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Post Production

Quantel Quality, Clipbox Power

Rob Buckley

RUSHES™



"I'm amazed at some of our competitors. Rather than throw stones at us, they should sit down and think "why is Liberty doing this?," Mark Hewitt has been looking into his crystal ball. The MD of post-production house Rushes sees a future as little as a year away in which he and only two of his competitors will be so far ahead of their Soho neighbours, the others stand almost no chance of catching up.

"Interactive commercials are coming. Interactive television is coming. Liberty has seen that and that's what our whole drive is for." You can tell Hewitt is glad to be part of the Liberty Livewire group. Probably the largest collection of post-production companies in the world, Liberty owns over 12 companies in Soho alone, including Rushes since it was acquired earlier this year. And as far as Hewitt can see, there are almost no disadvantages to this.

"Obviously I have a biased viewpoint, but I don't understand the hysteria that it has caused within Soho," he muses. "It's great to be owned by a company whose whole reason for being is our industry. So many post houses are just 'mom and pop' shops set up by operators. That always limits capital, creativity and horizons. To be owned now by somebody who's taking a worldwide view of it is exciting."

Hewitt, to put it bluntly, thinks Liberty's situation has been made far too much of. None of the companies in the group are being "submerged by a behemoth," he points out, and their identities are not in question. "You don't spend the money Liberty has spent buying established names like Soho 601, SVC and Rushes and just do away with the names," he points out. "That's crazy. It's like buying Marks and Spencers and deciding to call it "Rachel's and Steve's" instead. You just don't do that." The forthcoming merging of various properties is pure coincidence, he adds: four of the Liberty companies have their 15-year leases up in the next six months and would have merged their properties in any case. Clients aren't running away in droves because of the take-over, either. "Most clients don't know about the take-over. When the press release came out that we'd been sold by Virgin, a proportion of our clients didn't know we'd been owned by them in any case," he points out.

"That's no disrespect to clients. If my car breaks down, I call out the AA. I don't think 'actually, they're owned by Cordiant or whoever'. Client service is an inter-personal skill and it's always between Rushes and its clients. I use other services, but I don't really care who owns them. Similarly, our clients don't really bother about who owns us." The extra facilities Rushes et al can offer through their sister companies don't hurt, either. The 'craziness', Hewitt believes, is down to jealousy and ignorance. "This reaction, to a large extent in the press and the bars around town, is just crazy. Most of the 'unnamed sources' quoted are unnamed because they're ringing us up to ask if they can be next on the list and don't want to spoil their chances by being named." Liberty doesn't want to interfere with how its acquisitions have been running themselves, Hewitt maintains. "Their view is just to let companies continue doing what they're good at." Rushes and co can carry on with their work, uninterrupted, their only limitation being they're just not allowed to offer old software and machines to clients any more. In return, Liberty gets the UK

expertise, local know-how for the quirks of European jobs and worldwide economy of scale for iTV production. "It's about giving creative talent the best possible tools they can have to give clients the best possible service."

A nice picture. To many, however, the decision by Liberty to buy up a large slice of Soho might look alarming. As far as Hewitt is concerned, though, this is due to the success of the UK in the most important and fastest-developing TV market around. "The UK is a world leader already in interactive television," replies Hewitt. "For years, we've had Teletext, Ceefax and all that. While those technologies are not that exciting, British people are already used to getting information from their television using remote control. The States has never had that background." Interactive TV is not an easy thing to produce. It needs expertise in many areas, something Liberty Livewire now has in Soho, as its acquisitions cover all the bases of television post-production. "We can do everything after the can has been closed, from developing the film, through the offline, high-end or low-end post work to producing one or ten thousand copies for the client of the result," says Hewitt proudly.

With Sky Digital the world's first properly interactive, digital platform, other UK digital platforms are catching up fast. Liberty is guessing that the expertise gained from its UK acquisitions in making content for digital viewers will give it a head start in the other markets as they come online. It also believes that the huge capabilities of the combined Soho companies will create a commanding lead here. Only Liberty and a couple of competitors (including German firm Das Werks, which has invested very heavily in Soho commercials expert Glassworks) have grasped what iTV will mean, Hewitt reckons.

"Within a couple of years, it will be obvious who's got it because they'll be so far ahead of everyone else. Interactive commercials are coming whether you like it or not," he warns.

To exploit interactive television, Soho companies, with their technical expertise, will have to become even more integrated with global markets and have the ability to exploit them than they do already. And in that climate, those companies that have not got more muscle behind them might then be crying "give me Liberty."