

## **Social TV Trends: Katalyst's Anthony Batt offers unvarnished view of Hollywood, Madison Avenue and social TV**

For those of us who love both television and technology, the momentum of the social TV wave is exhilarating. Tech entrepreneurs are creating new ways to view and share our favorite TV programs. Advertisers are experimenting with more personalized and measurable marketing opportunities. Hollywood is exploring ways to make storytelling a richer experience, occasionally even allowing audiences to become co-creators of entertainment.

Disruption is the name of the game and innovation on the social Web is the driving force.

It should come as no surprise, then, that Hollywood and Madison Avenue are looking for ways to “socialize” what they do. For many, this means bolting a technology group or practice onto their business. The problem with this approach is that the people at the top often don't *get* it. They don't know why or how to do things differently, let alone build a business that is disruptive.

Anthony Batt, on the other hand, is a guy who *gets* it. You might even say he helped *create* it. He's been building businesses around content and community – the defining characteristics of the social Web – for over a decade.



**Anthony Batt, president of Katalyst**

An unusual hybrid of entertainment mogul and super geek, Batt began managing recording artists on the Columbia Records roster at age 16, but studied geophysics and computer science in college. With stints in marketing, publishing and technology, he worked with big brands such as Absolut and TIME. He was also instrumental in the development and launch of Craigslist with founder Craig Newmark.

Batt founded BUZZMEDIA in 2005, which has become the fastest growing network of blogs and Web news aggregators about entertainment and pop culture. The BUZZMEDIA network actually attracts more 18-34 years olds than Facebook, according to comScore.

Now Batt aims to upend the TV production industry – and he’s in the right place to do it. He joined Katalyst as president in January 2011. If you haven’t heard of Katalyst, chances are you know a little about its co-founder: Ashton Kutcher. While Kutcher is a big Hollywood star, he also has serious geek cred. You may recall he was the first Twitter user (@aplusk) to garner one million followers in a highly publicized contest with CNN Breaking News (@cnnbrk) in 2009. He posts videos to YouTube, blogs on Posterous, speaks at tech conferences and invests in social media startups. Kutcher even plays a geek on TV; his character in “Two and a Half Men” is an Internet billionaire.

Kutcher founded *Katalyst Films* with friend and producer, Jason Goldberg, in 2000. Katalyst dropped *Film* from its moniker a few years ago when Kutcher and Goldberg made it a mission to move the company into the digital arena. Now Katalyst works on marketing, social media and entertainment projects, often blurring the lines between them. “We built a new media division that really operates as a studio for social media,” said Kutcher. “We’re storytellers. It doesn’t matter the medium...television, film, whatever it is. We figure out how to tell the best stories.”



Anthony Batt, Ashton Kutcher and Jason Goldberg of Katalyst.

## Batt plans to “punch TV in the face with the social glove”

I met Batt in early 2009 when we were on a panel together at OnHollywood, so I knew about his impressive background. When I found out he had joined Katalyst, I figured something big was brewing. I was eager to learn more about it (Katalyst has no website) and find out if the company aims to be part of the social TV revolution. As a digital media pioneer, Batt has keen insight about the space and he holds nothing back.

**Q: Anthony, what brought you to Katalyst?**

**A:** Ashton was following what I was doing with BUZZMEDIA and I knew about him from an old business partner. I took BUZZMEDIA from three slides and one person to 150 people in just a few years. I was the third wheel that Ashton and Jason needed to make Katalyst work. I stepped down from BUZZMEDIA as chief creative officer and joined them – though I still do founder stuff for BUZZMEDIA.

**Q: What was the appeal for you?**

**A:** I had developed one of the biggest blogging platforms, but I think people watch TV way more than they read. Unfortunately, the TV business model is wrong for the social Web. Producers hand the show off to the network and it's over. They're gone. They don't think about their audience. There's no line item for engagement.

People are talking about TV all over the Web. The audience could also be talking to TV producers – if they showed up. But the producer is disconnected from the end user. We're trying to cultivate producers and creative writers that can help create that shift in Hollywood. We need to create a new concept of the showrunner and shift an industry that is under pressure to make money. To do this, we have to work with brands, creators and networks. You're going to watch us punch TV in the face with the social glove.

**Q: What does social TV mean to you? Would you put Katalyst in that category?**

**A:** Part of our business is creating programming for brands. The other part is attacking and reframing social TV. We're always thinking about how you can engage an audience. When we're shooting shows, we're already thinking about social strategy and how to engage. The networks don't think about giving producers a budget to do this, but they should be buying programming that can spread across multiple media.

