

# Catherine Warren

By Curt Cherewayko

## Audience participation

Catherine Warren's cultivation of fan bases for major media brands underscores how important personal connections and the right communication channels are to the cult of celebrity

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Catherine Warren: "I don't really think that fan cult and fan culture is new. I think what we're seeing now is how it unfolds and how it manifests in real time"

If there's one thing Catherine Warren has learned from her media career, it's how powerful an audience can be.

It's what convinced her 10 years ago to launch **FanTrust Entertainment Strategies**, through which she has helped broadcasters, game companies and TV and film producers around the world use digital media to build fan bases and drive revenue.

"The audience used to be looked at as an amorphous group," said Warren. "They were not looked at as a community or as individuals who could provide things like viral marketing and context."

FanTrust has helped everyone from the **Canadian Broadcasting Corp.** and **Microsoft Corp.** to **British Columbia Lottery Corp.** expand their fan bases using the web and other communication channels.

When **Nokia** and **Orange Telecom France** formed a strategic alliance to increase video game use on their mobile products, they called on FanTrust to build game developer momentum for the alliance.

When the **Public Broadcasting Service's** KCTS station wanted to penetrate the Canadian market, it turned to FanTrust for the initiative's finance and business strategy.

Warren's reputation and roles in the media world continue to grow thanks to her ability to bring together the right content, communications channels and partners to build fan-base passion.

Among her loftiest roles is jury chairwoman for the experimental stream of the newly created **Canada Media Fund**. The \$27 million fund supports high-risk interactive digital media content and application creators.

During the stream's first round of funding in October, 27 projects were approved for a total of \$12.9 million.

**Lynda Brown-Ganzert**, another Vancouver-based digital media mover-and-shaker, who also sits on the experimental stream's board, describes Warren as a great synthesizer.

"Catherine has this ability to take things in what can be a pretty confusing space and link them together," said Brown-Ganzert. "She'll look at what's happening around the world – different trends, emerging technology platforms and human behaviour – and she'll weave it all together into a well-thought-out strategy."

Warren was previously a **New Media BC** board member; Brown-Ganzert was the organization's president.

"There still aren't a ton of women in digital media," noted Brown-Ganzert, who is launching a new Internet startup

called **ZuluMe**.

Warren is a jury member for both the **Academy of Television Arts and Sciences**, which hosts the Emmy Awards, and the **Rose d'Or**, a European festival that recognizes quality television.

She has been a board member of the \$18 million **Bell Broadcast and New Media Fund** for 10 years and is the fund's communications chairwoman.

In September 2009, Warren was appointed to the board of the **United Nations' World Summit Award for New Media**, which promotes digital content and information and communication technology applications that can improve lives.

More than 20,000 applications from 157 countries were included in the 2009 awards competition.

"I've been able to draw on my experience in media and technology to really understand what makes a winning project – that can be winning in terms of revenue models, strategic partnerships or audience effect," said Warren.

Giving back to the industry and cultivating her network of media folk are among her main motivations when

deciding what organizations to work with.

While her networking skills are integral to her job as a FanTrust relationship-builder, her greatest asset might be her ability to stay ahead of digital media's swift evolution.

In the mid-1980s, her master's degree thesis in journalism at **Columbia University** focused on the evolution of multimedia at the **Massachusetts Institute of Technology**.

It examined trends like computer music (think of today's iTunes) and digital holography (think of today's medical imaging).

"It took me a very long time to fight and get multimedia approved as a topic," said Warren. "I was told there was no story here. Multimedia turned out to be one of the biggest stories of the later part of the century."

Out of grad school, she became an editor at **PCI**, the small U.S.-based publishing firm that published magazines about trends for major technology brands like **Hewlett-Packard**, **Unisys** and **Sun Microsystems**.

Her ability to pull together magazines on time and on budget with a new computer-based platform called

**Mission:** Create more intimacy and communication between fans and entertainment

**Assets:** 25 years spent blending media content and the latest technologies

**Yield:** Digital media strategies for everyone from CTV and Microsoft to Nokia and David Suzuki

desktop publishing resulted in her being promoted and relocated to London, England, to set up a stable of PCI publications throughout Europe.

"All these aficionados who wanted to understand where media, new media and technology were going really only had our publications to buy," said Warren.

She could also be found over the years blending new technologies and media for firms like **Microsoft** and global ad agency **TBWA**.

It was during her time as COO of interactive broadcaster **Blue Zone Inc.** near Seattle in the early 2000s that Warren began noting a shift in audience behaviour that stemmed from the introduction of new technologies.

Before the Internet, soap opera fans could send letters to their favourite soap star and expect to receive an eight-by-10-inch glossy or some other mailed acknowledgement from the show some weeks later.

The fan's relationship with the actor was delayed and remote, and the fan didn't feel as if he or she were part of any larger fan community.

"Today, it's truly intimate ... a dialogue," said Warren.

Fans can communicate directly and in real time with their favourite celebrity over channels like **Twitter**. They can join fan groups and communicate with other fans online.

In the process, they become part of fan communities whose growth and ability to spread the online discussion effectively make them individual marketing machines for production houses and other media companies.

"We've seen this time and again that people who make content have been able to rely on fans to supply other fans with everything from information about air dates to back stories to complex plot lines to characters."

And while the fan culture whose growth Warren helps promote can get obsessive at its fringes, Warren thinks it's best to let the audience engage with content and celebrity on their terms.

Simply provide them with the latest and greatest communication channels to do so.

"Even going back to **Shakespeare**, people have identified with their favourite forms of entertainment," she said, "so I don't really think that fan cult and fan culture is new. I think what we're seeing now is how it unfolds and how it manifests in real time." ■

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