

M-Net confirms Jennings viral campaign

M-Net confirmed yesterday, Monday, 3 September 2007, that the broadcaster offered a platform for Idols contestant Cliff Jennings to create a below-the-line word-of-mouth viral campaign to support Idols Season 4. It also confirmed that the nature of this campaign was known to only a handful of executives at M-Net and its advertising agency, Ogilvy JHB.

“Who is Cliff Jennings?” This burning question caused a frenzy in media circles, Internet chatrooms, blogs and websites towards the end of last week after a premature leak on a US ad website revealed that one of the local South Africa Idols contestants was actually an actor hired by Ogilvy for an ad campaign [see [Idols contestant a marketing ploy?](#)].

“No-one on the Idols crew knew about the campaign – not the director, not Colin Moss, not the crew, and certainly not the judges,” said M-Net brand manager Pierre Cloete.

This is backed up a statement from the judges, Mara Louw, Dave Thompson, Randall Abrahams and Gareth Cliff: “As a point of departure we wish to make it quite clear that we had absolutely no prior knowledge of the genesis of the Cliff Jennings ‘viral’ campaign or the involvement of the M-Net marketing department in this project. While we may have guessed at a ‘social networking’ context to Cliff Jennings continued presence at the first round of auditions we had no idea that he was in fact a ‘plant’ developed by M-Net marketing and their advertising agency.

“Paid little attention”

“As judges on a talent show in search of a popular music star and future industry success-story, the keen focus is upon individuals who possess the attributes for achieving such a position in the local industry and beyond. We fully understand that a wide variety of ‘performers’ enter the competition each year and that in the initial stages many entrants provide the show with a degree of amusement. However, our stated aim during the course of the show is to provide the South African public with a range of singers for whom they may vote in order to finally determine a winner. As this is our chief concern in all honesty we paid little attention to the antics of Cliff Jennings.

“We trust that once the screening of the initial phase is completed the public will focus on the task of finding a valuable, talented singer who will take their place in the South African spotlight,” concluded the statement.

“As real as any other”

“Cliff is as real to us as any other contestant who auditioned for Idols this year,” said Cloete. “The Cliff Jennings character uses the unique power of Idols to promote Season 4, and his phenomenal success on web-based social communities like MySpace and Facebook proves how successfully he embodies the ideals of Idols – Cliff truly does ‘live the dream’.”

According to M-Net, the viral campaign was an instant success with the Idols viewing public and the character of Cliff Jennings has become a cult hit on the South African scene.

“Today we have blogs, social networks and chatrooms on cellphones – these electronic platforms can be compared to the traditional ‘watercooler’ where people communicate and talk about things that interest them. For the past few weeks since the launch of Idols, Cliff Jennings [has been] the topic of discussion in many such forums,” commented Cloete.

By Sunday, 2 September the Cliff Jennings’ MySpace page had had 3500 profile views, he had 896 friends and 25 groups dedicated to him on Facebook, totalling more than 5600 members, and his 10n videoclips on YouTube had already had 5210 views.

Continued Cloete, “Nothing Cliff did on or off the cameras was scripted and he went through the exact same audition process as any other contestant – the pre-dawn queues, the tension, the anxious waiting, the fear, the exhilaration... The only difference is that Cliff chose to document his experience in a unique documentary (Cliff Jennings: Living The Dream, available on various viral platforms), which highlights the Idols experience from the contestant’s perspective.

“Encourage viewers”

“The reason why M-Net decided to ‘neither confirm nor deny’ the speculation regarding Cliff’s authenticity for the past few days was to encourage viewers to watch for themselves how the drama surrounding Cliff Jennings unfolded in the Sunday night broadcast of Idols. Cliff got people talking about Idols. As we enter the next phase of the show, the judges and the public decide the outcome of the show. By voting, the judges and viewers will determine the fate of the Idols contestants. Cliff Jennings never have and certainly won’t influence the purpose of Idols – to find the best singer in the country,” said Cloete.

“It is important to note that Cliff Jennings was never intended to generate content for Idols Season 4,” Cloete stressed. “We have more than enough weird, wonderful, talented – and talentless – contestants at every audition. Just tune in to DSTv channel 38 to see all the gripping material captured in regional audition of this season of Idols. What Cliff did was to generate a unique and hugely impactful viral marketing campaign for the show. M-Net commends Cliff Jennings for the way he continues to live the dream, and we wish him well in his future endeavours.”

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