Are we in social TV? Fuck, yeah. Are we going to change social TV? Definitely. I want Katalyst to be the lead for social TV and the social Web – and there will be no difference between the two. Katalyst was selected by Google to develop one of the initial content channels for YouTube because we're great storytellers. The YouTube channel will allow Ashton to introduce new narrative forms so we can possibly lead by example.

**Q: What Katalyst projects are most reflective of the company's mission?**

**A:** The project for Virgin Mobile is a good example of what we can do. Virgin usually does ads, but we asked “What would be entertaining to their audience?” We created stories that enabled Virgin Mobile to hijack pop culture. Virgin needed a new celebrity couple to promote its brand and its NYC agency, Mother, reached out to us. All the celebrity couples were booked so we invented one. It was completely transparent to fans. We cast our celebrities via the Internet; people sent us photos and videos and then finalists came to Hollywood for a casting session.



We named the couple Sparah - short for Spencer and Sarah. Sparah is a transmedia story played out over the social graph. You can see it on national TV, get interested in the cast, follow them on Twitter or Facebook and find parts of the story in any one of those places. Spencer and Sarah were also encouraged to date other celebrities through their own means. It was really interesting. We had the celebrity social story going on, but it was with a wink and a nod. Now we see girls talking about Sparah on Twitter and wanting to get a phone plan with Virgin.



Katalyst created the fake celebrity couple Sparah (Spencer + Sarah) for a Virgin Mobile transmedia campaign.

With Intel, we worked on IdeaJam and the idea there was to create video jam sessions in the vein of musician jam sessions. Ashton hosted a *Dream Bigger* session where entertainment and digital media creatives shot a bunch of original ideas in 48 hours. Then we released those on YouTube to get people interested in stuff that was germane to Intel. We wanted to make Intel relevant to people. We wanted to show that this is what Intel stands for.



Katalyst hosted the Intel IdeaJam *Dream Bigger* session with Ashton Kutcher as moderator.



**Q: Does Katalyst usually work with agencies or directly with brands?**

A lot of times we work directly with a brand. Most agencies don't have a social media practice. If you go to a hardware store, you can get a hammer, but you'll never get good food. If you want a really great ad, go to an ad agency. If you want good entertainment, go to an entertainment company that's been doing it for 11 years.

We've all been talking about brands as publishers for the past 16 months, but a lot of that is wishful thinking. The truth is, brands are what they make – and then they talk about it. It's hard for them to become objective publishers of content because they want to sanitize everything. But what is important for marketing is better content. I really see CMOs struggling with this.

**Q. How involved are Ashton and Jason in the day-to-day business?**

**A:** Jason and Ashton are my two partners. I involve them all the time. Ashton is like a creative director and analyst and Jason is like a showrunner plus creative guy. I speak to Ashton several times a week if not several times a day. He is anything but hands off. He has like three full-time jobs, but when he's on the set we connect through email and phone calls. Yeah, he's a star, but he's a sharp, sharp analyst of what is going on. There isn't a single brand that comes in here and doesn't leave thinking "Holy shit, this guy is like wow."

**Q. What has surprised you the most since you joined Katalyst?**

**A:** The first thing that surprised me is how wickedly smart Ash and Jason are. Second is how much of a need there is for a company like ours – how much pent up demand there is. Brands are ahead of their agencies. They're coming to Katalyst saying "Look, we get it. Our agency doesn't." The bureaucracy of the ad industry doesn't move at the same rate as technology. Agency creative directors build ads, not memes.

In fact, even I'm surprised at how fast technology development moves now. Stuff we might have spent years on in the early nineties now takes months. The same goes for content. In 12 months, you could produce content, drop it onto YouTube, go international, get on Apple and Android; this is a big media distribution shift.

**A: I see Katalyst doesn't have a website. Why so elusive?**

**A:** Elusive is a good word for us. Honestly, we don't fit into any category. We're a very narrowly sold company. We're not out there grabbing RFPs. We beat to our own drum. Agencies and brands seek us out and they often end up getting something much bigger than what they planned on.

What we're trying to say is that we tell stories for a living. We look for an entertaining or informative part of your company and build something around that so you can talk about it with your friends and followers. We call ourselves a content programming company. I think we're incomplete with our mission but we're directionally correct. I'm eager to work with more brands to fulfill that vision.

*Carri Bugbee writes Social TV Trends every month. You can connect with her on Twitter via @CarriBugbee and @socialTVtrends. She started tweeting for Mad Men character @PeggyOlson long before social TV was a trend.*