

'Veronica Mars' film a go, thanks to a kick from Kickstarter

The success of the \$2-million Kickstarter campaign in support of 'Veronica Mars,' a TV show that has been off the air for more than five years, illustrates the power of social media and its potential to reshape the economics of Hollywood.

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Illustrating the power of social media, more than 30,000 fans of the cult favorite television series "Veronica Mars" pledged \$2 million in a single day — or 10 hours, to be exact — to finance an independent film based on the teen drama.

The overnight success of the fundraising effort — the biggest film campaign in Kickstarter history, and the fastest to reach the \$1-million threshold — represents a milestone in Hollywood moviemaking economics. It demonstrates that devoted fan communities can rally to support projects that mainstream studios might otherwise reject.

Already, prominent television producers are contemplating using crowd funding to finance passion projects and give afterlife to other defunct series. The morning after "Veronica Mars" reached its \$2-million goal, Bryan Fuller, creator of ABC's "Pushing Daisies," emailed his agent to see if he too could use the crowd-funding site to resurrect his fan-loved show about a man who can bring people back to life.

"This is the day that Kickstarter went mainstream," said Canadian businessman Steven Dengler, 44, who pledged \$10,000 to the movie project.

"Veronica Mars" creator Rob Thomas launched the Kickstarter campaign Wednesday morning. In his online appeal, he told potential backers he's wanted to make a movie based on the UPN-turned-CW series almost since the day it went off the air in 2007. The low-rated show, which starred actress Kristen Bell as a teenager who cracked cases under the guidance of her detective father, lasted just three seasons. Its passionate followers have been

longing to revisit the fictional Neptune, Calif., ever since.

This week, they proved that with a Kickstarter link, they will come — and they will fund. The movie will be shot this summer for an early 2014 release in a limited number of theaters, and made available via digital download.

Wednesday "was one of the most remarkable days of my life," Thomas told *The Times*. "My attention span was about 4 seconds because everything was piling up. We were seeing all this press pop up, the Kickstarter number kept going up, we were the talk of the Twittersphere. At one point, it was the pope and us trending. I've never been in the eye of the storm like that."

Thomas first tried to make his movie the conventional way. He developed a film pitch in 2009, based on graduation day at Hearst College. But Warner Bros., which owns the rights to the show, declined, questioning whether there was enough interest to warrant a studio-sized budget and traditional marketing blitz.

Unwilling to abandon the notion of adapting his television series for film, Thomas began exploring unconventional ways to revive the project with his agent and Warner Bros. The scripts evolved over time, he said, as the original cast aged. Now, the story revolves around Mars' 10-year Neptune High School reunion.

"Suddenly what I thought was a pipe dream became a real possibility," Thomas said. "There became tough business side hurdles to deal with, and it took a better part of a year."

Bell, despite moving on to films and other TV shows, including Showtime's "House of Lies," remained committed to the project.

"I've told Rob I'll shoot it on toilet paper in my backyard if that's what needs to happen," Bell said.

Thomas and Bell offered fans incentives to pledge, including a speaking role in the film, private screenings of the movie, tickets to the red carpet premiere and a visit to the set during production, where contributors will appear as extras.

At the time of publication, the total had surpassed \$3 million, with more than 47,000 pledging to the cause. No one can accurately predict how much the campaign might raise; the project will continue accepting pledges through April 12.

"The number shows the energy and the warmth of a fan base that refused to die, refused to bow down," Bell said in a phone interview.

"The studio wins because they don't have to wonder if the audience is going to show up," said Jeremy Zimmer, chief executive of United Talent Agency, which represents Thomas. "And the fans win because they get a real sense of ownership and connectivity to something they would otherwise only passively admire."

"The 'Veronica Mars' show has such an incredible fan base," said Thomas Gewecke, Warner Bros. Digital Distribution president, who served as an internal studio advocate for the Kickstarter campaign. "When Rob came to us with the Kickstarter idea, we saw a unique opportunity to take a fantastic product, a wonderful universe that has so much richness and depth to it, and to try to have a new approach to how we do these projects."

Warner Bros. has agreed to distribute and market the film.

The success of the Kickstarter campaign immediately reverberated through Hollywood's creative community — particularly those all too familiar with the cutthroat nature of the ratings-impatient television industry.

Shawn Ryan, creator of FX's "The Shield" and the network's short-lived detective drama "Terriers," posted Wednesday on Twitter: "Very interested to see how this Veronica Mars kickstarter goes. Could be a model for a 'Terriers' wrap up film."

"Pushing Daisies" Fuller has long considered making a movie from his canceled series, which ended in 2009. After contacting his agent, his next email was to Barry Sonnenfeld, an executive producer on the show, asking if he wanted to replicate the "Veronica Mars" model to resurrect "Pushing Daisies."

"He was like, 'Uh, let's talk to the studio first,'" said Fuller, who has already written a third of a "Pushing Daisies" film script. "And, yeah, it's not as simple as it seems." An average episode of the series, which incorporated many special effects, cost \$3 million. "The opening scene of what I have written involves a flash flood in a graveyard — I don't know if we can do that with \$2 million."

So far, Kickstarter has successfully funded more than 9,000 films.

"Kickstarter was the perfect way for Rob and Kristen to ask fans what they thought about a 'Veronica Mars' movie, and to see if they wanted to make it with them," said the site's co-founder Yancey Strickler. "The response so far has been incredible."

But not every idea wins grass-roots support and gets funded.

Michael Taylor, a film producer and chairman of the Division of Film and Television Production at USC, cautions that Kickstarter will hardly revolutionize the movie industry, but it could transform how certain independent films get financed.

"People have been using crowd funding for a long time, particularly students, to raise money for their short films," Taylor said. "This shows when you have either compelling elements to a film or the right players or a subject matter that is attractive to the public, suddenly you can finance an entire low-budget film."

If you have a film that appeals to a niche audience, and that niche is big enough to fund it, it's a whole new dynamic."