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Film School: Producing School Promo Videos

St. Louis-area studio Gebbs.TV has created a renewable revenue stream and a powerful body of work producing promo videos for area schools that live on the schools' websites and serve as recruiting films and video mission statements.

By [Liz Merfeld](#)

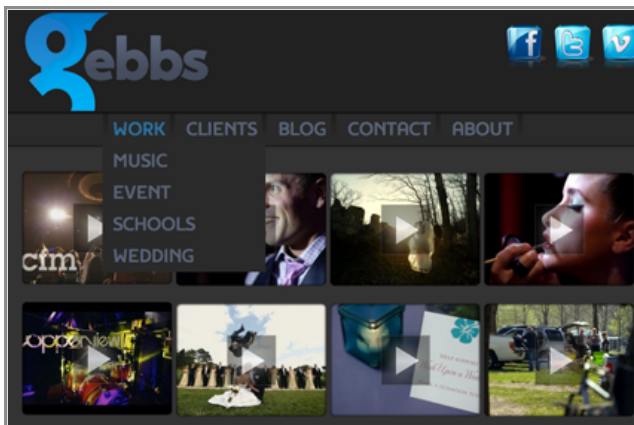
Posted on March 28, 2012

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To you, the name Michael Gebben might be synonymous with "same-day edit," but get out your thesaurus because this streaming media producer is branching out. While he's busy launching his new endeavor, [KRE8Insights](#), an online resource for video production business training, his business partner Ryan Hanlon, working with him since December 2010, has gone back to school.

That is, Hanlon has made school promotional videos his pet project at [GEBBS](#), the studio's new, simplified name. As Hanlon describes the company's re-branding, "It had become a bit of a two-headed monster. There was Gebbs Wedding Films and then there was Gebbs Total Video." Now just GEBBS, the studio lists four core services on its website: music, events, schools, and weddings. But at the rate Hanlon is going, school films is poised for top billing. Re-re-branding might not be far away.



The new [Gebbs.tv](#)

Back to School

Inspired by entrepreneur, speaker, and author Timothy Ferriss (*The 4-Hour Workweek*) and other "creative folks" who evangelize lifestyle design and finding a niche and excelling in it, Hanlon didn't have to travel far to find his niche. Growing up in a family of schoolteachers (he even substitute-taught after college, and his wife is a school social worker), Hanlon got the idea to approach schools in the St. Louis area with the idea of producing promo videos for use on their websites as recruitment tools, "like video mission statements," he says, describing an academic version of a commercial product recently profiled in a three-part article, "[Producing Corporate Identity Videos](#)." "If you're on a school's website," he argues, "you can read their description of what it's like to attend school there, but it's not the same" as a film that draws you in and motivates a visit or phone call.

Hanlon first approached nearby Illinois' Alton School District [www.altonschools.org] with the idea, and "they loved it." GEBBS produced promo videos for their elementary school, middle school, high school, and Redbirds varsity baseball team, all available from their respective web pages. A shorter, 54-second music video-style piece, encompassing all grades, greets district homepage visitors.

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Production Process

Production "always starts with interviews," not capturing b-roll. Even if someone doesn't interview well, Hanlon says, "we'll get one nugget or smile or sincere thing, and we'll use it." On most shoots, Hanlon plays producer, director, and interviewer, and relies on main cameraman Jimmy Wilderman to get the shots.

Shooting with Canon DSLRs, "we try to stay light and fast. We don't want to show up with a ton of gear and scare people," Hanlon says.

He found right away that producing school promo videos "felt good. I loved being around kids and I felt like I was doing something from the heart, something sincere." Hanlon's next projects were for Fontbonne University in St. Louis, Nashville's Pope John Paul II high school (JP2), and Alton's Marquette Catholic high school, his and Gebben's alma mater.

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[Pope John Paul II High School](#) from [GEBBS](#) on [Vimeo](#).

Hanlon highlights each school's selling points, whether academics, athletics, or culture. "JP2 isn't a big sports powerhouse, but it's an academic powerhouse." Hanlon feels that what works about these videos is their candor. "They are documentary-esque, with real comments, real feeling."

[MARQUETTE CATHOLIC HS](#) from [GEBBS](#) on [Vimeo](#).

Michael Gebben, a Marquette alum, helped with the Marquette Catholic High School piece, which highlights the school's academic success rate, college preparatory classes, and its culture of inclusion. By design, the videos are meant for the schools' websites, and more specifically for their home pages, "which is so important," Hanlon emphasizes, to display them on the home pages "as a welcome message—this is who we are, this is what we're about."

