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Entrepreneur Finds Reality Television Pays Off After All

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Keri DeWitt bombed as a contestant on reality-show king Mark Burnett's 2001 adventure race, "Eco-Challenge: New Zealand."

It wasn't until later, after launching her own business, that she achieved the success that first eluded her in reality TV.

DeWitt, amateur athlete and chief executive of Burbank-based **Teresis Media Management Inc.**, thinks she's found a solution to the daunting challenge of sifting through hours and hours of location footage needed for reality shows.

Her digital editing service makes it easier for production crews to log, catalog and retrieve the clips by digitizing footage and storing it on an Internet platform. This saves time and money compared with the traditional analog system, with the added benefit of being accessible from anywhere with an Internet hookup.

The challenge now is to convince users to give it a try.

"We kind of took a gamble because we knew it was a new technology," said Ke'alohe Lee, the post-producer for the NBC reality show, "Three Wishes."

A staffer for **June Road Productions**, Lee knew she didn't want to do "Three Wishes" with the usual method. "Before, if I wanted a tape from two days ago, I'd have to go into our library, search through, pull the tape, put it into VHS - now, I just have to punch in the tape number and there it is on the screen."

DeWitt founded Teresis in 2003 and got three-quarters of a million dollars in startup funding from the Tech Coast Angels after her business plan won Best in Show at the VentureNet venture capital conference.

Producers use the company's equipment to digitize the video that crews shoot and transcribe the dialogue. Producers and editors can



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Editing: Karen DeWitt developed a Web-based system for reality TV programs.

then access video and transcripts simultaneously through a Web connection - eliminating multiple copies of VHS tapes and shaving hours off the production cycle. Since post-production on reality shows is a race against the clock, any time-saving technology has a good chance of surviving the first-round elimination.

"The pain in the industry was very clear, and their value proposition was clear," said Bill Collins, president of the L.A. network of Tech Coast Angels. "It's very hard to do a reality show with the current analog approach - it just gets overwhelming to transcribe all those tapes and put them together."

Teresis's approach involves a server about the size of a computer hard drive. Production teams rent the equipment and can take it with them in the field. (It has been used as far away as Nicaragua).

The server plugs into as many as four camera decks, which are professional players for video,

at one time. Video is transferred from there to the Web platform, and a producer or editor can access it from anywhere with a Web browser.

Dialogue also has to be transcribed. Some production crews do this in-house, others use a transcription center that DeWitt set up in her hometown of Marshall, Mo.

Producers can insert hyperlinks with time codes into the transcript linking to the video. This allows editors to go to a particular scene by clicking on the link, rather than manually fast-forwarding through tapes to find it.

Teresis also offers a Google-like search function allowing producers to search for a specific quote, then click on it to play the scene.

Teresis machines are rented for a show's production season, and the Web service can be maintained during the off-season for a monthly fee. Prices vary depending on the size of the production and its requirements, DeWitt said.

The company has already burned through

most of its initial funding and is now out to secure more. DeWitt says she needs about \$400,000, along with the revenues generated from the business, to replace the cash she expects to burn through this year. "For us, breakeven represents five concurrent customers," she said.

With "Three Wishes" and a contract from **Film Garden Entertainment Inc.**, which produces shows for TLC and Discovery Channel, Teresis has two clients.

There are between 150 and 200 reality TV shows in production in a given quarter. "From January through April, a lot of shows were interested but didn't quite get it - they were a little afraid to be the first to try it out," she said.

After Film Garden shaved two weeks off the production of a pilot in May, it decided to use Teresis technology on all of its productions going forward. That got a little attention, DeWitt said, and more companies are now testing the technology.

Teresis did a demonstration for **Mark Burnett Productions'** "American Idol" last spring, and is getting ready for a second meeting with the "Idol" production team this fall. That will put DeWitt on the other side of Burnett's cameras for the first time.

Four years ago, DeWitt was part of a U.S.-based team that competed in the grueling Eco-Challenge, a 12-day extreme adventure race televised on the USA Network. The team dropped out halfway through the race due to injuries.

DeWitt later saw the inefficiencies in the unscripted production cycle when she interned on another reality show. Other companies, such as industry leader **Avid Technology Inc.**, also offer digital editing and archiving. These companies offer different pieces of the process, "but not the whole thing on one platform," Collins said. "You know other companies are going to be coming after it, but we haven't seen them winning head to head at this point."