

Big shows get star treatment

Cinram's packaging arm, Ivy Hill, sees a big future in big boxed sets as DVD turns to putting episodic television into its own unique packages. Dan Daley reports

Like the movie business, Ivy Hill has been around a long time. The company has been designing and creating packaging since 1914, and much of that time it was churning out record sleeves and other media envelopes for Warner's (later Time Warner's) music operations. As WAMO's packaging development division it came into the digital age with a bang, creating innovative packages first for the CD with the Eco-Pak, which is co-developed with Shape and was ahead of its time as an environmentally-friendly package concept; and then for DVD, which WAMO was on the frontiers of.

Along with other Warner manufacturing assets, Cinram acquired Ivy Hill in 2003, but the desire to be looking over the horizon to see where media packaging would be headed remained very much in place. Ivy Hill's 10,000sqft facility in Glendale is close by Hollywood's main engine room in Burbank. Warner's remains a client and is a not-too-long

drive away down the 101 Freeway. Ivy Hill is matching the video content industry's expanding focus on fostering television as the new big bucket from which to draw growth.

Rich Oppenheimer, executive vice president of sales & marketing for Ivy Hill, sits at the company's conference table surrounded by its legacy of packaging and graphics: DVD film collections and complex disc packages for quirky bands like the Ramones show the range of what the company has tackled over the years. On the table in front of him, though, is what he

two decades as group COO at competitor AGI, where he helped the creative group create Grammy award-winning designs for records by Madonna and Hank Williams. "This is already happening but it's going to be happening a lot more in the near future as big shows get repackaged to be resold in new configurations." It is, he suggests, the next logical step after many of these same series released individual season compilations on four-and five-disc sets in simple sliding tray-types of packages. "The package has to match the scale of putting out the entire series instead of just an entire season."

Know who your Friends are

The history of the *Friends* package (pictures were unavailable for release at press time) illustrates how important it is to ingest and

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thinks it'll be focusing on for the next few years. Two boxed sets, for the entire-season collections of major television series *Friends* and *The West Wing*, sit almost glowing on the table. If you notice *The West Wing* box first in its blue livery, a politically sensitive mind might assume that the similarly sized red box next to it is simply the politically correct counterpart of the blue-state version. However, there's nothing so Machiavellian at work here. The boxes represent the increasingly dynamic between content purveyors and ever-more powerful big-box retailers. In the middle are the packaging designers who are trying to help both entities fit a coming slew of large-scale video programming into ever-tighter shelf space.

"There are more and more big hit television shows that have reached the end of their broadcasting life cycle and are ready to be turned into boxed complete sets on DVD," says Oppenheimer, a packaging veteran who has been at Ivy Hill for nearly five years after over

integrate the needs of both sides of the equation – content and retail. *Friends*, which ran for 11 seasons on NBC in the US and has received wide syndication globally, went out as a complete set once before, in 2005. But while Wal-Mart accepted the package for sale, two other major big-box retailers, K-Mart and Target, declined to carry it. Oppenheimer demures when asked why, but his arched eyebrow suggests he thinks it was the nature and size of the packaging. "We're not a wooden box company," he comments.

He's more animated when it comes to how Ivy Hill responded to the challenge when Warner Home Video asked them to redesign it to make it fit within the other retailers' parameters. "It's a 42-disc set, and anything that size is going to be immediately outside of any SKU size," he says. "At first we looked at another large package we had come up with, a 40-disc set for the series *Alias*, but the dimensions we were given from the retail side meant we couldn't use that as a template."

Alias is housed in a nearly square, stiff paperboard cube covered in an ornately



Rich Oppenheimer surrounded by a selection of Ivy Hill's special packaging and graphics



decorated outer skin that holds six wallet-like portfolio disc holders positioned upright in the base and held in place with a keystone-like cap that, when removed, lets the box's sides fall away. Opening the box conveys a sense of revelation, of secrets unfolding, in keeping with the show's central theme, propelled by the prophecies of the inventive soothsayer Milo Rimbaldi.

The mandate for *Friends* was somewhat more utilitarian. "We were told we had a six-inch [depth] shelf to work with at retail, and they wanted two boxes to fit per shelf," explains Lori Ann Cooper, the Ivy Hill account executive who guided the project. "They wanted the box to define its own space, not to necessarily be defined by the space of the shelf itself."

The decision came down to a rectangular box, almost 12 inches in length and three inches deep, so that when the first one was removed another waited behind it to give a consumer the perception of uninterrupted availability. It wasn't quite that easy, of course. "There were constant small changes being made by Warner and the retailers, and each

change caused some level of chaos because each one would affect other aspects of the design and they'd ripple back and we'd have to change any number of things," says Oppenheimer.

