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From Tykes to Teens to Celebs, Three One O Can Wrangle 'Em All

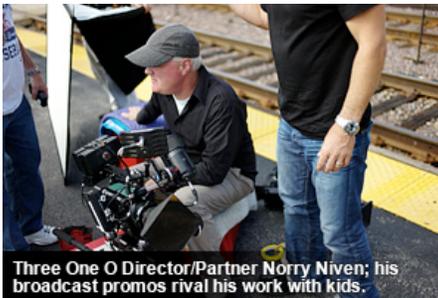
Can They Get Any Cuter? Our Kids & Critter Showcase Says No Way!

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From Tykes to Teens to Celebs, Three One O Can Wrangle 'Em All

by Anthony Vagnoni

Whether its 'American Idol' to 'The X Factor' to spots for a range of kid-friendly brands, Director Norry Niven has a way of working with talent.



Three One O Director/Partner Norry Niven; his broadcast promos rival his work with kids.

In a wonderful new broadcast promo for Fox, Simon Cowell, that shy, retiring wallflower, is seen in a different light. Resplendent in a pink cable-knit sweater, he's seen at "X Factor" auditions cheering on applicants who must have been standing in line with thimbles when they ladled out singing ability. He claps warmly, gets along with his fellow judges, offers heartfelt words of encouragement, gives everyone high fives and then hops in his prim little hybrid car as he leaves the studio.

Yeah, right. It's a comic dream sequence, and not of the good variety. Bolting upright in bed, he mutters about having just had the worst nightmare before lapsing back into the prickly taskmaster we've come to know and loathe.

The spot was produced by a lean-but-mean L.A.-based production company launched just two years ago this month called [Three One O](#). It's the home of Director [Norry Niven](#) and his partner, Executive Producer [Elaine Sibert](#). Niven is an ultra-experienced pro who's spent the last two decades making a name for himself in the areas of music videos, TV commercials and broadcast promotion.

Sibert and Niven met years ago, when he was a budding young director and she was fresh out of college with a business degree. She was doing accounting and P.A. work at a production company where Niven had worked earlier, and they hit it off. Shortly thereafter they debuted [Stone Core Films](#) in Dallas in 1993.

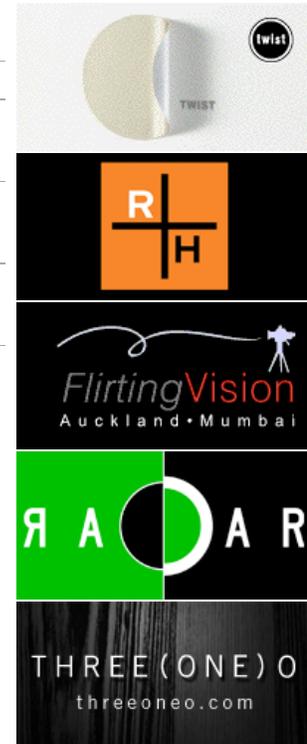
The company was a quick success, as was Niven's career as a director. While still a principal in Stone Core and producing work for local and regional agencies and clients, he was also being repped by the budding music video company The End, which for a period of time in the mid-1990s was at the top of the MV rankings.

Niven bounced back and forth between high profile assignments for a few years, then made the decision to devote his energies full time to Stone Core. Two years ago, he and Sibert decided to launch a new production company in Los Angeles, dubbing it Three One O.

Going forward, Niven says the focus of their efforts will be on building the Three One O brand. They're maintaining Stone Core in Dallas to continue to service existing local business and nurture some longstanding client relationships. Sibert now lives in L.A. while Niven is based in Dallas, but he spends enough time there to be thankful he missed the recent closing of the 405 freeway. "We have clients who love Stone Core, as do we, but we both also felt it was time to do something new and fresh and fun, and we were ready for the challenge," says Sibert.

One advantage the partners have is that they're building Three One O on a rock-solid foundation. The company has worked across almost all categories and genres, both in advertising and in the world of broadcast promos, where Niven is known for his work for both "[The X Factor](#)" and "[American Idol](#)." But he's just as at home working on spots aimed at kids ranging in age from toddlers to tykes to teens.

Indeed, his "kids work" has some parallels to his days as a music video maven; his boys toys spots for Hasbro's [Nerf](#) line, as well as his work for a variety of "[Star Wars](#)" licensed action toys, is fast-paced, energetic and graphically driven. There's a touch of rock and roll attitude to all of it, which is not to say Niven can't be warm and fuzzy when he needs to. He's directed spots for such brands as Disney, Walmart, Hasbro, Nintendo, EA, McDonald's, Sea World and Tiger Electronics, among others.



His list of celebrities reads like the line-up for an E! special. It includes Michael C. Hall, Laura Linney, Edie Falco, Matthew Modine, Queen Latifah, Matt LeBlanc, Jennifer Beals, Mary-Louise Parker, Kevin Nealon, Demi Lovato, Hillary Duff and Jim Gaffigan. While working on a series of web shorts for Gatorade and its G Series, he recently directed a deep bench of top athletes, including Dwight Howard, Usain Bolt, Landon Donovan, Dwayne Wade and LaDainian Tomlinson.



Partner and EP Elaine Sibert says the company's work with celebs and kids has a lot in common.

