



## Black Label Content's COVID Protocols Get Marketers Back in Business

10.02.2020

Shooting live-action content during the pandemic is challenging but doable as creative agency Black Label Content has proven by implementing a raft of stringent COVID-19 protocols for clients such as Disney and Fox.

"The goal was always to get back to work with the creative quality that we had before. The question was how do we get there without sending cameras to people's homes but pretending like we're shooting live on set somewhere," said Joseph Uliano, executive producer and founder of Black Label Content.

As everyone knows, quarantine in Los Angeles and across the country began in full in mid-March and by April it was clear that it was going to go on for a while. That's when Uliano began researching the problem, thinking about how production companies could go back to work and making sure any protocol he and his team developed were in line with Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and Los Angeles County public health guidelines. Uliano also started acquiring N95 masks and personal protective gear (PPE), which became easier to access with time, he said.

On June 15, 2020, officials in Los Angeles County ruled that production could

resume, and by then, Uliano and his team was prepared with a full COVID-19 protocol that they could implement for clients.

The protocols include offering accurate testing for every person involved in a shoot and turning those test results around quickly; wearing PPE including N-95 masks, face shields, tyvek suits and gloves; keeping everyone socially distanced; and keeping everything clean and sanitized.

Since June, Black Label Content has completed five live-action shoots for different clients: a live-action campaign for ABC's new drama, Big Sky, created and written by David E. Kelley; a half-hour fall preview, starring Ken Jeong, for Fox; the 72nd annual Primetime Emmys, hosted by Jimmy Kimmel on ABC; a live-action on-set shoot of ABC's new Dancing with the Stars host, Tyra Banks; and a commercial for FCB NYC.

Probably the most important part of the protocol is testing, for which Black Label Content has partnered with Los Angeles-based Pure Sets to offer. Two days prior to any shoot, the crew and talent are tested at home with nasal swab tests—those tests return within 24 hours. Then, upon arriving on set, they are rapid-tested again.

"The most important thing to go back to work was the 24-hour turnaround time," said Uliano. "So far, we've done five shoots in a row and we've done almost 500 tests on crew. Some of those we double-tested and we've had no positive results, which is great."

Black Label also is using the same crew for all of its shoots, so those people are getting more and more familiar with the protocols, and thus are able to execute them more efficiently.

Prior to any shoot, Uliano and his team hold Zoom meetings with talent, crew and executives to explain exactly what will be going on and how all of the procedures work. Uliano has found that adding these meetings to the process expedites production on set and thinks that's a change that will remain post-pandemic.

Once on set, crew and talent encounter a series of protocols, all designed to keep everyone safe. There is always a COVID-compliance officer on set who takes everyone's temperature and assigns everyone colored wristbands that gives each person access only to needed areas of the shoot. The idea is to keep talent, who cannot wear face masks due to makeup, as safe as possible. A big part of that is limiting their contact with other people.

All of the hair, make-up and wardrobe rooms are set up to allow social distancing, with plexiglass separators inside each room. No hair, makeup or wardrobe person works with more than one talent during any shoot and wardrobe is fitted prior to the shoot via virtual fittings on Zoom.

The rooms and sets are constantly cleaned electro-statically with hypo-allergenic and medical-grade cleaning products. All entrances are marked one way, so everyone goes in one door and out another. And all foods and drinks at craft services are prepackaged.

The first shoot Black Label Content undertook upon returning was a multi-talent live-action shoot for ABC's new drama, Big Sky, starring Ryan Phillippe (Shooter) and Katheryn Winnick (Vikings).

### Big Sky

"We have worked closely with Black Label over several years, so when we knew we would be shooting during the pandemic, and with short notice, we turned to them as one of our trusted partners. The fact that Black Label was active in the industry working on operational protocols made it easier to get our shoot organization in the time we had available," said Steve Bushong, SVP, marketing operations, ABC Entertainment, in an email interview.

"Our Big Sky marketing shoot was the first major production of its type in the industry. Our internal original production team worked closely with Black Label to ensure all protocols were fleshed out and applied for the safety and security of everyone who touched this production."

From there, Black Label went on to produce other marketing shoots, including one in collaboration with Disney/ABC and Bigstar to introduce new Dancing with the Stars host Tyra Banks and the show's new cast.

### Dancing With the Stars

Black Label also produced some promos for the virtually produced 72nd Annual Primetime Emmys, with host Jimmy Kimmel. Black Label has worked with Disney/ABC to produce Emmy marketing campaigns, including prior ones with Kimmel, for several years now.

### Jimmy Kimmel, Primetime Emmys

"Live-action production for the marketing of television shows is critical in normal times, but it's even more important now as our shows overcome the challenges of operating during a pandemic," said Bushong. "That's because original productions are typically part of a multi-layered marketing campaign to create awareness, build intent and then drive tune in. By managing to successfully organize and execute scripted, live-action marketing productions, we're able to

create content in advance of our shows that allow us to engage audiences and raise awareness, which is crucial for a new show. Big Sky from David E. Kelley is our new fall drama and a top priority for us, so we had to get this right," he said.

From there, Black Label moved over to the Fox backlot, where no one had set foot since March, to work with Fox to produce its fall preview, hosted by Ken Jeong of The Masked Singer and new unscripted series, I Can See Your Voice, and Fox Sports' Charissa Thompson.

#### Fox Fall Preview

"I've known Joe and worked with Black Label off and on for many years," said Brian Gawronski, SVP, creative advertising, Fox, also in an email interview. "Joe and his team have always been responsible, detailed and thorough outside of COVID, so when it came for us to dive back into production for the first time during COVID, and doing it with a high-profile project and talent, we trusted them to deliver.

"When we reached out for a bid, they immediately presented us with a lengthy document detailing the precautions they were taking and the testing they were mandating. They made it very clear from the start that their primary concern was safety, followed by creative, and that eased any fears we had off the bat."

While Fox's shoot might have been a bit longer due to the 30-minute length of the program they were creating, it took advantage of certain aspects of being on the lot.

"What helped us is that we designed the shoot around using our backlot as an open, outdoor set. With little production going on, and ample space to spread out, we didn't have to worry about being confined to an indoor soundstage and the additional COVID precautions that would entail."

With those five productions safely under his belt, Uliano feels confident he and his team can continue to produce safe, high-quality content for clients no matter how long the pandemic continues.

"My job is, since I don't know and nobody is conclusive about it, that we treat every single thing that comes in or out like it's radioactive," said Uliano. "We're trying to take every precaution that we know of to keep everything safe, especially for our crew and our talent. It's just part of the protocol as we go forward in our new world."