nailgun*Goes Universal

Award-winning New York design/production studio brings intriguing narrative direction to redesign of Universal Channel, a television network seen in over 19 territories in Latin America.

'Universal' short stories with strong live-action narrative

"The approach we took, which is one of the things that makes this project both interesting and unusual, was narrative and story driven," said Michael Waldron, Creative Director and Co-Founder of nailgun*, the broadcast design/motion graphics studio he co-founded four years ago. "Most network redesigns lean heavily on 2D/3D animation and motion graphics. For this, our concept was to tell a lot of short stories that all add up to life inside the 'Universal World.'

And life inside the Universal World, as envisioned by nailgun*, is full of characters and intrigue. With a strong live-action narrative that abstractly recalls such classic films as *Rear Window* and *The Conversation*, nailgun* completed the comprehensive HD redesign of Universal Channel, the NBC Universal owned network seen by millions throughout Latin America. The redesign, which includes network IDs, bumpers, menus, promo templates, specialized movie animation opens/interstitials and more all produced in HD, focuses on the network's character-driven programming and its evolution from a crime channel into a general entertainment destination.

Redesign and branding: enter nailgun*

"Since launching in 2004, Universal Channel has grown to be one of the top rated channels in Latin America," Universal Channel Managing Director Steve Patscheck says. "Character-driven programs such as Heroes and House, as well as bold steps in the online and mobile arenas have allowed us to evolve from a crime channel into a general entertainment destination. The nailgun* team translated this into a cutting-edge look that beautifully showcases Universal Channel as a place rife with characters and drama. The new package is a perfect reflection of our blockbuster movies, award-winning series and original content, and we think it's exactly the right time to give our audience, affiliates and advertisers something new."

nailgun* redesign of Universal Channel (top)
Michael Waldron (above)
Creative Director and Co-Founder of nailgun*

nailgun* redesign of Universal Channel

The redesign package includes of series of main IDs – short, suspenseful vignettes that unfold in the new Universal cityscape. In one a man emerges from a building carrying a briefcase only to be confronted by two police cruisers. Another depicts a man and woman in a passionate embrace, little suspecting they are being watched by a stranger through binoculars. Still another shows a women sharpening a knife while standing behind a man seated on a couch reading a newspaper. The IDs end with the POV turning and pulling back to reveal a reflective glass cityscape bathed in a warm red light, and the familiar, yet completely modernized, Universal 'globe' logo.

The iconic 'running man'
The Universal Channel's current branding featured two iconic elements that had worked well for them: a silhouette image of a man running and an urban landscape.
"They had some equity built up in those icons so we decided early on rather than reinvent the brand we would significantly refresh those icons to make them more modern and interesting," Waldron said. "We delved further into Universal's relationship with the cityscape and the mantra became 'Universal belongs to the city and the city belongs to Universal.' In terms of characters, the 'running man' is a great image because you don't know if he is chasing someone or being chased, whether he's a guilty man or one wrongly accused. It provides a lot of dramatic possibilities."

For the live action Waldron directed the cast of 12 through an extensive two-day greenscreen production of the various vignettes involving cranes, dollies and motion tracking. That footage was later composited along with an extensive amount of 2D/3D elements and typography into the final spots.

"For the live action we settled on a series of different personalities living in this world," explains Waldron. "They're every day scenes but because of the context we've put them in there's a sense of danger and intrigue".

As ambiguous as possible
Erik van der Wilden, nailgun*'s director of animation & editorial and co-founder, adds, "The client's biggest concern was having more than one discernible narrative thread to each of the stories and making sure each focused on the premise of Universal Channel as a place rife with characters and drama. These IDs will air for a long time and over time one narrative wasn't going to keep viewers interested. We kept the spots as ambiguous as possible so they could be viewed in a variety of ways. Is the woman sharpening the knife about to chop vegetables or murder her husband? Is the guy looking through binoculars a cheated husband or a peeping tom? Those questions keep viewers intrigued and what makes the work special."

Creating and modernising the cityscape

The nailgun* creative team also focused much of their effort on modernizing Universal Channel's cityscape icon and the famous globe logo, using 3D animation to make them feel more tactile and personal, and metaphorically represent the many intriguing ambiguities of the modern city. "We wanted the cityscape to look truly global," says Waldron. "We created things happening down at street level, but then pulled the camera back to reveal these dramatic horizons dominated by the Universal logo. Updating the Universal logo for this purpose proved to be kind of tricky. It's a familiar icon, but has a very flat, 2D look, which we wanted to enhance with more dimension and detail.

Adds van der Wilden, "Our use of reflections represents the idea that you can't always believe what you see. Sometimes you think you're in the city, but then perspective changes and you're somewhere else. The POV is always shifting and you're never be certain of what you're seeing."

Raymond Ecke

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