OZGIRL MAY HAVE BEEN MADE ON A LIMITED BUDGET, BUT THAT HASN’T STOPPED IT FROM MAKING A MAJOR IMPACT, AS ADAM COLEMAN DISCOVERS.

To say the interactive teen web series OzGirl was created with a limited budget and a small crew is a mere understatement.

Nineteen-year-old Nicholas Carlton shot the feature-length web series for a mere $7,000.

And, before he enlisted the help of some “film school buddies”, he was the show’s producer, camera operator, sound operator, director, cinematographer, editor, web designer, graphic designer and marketer.

In 24 ‘webisodes’, OzGirl tells the story of Sadie Brown, a small-town country girl who moves to Melbourne to live with her cousin Megan. The show follows Sadie’s efforts to get a job, make friends, fall in love and find her long-lost mother.

OzGirl had “no marketing budget to speak of” and Carlton’s distribution approach saw him, at one stage, pretend to be OzGirl’s lead protagonist. He contacted viewers from every existing show page on the social networking sites Bebo and MySpace.

“It was a bit creepy because I was sending messages as a 14 year-old-girl,” Carlton says.

“I literally went through the fan list and contacted every one of them in character as Sadie and said: ‘Hey, I am moving to the city, check out this documentary they are making about me. xoxo Sadie’.”

Carlton even employed his own sister and paid her one cent a message, which he says eventually “added up to quite a bit of money”.

It was an innovative strategy that saw OzGirl launch on Bebo in February to an already established audience of 25,000 people.

“Our strategy was to be everywhere,” Carlton says. “We wanted to be wherever the audiences were.”

OzGirl screened on numerous online platforms including YouTube, Blip.tv, Veoh, Vimeo, Metacafe and also featured on social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, Bebo and MySpace.

“We didn’t want a destination site where we would have to redirect audiences. We wanted to pump the content out anywhere we could,” Carlton says.

OzGirl soon began to attract interest and Carlton was approached by a distributor offering him “solid money” for all rights to OzGirl. He decided to turn them down.

“I concluded that it wasn’t worth giving up the rights because we basically would have no control over where the show would go, or if it would even come out. I knew I could do it better,” he says.

Eventually Carlton signed a non-exclusive distribution deal with a web network called Koldcast TV, which is based in Los Angeles. The move saw OzGirl syndicated on TiVo, iTunes, Zune and on Koldcast TV’s own network.

A deal was also signed with Virgin Blue International Airlines and the show is now screening on all flights as part of their on-demand in-flight entertainment.

“Basically our business strategy is to license out content on various platforms while retaining full control over the intellectual property and the brand.”

Maintaining control is important, says Carlton as “you are building value in a brand, which can later be capitalised on”.

“I wasn’t just going to make it and sell it off. As a franchise, you can sell merchandise and DVDs.”

OzGirl was recently recognised at the Independent Television Festival in Los Angeles where it won the Best Web Series and Best Acting awards. The show also made its New York premiere last month at the New York Television Festival.

“I got an agent through the festival and through our contacts we were pitching to people like Sony International, Lionsgate, Fox TV and various other networks. It further legitimised what we were doing,” he says.

Not content to settle for one web series, Carlton has now launched his own digital entertainment company called Carlton Digital and has three new series in development.

“If I was making OzGirl today I wouldn’t be making 24 by 4 minute webisodes. I’d be making longer form content, somewhere between 12 and 20 minute episodes,” he says.

“Consumers have proven that they are now ready to sit down and watch longer form content online.”

Carlton also says his marketing strategy would differ today, with an increased focus on the social networking site Facebook.

“Facebook is pretty much the key to really making something go viral. Because everyone on the site pretty much has their own social network, so if you watch something it goes in the news feed and all your 200 friends are going to see it.”

Nicholas Carlton recently spoke at SPAA Fringe 2009 held at Sydney’s Fox Studios on October 17.

OzGirl's Josephine Shorter won Best Actress at the Independent Television Festival.