about this big puzzle that everybody wants to be the first to solve," said Eichenlaub, 29, of Hudson, Fla. "If I was alone in it, it wouldn't be so fun. But it sort of sprung up, this whole subculture of fans who really see it like a video game."

It's all about the bottom line of course, and the idea is to drive the audience into the "Lost" maze, whether it's reflected in Nielsen ratings, merchandise purchases, online hits or $1.99 Apple downloads. Networks and studios that want to thrive in this new age are going to have to become as "platform-agnostic" as the Generation X and Y viewers they are targeting, said Bruce Gersh, senior vice president of business development for ABC Entertainment.

"We are reaching viewers primarily via the television screen but as we look into the crystal ball, who knows how many more products might be out there that will allow our consumers to have a great viewing experience," Gersh said.

If Lindelof and Cuse had their druthers, everyone would watch "Lost" on 72-inch high-definition screens. But they're not complaining about fans downloading the show on computers or video iPods. As producers, their biggest worry is losing viewers who skip one episode and don't return because they become intimidated by the revealing flashback they missed or the complex plot's twists and turns.

"At this point, if you try to talk about an episode from the first season, there are so many tie-ins to things that have happened more recently that you just have to be in the know," said Jess Blau, a graduate student who moved to Paris from Milwaukee in May. He has been downloading the second season of the show on his computer via iTunes since ABC became the first network to strike a deal with Apple in October. This month, NBC Universal made several of its prime-time programs available for download on iTunes as well. So far, "Lost" is the No. 1 downloaded show, with about 400,000 orders.

"I contribute to the forums occasionally and read them regularly but I don't really post very often because there are people out there who are investigating "Lost" like it's their job," Blau noted. "By the time I notice Walt's [a child character on the show] face on the milk carton, or whatever little Easter egg popped up in the episode, there is already a thread of 60 pages posted about it."

Many of the viewers who catch the show on the small screen later turn to downloaded versions on their computers where screen-grabs allow them to notice details. "I make sure to watch every episode on TV because the screen is bigger and the stereo is better and it's a more fun experience," said 15-year-old Ian Shirley of Vista, Calif. "But if I'm talking to people about episodes on the forums and we decide to go back and look at one or want to screen-capture something, I will go and watch them from the computer."

Ben Sledge of Germantown, Md., inadvertently got caught in the "Lost" trap when he created what he thought would be a personal website, lost.cubil.net, to keep track of the show's chronology. As more people downloaded the page, the Web developer and independent filmmaker was forced to expand it. The site had 836,000 downloads in October and 796,000 in November.

Other shows have gone above and beyond communicating with fans. "Six Feet Under" producers regularly wrote eulogies for the people who died on the HBO drama, and its website included detailed back stories of the show's characters. Writers of "NapRuck" recently posted a blog on myspace.com for the Carver, the show's topical serial killer. "How I Met Your Mother" writers have penned Barney's blog, a spot on cbs.com, where fans can keep up with the character's shenanigans. In this new world, TV writing isn't just about turning in scripts.

"The job of being a television show-runner has evolved and there's all these new aspects to it," Cuse said. "It's good because there are additional avenues open for content. We have ways of expressing ideas we have for the show that wouldn't fit into the television series. But it's hard to manage our time. And we honestly put most of our time and attention on the show itself — that still is the bread and butter of our existence."

As technology has opened up the possibilities for accessing a TV program, the paradigm for marketing television shows has shifted, turning marketers and producers into partners.

In the spring, Disney-owned Hyperion Books will publish its second "Lost" book, a novel written by the passenger who got sucked into the engine in the pilot. The passenger, Gary Troupe, had e-mailed a manuscript to his publisher, and another copy will be found on the island, Lindelof said. Who actually wrote the book won't be revealed.

Writers who now suddenly find themselves blogging for their characters, creating novels for them or sharing perspective on a website will eventually need to be compensated for the extra work, Cuse said.

"That is very much going to be at the forefront of all the new labor negotiations, particularly with the Writers Guild, because writers are at the center of television series production and all of these new ideas are ultimately writer-based," Cuse said. "Right now, our involvement in this is about being involved in the cutting edge of these emerging technologies and learning how it works."

Just as iTunes transformed the music industry by turning singles into a viable revenue source again, Cuse and Lindelof believe their show is at the forefront of the television revolution.

"We're exploring a new frontier here in a lot of ways," Lindelof said. "So it's best to see what it is first, as opposed to everybody walking up to the cash register and saying, pay me, and then we'll do the exploring."