

VIDDSEE

Seeing a future for short films

Viddsee aims to tell a brand's story with artistry and sincerity, backed with hard data about what works and what doesn't.

VISIT online video platform Viddsee, and one thing that might strike you – in contrast to other video hosting sites – is the utter lack of ads. As a venture capital-backed firm that was pre-revenue till 2017, Viddsee has had the leeway to reject certain commercial approaches.

But more crucially, the ad-free approach attests to the firm's philosophy of putting filmmakers front and centre.

"We're all about empowering storytellers," says co-founder Ho Jia Jian, 30.

The site's proposition: "How to get good stories out to an audience."

That is not to say that Viddsee has neglected the financials in favour of its mission. On the contrary, its business model is based on a longer-term conception of value. Since its founding in 2013, the site has invested deeply in building an audience, or indeed a community.

This loyal viewership – and the insights gained from their behaviour – gave Viddsee an edge when it went into content creation in 2017, creating branded videos for clients.

In contrast to in-your-face advertising that may not fly with today's young consumers, Viddsee's approach aims to tell a brand's story with artistry and sincerity, backed with hard data about what works and what doesn't.

Says Mr Ho: "We need to show people the value of content."

BUILDING AN AUDIENCE

Mr Ho and fellow co-founder Derek Tan are both engineers by training, but also filmmakers themselves.

Before Viddsee was founded, several of Mr Ho's works had played at festivals.

After each event, he would share the films online,

creating websites for them or uploading them on third-party hosts.

But as someone who was neither a celebrity nor even a YouTube star, he found it hard to get his content out to an audience. Viewership would spike upon the initial release, but swiftly tail off.

He rued the brief lifespan of his short films: "There's so much work you put into one thing and it doesn't have a life after that."

Viddsee thus arose from the wish to bring audiences to filmmakers. The site focuses on "short premium content", including indie films, documentaries, and branded content, with their bite-size nature making them suitable for social sharing.

Today, some of its videos receive over 100 million views in three months.

Yet when it comes to viewership, it is not mere quantity that Viddsee is after. Part of Viddsee's value proposition to clients is being able to target the right viewers.

Building an internet television platform is one thing; developing an audience is another, says Mr Ho.

"I think it's something that takes longer but will pay off (in terms of) loyalty and being a differentiating factor."

Viddsee currently focuses on viewers in four markets: Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines. "We have always thought of ourselves as a global company," says Mr Ho.

Unlike cinemas, which are constrained by the need to sell tickets for their seats, international expansion on the internet is far easier, he notes.

Yet at the same time, Viddsee has a fiercely local focus, giving local filmmakers a channel through which to reach local audiences.

This translates into decisions such as being mobile-first, which Mr Ho notes is particularly important in the region outside Singapore.

Today, many young internet users in South-east Asia "skip the PC stage" and access the web mainly via smartphones, he observes.

Viddsee's mobile-focused approach helps the firm reach out to these audiences, "so even secondary school kids have an avenue to watch local content".

This approach does not mean keeping viewers and content in silos. On the contrary, Viddsee's insights into viewer preferences have helped it push content cross-culturally.

For instance, Viddsee noticed that viewers in the Philippines were particularly keen on the romance genre. Understandably, this audience was mainly watching videos in Tagalog. Viddsee began recommending Taiwanese romance-related content to these viewers – with great success.

Many of Viddsee's loyal viewers are themselves filmmakers. Viddsee nourishes its ties with this cre-



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BT PHOTO: YEN MENG JIIN

ative community through initiatives such as its annual Juree Awards.

With separate editions for the Philippines, Indonesia and Singapore, the competition seeks short films ranging from fiction and animation to documentaries.

Winners will receive production grants and work with Viddsee Studios, the firm's content creation arm, in the making and distribution of their films.

This plays to another of Viddsee's strengths: helping filmmakers figure out what their next story could be.

TELLING A BRAND'S STORY

Eschewing an advertising-driven approach to revenue, Viddsee instead went into branded content in 2017.

Rather than acting as a production house itself, Viddsee Studios works with filmmakers to bring its clients' stories to life.

The idea is for a subtler approach to branding: "how can it be native, integrated". Instead of selling a product, Viddsee's branded content aims to sell values.

As Mr Ho puts it: "It's not just your typical thirty-second TV commercial."

Such branded content could take the form of a documentary, "bringing together real life stories and brand values".

For Vaseline Singapore, Viddsee created a documentary series on two elderly Singaporeans who have dedicated themselves to their craft.

Or the message could be brought across through fiction. For herbal health tonic Yomeishu, Viddsee crafted a heartwarming short about a mother-daughter relationship.

This organic approach towards branding works better for millennials such as himself, says Mr Ho. "We grew up in an age where you don't tell me what to buy – you embody what I believe. It's all about authenticity."

Furthermore, Viddsee's creative efforts are backed by viewership data gathered from its curated content over the years.

