Sony offers a big break for Internet video stars

Sony's remade Crackle website will award talent with a shot at funding and promotion.

By Dawn C. Chmielewski, Times Staff Writer
July 16, 2007

Sony Pictures Entertainment Inc. is trying to attract Web-video auteurs with a pitch straight out of central casting: We're gonna make you a star, baby.

Sony today is relaunching the video-sharing site it bought last year, changing the name from Grouper to Crackle.

"Surf's Up."

executives at Sony Pictures Animation, which has made such movies as this summer's "Surf's Up," say they hope to do the same for Web video. "We're gonna make you a star, baby," said Van Baker, research vice president of Gartner Inc. "That's just media quality," he said.

But the movie and TV studio is trying to separate Crackle from YouTube and the other amateur-video sites by dangling cash, a chance to perform stand-up at the Improv or a possible Oscar nomination in front of those who submit clips.

Sony acquired Sausalito, Calif.-based Grouper in August for $65 million. At the time, some questioned how a traditional media company would use the small site, which Sony acquired Sausalito, Calif.-based Grouper in August for $65 million. At the time, some questioned how a traditional media company would use the small site, which Sony acquired Sausalito, Calif.-based Grouper in August for $65 million. At the time, some questioned how a traditional media company would use the small site, which Sony acquired Sausalito, Calif.-based Grouper in August for $65 million. At the time, some questioned how a traditional media company would use the small site, which Sony acquired Sausalito, Calif.-based Grouper in August for $65 million.

Lions Gate Entertainment Corp. also is looking to scout the edgy talent that creates amateur video of dramatic spills or gross-out footage that young men can't seem to get enough of online. The independent movie studio last week invested an undisclosed amount in Break.com, taking a stake in the Beverly Hills-based online video company.

Get noticed
[click to enlarge]

Bracket.com Chief Executive Keith Richman said his competitors appeared to be searching for a niche that would allow their Web-video ventures to flourish in the shadow of YouTube.

"With certain people emerging and having more scale, others are trying to find approaches to attract an audience," he said.

Sony acquired Sausalito, Calif.-based Grouper in August for $65 million. At the time, some questioned how a traditional media company would use the small site, which Nielsen/NetRatings NetView said ranked 13th among online video sites in June.

But the movie and TV studio is trying to separate Crackle from YouTube and the other amateur-video sites by dangling cash, a chance to perform stand-up at the Improv or a possible Oscar nomination in front of those who submit clips.

The strategy is now clear: Sony will seek to elevate Crackle with a studio-centric approach of providing funding, promotion and syndication.

"There is so much video on the Internet now that it's crying out for a step up in quality," said Van Baker, research vice president of Gartner Inc. "That's just media companies doing what they do best, which is finding and distributing good content."

The new Crackle site is organized into themed channels, such as Wet Paint for animation.

Sony plans to sponsor quarterly contests to find the best original animation and award the creator with a cash prize and a trip to Los Angeles for a pitch meeting with executives at Sony Pictures Animation, which has made such movies as this summer's "Surf's Up."
Winners get a shot at having their animated short released in theaters — making it eligible for an Academy Award — and will be invited to attend Siggraph, the annual computer graphics conference, in August 2008.

"We're out of the user-generated-video business and in the emerging-talent business," said Josh Felser, who founded Grouper and is now co-president of Crackle. "We're liberating the next-generation directors and producers from YouTube."

Crackle is applying the same formula across all flavors of short-form video.

The quarterly contest winner on its Shorts channel, for short-form video, gets a financing deal from Crackle's seven-figure development budget and a meeting with executives of Columbia Pictures or Sony Pictures Television.

The best stand-up comedian or impersonator on Crackle's High Wire channel will win the right to pitch ideas for comedy shorts to the Improv Comedy Lab, its Internet studio. The top comic will get 15 minutes at the microphone at one of the Improv's comedy clubs in Los Angeles, New York or Chicago.

Crackle also promises broad distribution, on the Web and on Sony devices.

The videos can be posted on blogs, MySpace, Facebook and other websites, and viewed on devices including the Sony PSP hand-held game console and Internet-connected Sony Bravia televisions.

It's just the break that budding filmmaker Brian Keith Dalton has been waiting for.

The 42-year-old from Temecula said his musings about why God would permit natural disasters, such as the devastating tsunami of 2004, led to the creation of the character Mr. Deity.

In videos he began posting on YouTube in January, Dalton's comedic interpretations of the Almighty depicted him as a frustrated creative type with poor managerial skills.

The first Mr. Deity videos got about 1 million views over three months, Dalton said. Then Sony called and promised to give Mr. Deity better exposure. It worked; Dalton's videos attracted 1 million views in three weeks on Grouper.

Dalton said he has since signed a 10-episode development deal with Crackle that will enable him to pay the friends and family who work on the production, as well as select more extravagant shooting locales (a restaurant and a pool, instead of his living room).

He said he also had entered into a discussion with a "big-name company" to create a feature film with Mr. Deity.

"We will be taking this up a notch," he said.

dawn.chmielewski@latimes.com