Building a School Promo Client Base

Ryan Hanlon prides himself on his capabilities as a salesperson, in building relationships, and in getting his work out there and in front of people in order to drum up new business. After producing promo videos for the Alton School District, Todd Haug, the high school's varsity baseball coach called him one day to discuss a new project. Hanlon drove to his house to discuss his ideas. "I always want to do stuff in

Haug was "the perfect client" for Hanlon, who likes to involve school faculty in the process as much as possible. "Coach Todd is a super-uber sports guy but is also artistic," says Hanlon. "He had an idea of what he wanted to do and showed me a project a college has done that he liked." Hanlon told him, "We're going to make it even better."

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Current Digital Edition

Alton Redbirds Baseball is profiled in this moving piece that the team features on its web page. Unlike GEBBS' other films posted on Vimeo, Hanlon felt this one would appeal to a wider range of audiences, so he shared it on YouTube, where it's garnered close to 20,000 plays.

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Shoot for the Edit

"The funny thing is, when people see our videos, they think we were there for two weeks," laughs Hanlon, who is typically only on site for two days. "I know what I want. And I know the time constraints."

For the Redbirds project, as with others, he and Jimmy Wilderman began by interviewing key players from the baseball team. While interviewing, Hanlon says, you really have to be shooting for the edit, listening what they're saying, and figuring out the edit in your head. You have to be scheduling the b-roll shots as you go.

Before any shooting takes place, though, Hanlon always has one very important element already selected: the song. "Music is extremely important and inspirational. I always have the song in my back pocket." For this piece, he chose "Stranded Tension" by Moonlit Sailor. Hanlon points out that he always uses licensed music purchased from licensing libraries like [The Music Bed](#) and [Song Freedom](#). To get his brain into editing mode, "I have it in my head when shooting; I listen to it before shooting, at night, before we start editing." The music, he believes, "is what makes this video very watchable."

Edit for the Client

After shooting, Hanlon sat down with editor Chadwell Ruthsatz, as he often does, to bring him up to speed and ensure that certain elements would come out in the final edit that would be in line with Coach Todd's vision. "My hand was all over this piece. I was on the shoot. I even got behind the camera on this one," he says of his tepid familiarity with DSLRs. "I'd say, 'Jimmy, hand me the camera! Get the settings ready!' " he laughs.

For example, Ruthsatz wanted to play with colors, to give parts of the video a red hue. But knowing the coach's vision and not wanting to do anything too distracting to take away from the kids, Hanlon decided on a more traditional edit.

As always, he felt "blessed to have the song ahead of time" to guide the edit. That night he and Ruthsatz sat down for 5 hours and edited. "You get excited, but you have to hold back before showing it to the client," so they stepped away for awhile before putting on the finishing touches.



Ryan Hanlon (right) editing in the GEBBS studio with Michael Gebben in the foreground

When it was finally time to show the client, Hanlon describes the moment as "the most wonderful feeling in the world, like a painter showing someone his painting. This is our art." Upon watching it for the first time, Coach Todd texted him the following message: "You outdid yourself. This is a whole new level. We LOVE it!!!" He told Hanlon later over the phone that the piece had made grown men cry. To Hanlon, that's the best thanks he could get, to generate an emotional response.

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Beyond the Promo

These videos have led Hanlon into the next phase of helping schools. He plans to go beyond website promos and think more in terms of broader campaigns. "Companies have valuable content," he reasons, but "schools don't have that." Not yet, anyway. "We'll do a promo piece, a sports piece, we'll interview an ex-professor. We have to get schools to see that what they do is so important, and they have to share it."

He plans to offer up himself to schools as a catalyst, to help them find ways to create more content and even teach their own students how to generate content on their own. Hanlon wants to help schools come up with ideas for marketing their content, as well, particularly helping them think beyond traditional newspaper advertising and embrace more novel ideas. For example, he thinks a school could market its video in a movie theater, set to play in place of the static slideshow of ads that many theaters show before a movie starts. "I want schools to think of us as a longterm resource, to rely on us, to call us with questions," he says.

To keep business strong, Hanlon counts on the relationships he forges with schools, as well as putting his work out there. "I always preach, you've got to figure out a way to get your work in front of people."

Judging by the projects he's got lined up for the next few weeks, he's about to outdo himself again. We can't say how now, but stay tuned to find out. Details revealed soon!

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