Niven's promos have won in just about every awards show they've been entered in, including Promax/BDA, the AICP Show, the AICP Next Awards, the New York Festivals and the Emmy Awards. The genre is a great playground for a director, since they typically entail a greater sense of creative freedom and often demand that the director contribute to the narrative as well as to the performance of the actors. Among the shows he's shot for, including "Idol" and "X Factor," are the hit Showtime series "Weeds," "Nurse Jackie" and "Dexter."

How did he get into filmmaking? "I think I was born doing it," he says with a laugh. "I always had a camera. Even as a kid, I would shoot commercials off the TV screen onto Super 8, but would add different endings so they'd be funny. Then we'd show them to kids in the neighborhood."

Niven studied film at the University of Texas at Austin, a school known not only for its media arts program but is also home to one of the top advertising schools in the US. While there, he and his fellow students produced three short films that were sold to the cable channel Cinemax. "It was real hands on independent film experience," he recalls. "What was great about it was that we came out with a full understanding of the kind of work that the industry was buying."

Another smart move he made while in college was connecting with agencies down in Texas to see if they had scripts that he and his crews could shoot, not just to enter into competitions but to get on air as well. "We all had a responsibility to see if we could get the agencies to take us on to produce work," he recalls.

And where did all these high profile, concept-driven broadcast promos come from? Not surprisingly, it was word of mouth. "We were working for The Movie Channel and Showtime the day we opened in Dallas," Niven explains. The connections came through a variety of sources - people he'd cut with at different edit houses, or design and graphics shops with which he'd collaborated as a director, etc.

Likewise, his connection with Fox on "Idol" came out of all the attention his earlier promo work received via things like his Promax wins. It's lead to Three One O producing a series of promos and long-form documentaries for "American Idol" almost since the show's debut. Much of this work has been co-branded with Ford, which is perfect for Niven, as he lives with a foot in both worlds, broadcast and advertising.

Niven says he applies the same MO to his work with kids as he does to his entertainment projects. "It doesn't matter whether the person you're working with is an actor or a non-professional or a child who's never done this before," he explains, "they all want to be told in honest terms what's expected of them and what they're supposed to do. It's about being sincere, since even a three-year-old can sniff it out when you're not."

His approach when working with kids is simple: "You need to find the spark in the child. It's the same thing with adults - you're looking for that special energy that separates them from others."

He often finds these sparks close to home. While he spends quite a bit of time in L.A., Niven is familiar presence with the casting directors who work in Texas. The talent base there, adds Sibert, is outstanding. "We've got kids here that we've been working with since they were little, and now they're off doing Disney and Nickelodeon series," she says. "It's great to see these young talents that we've worked with doing such fun work on television."



Niven's spot for Mrs. Baird's Bread shows a young boy making his own peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

Since opening, Three One O has added two directors who make for a compelling and diverse roster. D!gby is an African-American Army brat who spent time growing up in both the US and Europe, while Amit Gupta is as at home in his native Mumbai as he is on the West Coast. Both Niven and Sibert say that D!gby and Gupta's cultural backgrounds influence the creative approach that they bring to their work. "Both of them are amazing and gifted when it comes to having a different way of looking at things," says Niven.

D!gby's entree to directing came while working as a graphic designer at the boutique advertising agency DCODE in New York via an assignment for the Partnership for a Drug Free America. Produced for next to nothing, it passed muster with the group's creative board and went on to be named a finalist for the AICP Awards in Art Direction. With a background in illustration and computer animation, he got his start working at the New York animation house Curious Pictures as a designer and CG modeler.

While working on a job for MJZ Director Marcus Nispel, Nispel took note of his talents and offered him the chance to move to L.A. to work with him exclusively. For the next three years, he worked directly on all of Nispel's commercial and feature film undertakings.



Niven captures young guys as they square off with their "Star Wars" Battle Line Lightsabers.

Gupta's commercial work has earned him the Mosaic Award from the American Advertising Federation, and a Telly Award for excellence in television commercials. His short film "The Guardian's Gateway" has screened at the Kids First! Film Festival, the largest festival for children and family films in the world, as well the Hollywood International Student Film Festival.

"Amit has a great attitude and a great work ethic, and we felt it was in sync with what we wanted to do," says Niven. "I met with a lot of different directors, but he stood out. It took us a while to find him. He studied at UT in Dallas and then on to film school in San Francisco, and once he knew he wanted to build his commercial reel, he felt it would be a smart thing to go back to India, so he did for three years. We met him last year when he came back to the States."

When asked what sets Three One O apart, Niven gives you a straight-shooting response, which is no surprise coming from a Texan. "We bring a tried and true work ethic that gets things done and done well to every job we do," he states. "Once we get a job in-house and we start to apply our process to it, we will come back with something amazing, regardless of budget."

Coming up for Niven is a first - he's landed his debut feature film, which has been green-lighted and starts production later this year for a 2012 release. It's one of two features Niven has had in development, and he promises more details on it later this year.

Of course, there's another film from the director that might be worth checking out - it's the one he makes with his young family every year. Talk about catching the bug early, he and his kids, as young as they are, put together a script for a home movie that they shoot in the fall. "I start writing the script in October, and we'll make a half-hour film starring the whole family," he says, revealing a charming side of his personal life. "We have so much fun doing this."

So is he in a rush to see his kids follow him into the business and maybe become the next Disney Channel stars? "You know, kids can face enough rejection in life," he says with an insider's perspective. "You can be really successful at this, but you have to have a burning passion to succeed."

Sounds like he knows what's he's talking about.