The box, made from stiffened solid-bleached sulfate (SBS) paperboard laminated to chipboard and covered with shiny Skyvertek, has a flip-top lid that opens to reveal six portfolios, each adorned with the likeness of one of the six main cast members. It also holds a perfect-bound book that outlines the history of the show, cast biographies and other series minutiae. The five-month effort that went into devising the design and its constant revisions belies its cost, which Oppenheimer estimates to be in the teens of dollars, but buttresses its \$199.00 retail price tag, as does its nearly 3lb heft.

Successive design phases

The *West Wing* box is similarly sized and made from similar materials, but its genesis illustrates how the design process can be expedited using high-resolution computer renderings. A series of these laid out on the board room table show the chronology of thought that went into the box. Early on, it had a brown leathery texture,

The West Wing had a series of graphical concepts in the early design stages. The file-tab folder (top left to right) was the design selected

to suggest an attaché case; two different later iterations show how it went from an underarm portfolio with a brass clasp to a briefcase with a handle on top. Graphical concepts included a box whose art was a set of doors leading to the *West Wing*; another was a presidential podium. "There are all sorts of ideas like that in the early design stages, and everyone loves all of them," says Oppenheimer. "Then reality sets in when you realise how much they cost and what it takes to make them."

Inside, the box is divided by file-tab folders with a parchment-like texture, each defining one of the show's seven seasons, each of which are also trays that hold a pair of inserted discs. The package's single most distinctive feature is a stamped metal disc affixed to the outside front that portrays the seal of the president of the United States – "POTUS", in the show's speak. That work was done by Universal Book Bindery, an El Paso, Texas company which specialises in



One design rendering was a presidential podium



metalised decorations. Meat & Potatoes, a graphics firm also in Glendale and on exclusive retainer to Ivy Hill, did the overall graphical design of the package. Ivy Hill's office takes in the graphics files from its outsource suppliers and then does colour separation and other refinement tasks as it assembles the prototypes.

After the principals approve the prototype packages, they are sent to the replicator (most often parent company Cinram but Ivy Hill also does work with other media manufacturers, including Disney/Buena Vista projects such as *Alias*, which is replicated by Technicolor). While the boxes themselves are put together at Ivy Hill's manufacturing plants, the Glendale office sends them with highly detailed assembly instructions that show where every component goes, including the orientation of discs in sleeves, as well as running shipping tests for timing, pack-out tests to estimate assembly timings, and creating time-and-motion estimates for replicator packaging departments. Packages such as *The West Wing* and *Friends* are not automatable, "but if I ran the world, they would be," Oppenheimer snorts. "It's not so much a big investment to create automation for packages like this, but it is a big investment to buy lots of them." He says he believes replicators would love to do just that, but that content providers constantly searching for ways to differentiate even their own products from each other limit the possibility of enough packages repeatedly using the same procedures and components to warrant such an investment.

The future

Ivy Hill has three main locations; besides Glendale, which is the company's creative nerve centre with full graphical design capabilities and the ability to mock up cases, displays and oversized posters and other promotional materials, there is a smaller cousin design centre in New York City, as well as manufacturing plants in downtown Los Angeles, Terre Haute, Indiana (just across the

street from Sony DADC's disc manufacturing facility), and in Louisville, Kentucky. All are going to be very busy with large-scale television series work in the next few years, if Oppenheimer's predictions are correct.

"All packagers are going to face this issue in the near future," he says. "There are very few precedents for packaging television on this scale. *Sex In The City* comes to mind but that was a half-hour series and it was all done on

put on a coffee table, about making it a nice gift. Who gives downloads as a gift?"

Friends has an initial run of 135,000 units, and *The West Wing* will start off with 35,000, but Oppenheimer is certain that reorders will come in for both not long after their November street dates, driven by this year's sales season and by the long-tail effect from what he says will be steady demand from video series aficionados. "There are so many of these shows that are reaching this stage now – *24*, *ER*, *Desperate Housewives*, *Lost*, *Will & Grace* and HBO series like *Six Feet Under*," he says. "I think we're going to be getting calls soon on the 'presidential hotline' screaming 'Get me more of these – we're selling them out!'"

He's looking forward to next-generation discs picking up where DVD is now beginning to slack off, and he expects that the packaging industry will see more consolidation as that happens. "There are too many companies chasing too little work," he says. "But it's really all about perceived value for the consumer. Matching up great packaging with great television is going to be a huge opportunity in the next few years. You have to pick the right candidates – people are not going to pay big bucks for *Gilligan's Island* no matter how nice the package is. But put a great show in a great box and you've got a business." ●

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20 discs. These new projects are more than twice that many."

Oppenheimer cites music compilation specialists Rhino Records as a good model for the future of DVD television packaging. "They are experts at taking something that was already out there and repackaging it and selling it again and again," he says. "I think the video companies are going to have to get this as theatrical DVD sales continue to plateau. This is all about making the product not only sellable but also collectable, about making it something to



This package for the quirky rock band The Ramones creates a unique look, much like a coffee table book