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## Going to the mat for media buys

By Lee Howard

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Special to the day

A crew from National Media Connection films former wrestling pro and TV reality star Hulk Hogan recently at a hotel in Tampa, Fla.

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A small New London company previously known for its infomercials is going Hollywood by signing on former pro wrestler and reality-TV star Hulk Hogan as a partner in a series of commercials set to start airing today.

National Media Connection's advertising campaign - for a debt-reduction referral company it also owns - is part of a new way of doing business for the 8-year-old company owned by Matt Goldreich of Waterford.

The firm previously shot infomercials for other companies, making money mostly from a 15 percent fee for placing spots on various networks. It now produces commercials and buys airtime on its own, making its profits by forwarding responses to clients who pay to find people interested in the services being advertised.

And that's where Hulk Hogan comes in - no holds barred. Hogan, as a partner in the debt-settlement commercials, will receive an up-front fee plus incentives and bonuses based on the number of callers responding to the ads, Goldreich said.

"It's bringing the business to the next level," Goldreich

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said. "We're bringing a little bit of Hollywood to New London."

Goldreich had sought out a variety of big-name talent before settling on Hogan, who he said seemed like a natural fit for the target audience for debt-settlement advertisements promising to help reduce credit-card bills of more than \$10,000. The ads might also include a version with Hogan using his real name and laid-back alter ego, Terry Bollea, Goldreich said.

In one version of the ad, which the company was still working feverishly to complete last week, Hogan rips apart a shirt that reads Don't Sweat the Debt - a slogan that director and company vice president Hank Tenney invented as part of the campaign.

"I'm hoping it becomes part of the American lexicon," Tenney said with a laugh.

Hogan said he loved the script, which also included the line "Don't let the bill collectors work you over."

"You gotta get in there and you gotta own it," Hogan said in a telephone interview a few days after the one-day shoot last month. "These guys are great to work with. It usually takes me like half a day to find the sweet spot and settle in, but with this shoot I found the groove in about a half-hour."

Tenney was just as impressed with Hogan.

"It was the easiest direction I've ever done," he said. "He just nailed it. He probably was harder on himself than I was."

"He was a cool, regular guy," recalled Dan Price, a National Media Connection employee who attended the shoot. "He didn't want anything extra. Every time we asked if he wanted anything, he'd say, 'No, I'm good, brother. I'm fine.'"

Hogan, who has been battling recurring health problems that sent him into his fourth back surgery last week, said he has been "financially wiped out" by both his divorce from his wife, Linda, and legal fees associated with the charges and claims against his son, Nick, who seriously injured another driver in a car accident.

"I know what it's like to scramble," he said. "When I said (in the commercial) I understand what it's like to face tough times, I was speaking from the heart."

National Media Connection took a crew of six to Tampa, Fla., two weeks ago to film the advertisement for Debt Help Center USA. It plans to put the ad on "full rotation" today, meaning it will be the only one of its several debt-reduction spots to get airtime.

Responses to the ads are automatically routed to various companies that pay for the referrals. Those clients are charged based on the number of calls their company receives.

"These guys are counting on us to make the phones ring," said Goldreich, who estimates his debt-settlement ads generate an average of 500 calls a day, while other commercials can bring in an additional 1,000 responses.

National Media Connection does it all - scripting, production and the placement of the ads - from its increasingly cramped office space in Union Plaza, where a work force of four just a year and a half ago has blossomed into 12 full-time employees, including four video editors. The business requires more employees -

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including a director of finance - now that its billings have gone from about 30 a month to more than 400, Goldreich said.

Previously, the New London firm counted on just a few clients to pay for both the production and placement of ads. But when the now-defunct Lend America canceled its advertising relationship with National Media Connection shortly before running afoul of Federal Housing Administration regulations, Goldreich said he decided it would be better not to rely too much on any one company.

"Lend America was great, but it became almost too big a part of our business," he said. "We decided to monetize the little guys across this country."

Doing so created new complexities and higher up-front costs. Last quarter, for instance, National Media Connection spent millions of dollars on advertisements to get clients' phones ringing, and he bought airtime on about 60 networks, compared with the dozen networks that accept infomercial buys.

On any given day National Media Connection might have as many as 10 different commercials running - spots that the company produces and must track to determine how many leads each is generating and whether ads are being played at the proper time. Computers parcel out the inquiries to clients, some of which are one-person shops that designate they want only one call an hour.

"We don't get paid for over-delivery," Goldreich said.

The switch from infomercials, which generally run 28 ½ minutes long, to mostly 60-second commercials has been surprisingly easy, Goldreich said. The commercials are easier to make and cheaper to place, while at the same time getting very good response rates.

Goldreich said the new process goes quickly because he can make decisions without having to go through the approval process with clients. Ads can be produced with as little as a 24-hour turn-around, he said.

"We're basically masters of our own future now," he said. "We get paid based on the effectiveness of our campaigns."

"I love the idea that we can do this and I don't have to be in New York or L.A.," Goldreich added. "I don't have to wrestle with trains or subways."

But Goldreich admits every day is still a bit of a tightrope walk. The company can lose money if responses are low. Every commercial hits a point of diminishing returns, which means the company always must be ready with another idea or to switch gears and create advertisements for other types of direct-response marketers, such as mortgage-modification programs.

With the latest Hulk Hogan advertisement, Goldreich thinks he's tapped into the perfect formula for delivering "that little bit of glamour" missing from previous commercials.

"We thought Hulk Hogan would be great," Goldreich said. "This could be the first partnership between direct response (advertising) and Hollywood."

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