"It only made sense that we try to combine whatever we've understood (through curating content) with creating new stories," says Mr Ho.

First, Viddsee can target audiences who have previously enjoyed videos on similar themes, pushing new content to them through on-site recommendations or direct mailers.

If a client has a specific demographic in mind, Viddsee can ensure the video gets to them.

Second, the team goes down to fine-grained details: from which keywords work best in snagging viewers, to which screenshots will prompt click-throughs on social media.

Through analysing viewing data, Viddsee can tell what keywords work better for certain demographics, and use different sets of keywords to market the same one film.

Or Viddsee might send out several batches of mailers about a single video, using different screenshots in each one, to test which result in higher clickthrough rates. This could even inform the film-making process itself, adds Mr Ho: "We can then tell the filmmaker, 'Okay, please have a shot like this in your film.'"

Viddsee tests changes to their website interface in the same manner, by simply rolling them out and seeing how viewer behaviour responds.

"We look at data as: How do we equip the team?" says Mr Ho. "This may be creatively good, but what backs you to say it's good?"

As engineers themselves, the founders are at home working with data and technology.

An automated content management system, for instance, uploads Viddsee's videos seamlessly to multiple platforms and the cloud, eliminating the need to fiddle with portable hard drives.

"If there are things that the machines can take over, let them take over," Mr Ho sums up.

"But don't forget that there is the other side," he adds – that there are some decisions only humans can make. While data informs creative decisions, it cannot replace the film-maker's eye.

So far, Viddsee's revenue activities have been limited to Singapore. But the firm is looking to take that business abroad as well, setting up a Viddsee Studios branch in Indonesia.

In finding new markets for branded content, Viddsee will continue to focus on the countries where its viewers are concentrated.

Once more, Mr Ho stresses the need to build a community before going commercial: "We really believe in the power of being local."



Harnessing data for better drama

WHEN filmmaker Kenny Tan was approached to join Viddsee in April 2017, he was nonplussed. His response, he recalls, was: "I'm not really the curator type, I do creation!"

Co-founder Ho Jia Jian then explained that the video platform was going into content creation too.

Now Mr Tan, 35, heads that new arm of the firm, Viddsee Studios, which was launched in November that year.

He started out in the industry years ago as a freelance director and producer, before joining a media company in 2014 to produce content with an online focus.

One major way in which working at Viddsee differs from his past experience, he says, is that the firm has "the data (he) needed to tell stories better".

Previously, all he had to go on were general surveys such as those carried out by Nielsen, with relatively limited sample sizes.

In contrast, Viddsee's films have had over a billion views to date, with each one being a useful datapoint.

Data analytics allows for audience profiling: figuring out what specific segments and demographics prefer.

"For me as a filmmaker, that's exciting," says Mr Tan.

Available data include viewing duration, time spent on Viddsee's site in a single browsing session, and whether users click through on content pushed to them via emailers.

Also tracked are shares, likes and comments, both on Viddsee's site and other platforms where its videos are hosted, such as Facebook and YouTube.

"As a filmmaker myself, I never had that kind of data," says Mr Tan.

Much of his filmmaking used to be based on assumptions about what worked. For instance, he would rule out what he thought of as clichés. Yet there may be an audience to whom such "clichés" are still fresh, he says.

The lesson: "Don't be myopic. You have to look at the data."

By analysing viewing data, Viddsee is better able to offer viewers content that they are likely to enjoy.

The viewing completion rate for Viddsee's videos is usually over 50 per cent, even for films lasting 11 or 12 minutes – no mean feat given the usual online attention spans.

It also helps that the firm has earned a reputation, he adds: "When you build a brand that revolves around storytelling, people are more willing to watch longer content."

Insights from data also inform Viddsee's content creation services.

If a client has a specific target demographic in mind, Viddsee can crunch the data to see what such audiences enjoy. Says Mr Tan: "It helps you target them better."

Yet even as Viddsee's filmmaking efforts are informed by data, the team never loses sight of the heart of their enterprise: creativity.

As an adjunct lecturer at a polytechnic some years ago, Mr Tan saw students who gave up creative work for corporate jobs or ended up in other roles in the industry.

Part of his goal at Viddsee is "finding work for the filmmakers" to keep their creative spirit alive, he says.

The Viddsee Originals series commissions work from filmmakers.

By working with Viddsee, young filmmakers also get a chance to work with big brands and build up their portfolio. This is possible because clients trust Viddsee to match them with the right directors, says Mr Tan.

The filmmakers also gain from Viddsee's insights, particularly on the difference between a captive cinema audience and fickle online viewers.

These tips can be as simple as avoiding an extended black screen at the start of the film – "People will just swipe away" – or providing subtitles so viewers can watch videos even without the sound on, as they might do during their commute. Says Mr Tan: "We're all about supporting filmmakers and keeping them going."

"We grew up in an age where you don't tell me what to buy – you embody what I believe. It's all about authenticity."

– Mr Ho on why the subtler approach towards branding works better for millennials

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