

**Irial Mac Murchú – Nemeton Television Productions,
Waterford
Creating Media Content in Regional Companies**

Very few people know that the three biggest areas in this country in which television is content is produced is Dublin, Galway and An Rinn, the country's smallest Gaeltacht area, down in Co. Waterford. This year, we in Nemeton will be celebrating our 14th birthday with a higher output of programmes to more broadcasters than ever before. We produce content across three genres, sport, health/lifestyle and documentaries. Best known of these are the sport for TG4 and Health Squad for RTÉ . We have also done international co-productions with the BBC and we provide technical facilities and satellite services for BBC, Sky, Channel 4, ABC and a range of other broadcasters at home and abroad. We have an equivalent of 50 full-time employees, this is made up of 25 full-time and anything up to 100 freelancers at different times. We do all of our work, technical and creative in the Irish language.

So over the next 20 minutes, I hope to share with you what our experience has been:

- First what Nemeton does and how we got to where we are as a regional company
- Then I will give examples of how we developed content for the Irish market
- Thirdly I will try and draw the scenarios for the future path of our international content

So, first of all, how does the smallest Gaeltacht area in the country end up with one of the biggest production companies in Ireland.

There was never a grand plan at the start to become this size. I had been working as a radio and print journalist in the early 90's, and having a low boredom threshold, started looking around to see what was happening in television. Legislation had just been introduced to compel RTÉ to start commissioning independent productions on a bigger scale, TG4 was just about to be established and TV3 looked like finally making it to air.

So Nemeton was founded with a view to doing a 'little bit' of television. But as anyone who gets involved will tell you, television is an all-consuming animal that gets a hold of you and and you either go with it, or step off straight away.

But the industry suited us, and along with the other founding partner who is now our Financial Controller, Tadhg Ó Maoileoin, we had the right mix of creativity and business skills.

There is a great principle which Jim Collins talks about in his book, *Good is the Enemy of Great*, where he describes, 'The Hedgehog Principle'. If you can imagine three circles with a question in each - the three questions to be answered to be successful in business and to make it great.

1. What would you get out of bed in the morning to do supposing you never got paid for it?
2. What can you do better than anyone else?
3. What makes economic sense?

If what you're doing answers all three, then where they overlap is called the 'The Hedgehog Principle', because you can then roll up into a ball, like a hedgehog, and nobody can touch you.

So would we make television programmes and get paid for it - absolutely. Could we do it better than anyone else - we certainly believe that. Did it make economic sense - well, let's just say, we quickly made sense of it.

Until 1996, Nemeton was basically a one-person operation with others hired in as necessary. Our first big breakthrough was securing a big commission from TG4. We had carefully analysed what kind of content was needed to be successful on this new Irish language channel and what was needed to be involved in myth-busting what one commentator famously said would be "bearded zealots reading news from morning 'til night". So we came up with the concept of Spanish soccer and a Monday night highlights programme to be aired one hour before the same went out on Eurosport and 24 hours before Sky Sports.

From that platform we developed a range of programming for TG4 and went on then to look at other Irish markets. We approached RTÉ with an idea for a health programme, which became the highly successful, *Health Squad*. We knew that there was a huge appetite for health issues in Ireland and once we had identified the kind of content that would be necessary for such a series, it was commissioned.

We have also been sporadically involved with international co-productions. Back in the late 1990's, we did a current affairs co-production with the BBC in Scotland, did a two-part documentary with Grampian Television, (now STV) and at present we are now trying to move ahead again with international work, focusing mainly on the US.

As surely as the Irish language served us so well in developing content for TG4, we realised that we speak English equally well and that the whole of the biggest

tv market in the world, the English-speaking countries, were also there as potential markets. For a start there are some 40-50 million people outside of Ireland who claim Irish lineage. This must be a huge potential marketplace for us. There are people of Irish descent in almost every area of life in the whole of the English-speaking world. Surely it is time for us to start working this area and tapping into this. This is the way to go.

But while we may attempt to have a go at these markets on an occasional basis, there are very few, if any, production companies who have the resources to put in the effort on a continuous basis required to crack this market. We need the assistance of our old friends in Údarás na Gaeltachta, Enterprise Ireland and other agencies to develop this market. The potential in this case speaks for itself.

So what is stopping us from developing content for these markets. I think that the one biggest single factor is people. It is difficult enough trying to develop a skillful creative and technical crew in a small rural base to service the Irish market. It is even harder when you try and move out into the international market. But we know this and are working hard to develop the people to take us forward to do this. We have learned the lesson that If you cannot get the people, then you grow them.

We need to develop creative minds. Creativity is the most sought after trait in the whole world. We are working on that, developing not just Nemeton, but the whole Waterford area as a centre of excellence, and thus contributing to evolving the whole Irish sector to a higher level.

So conscious are we of this that we set up a specific training dept., not only to develop our own team, but also as a new business centre. Our single biggest initiative is the Higher Diploma in Television Production which we are running in partnership with WIT and is funded by Údarás na Gaeltachta. We are now into our second year of this post-graduate course and happy to say that everybody from year 1 - bar two (who went on to do another course) - have been gainfully employed. Many of them by Nemeton, to take on the extra work we are generating and to move it all forward.

So where do we go from here? Creative content for media is unique in many ways. Only Irish people can produce Irish content for Irish audiences. But we are so lucky to have that Irish diaspora and an even wider audience who buy into so much of what it is to be Irish. From Riverdance to Father Ted, U2 to The Clancy Brothers, it is truly unique and it is there for any media company to tap into, and that we must do. We must come up with unique content that audiences want, deliver it to the very highest world standards. And key to all of this, we must forget about delivering content for the screen alone. Everything from now on must be delivered with the internet viewer, the tv viewer and above all the iPod viewer in mind.

I think the most relevant quote to finish on is from Daniel Burnham, the famous American architect, who said, *“Make no little plans; they have no magic to stir men's blood...Make big plans, aim high in hope and work.”*