



PARTNERS IN MOTION :

# THE NAME SAYS IT ALL

If you've watched television anywhere in the world in the last 10 years, chances are you've seen the work of a Regina tandem that has earned a global reputation for turning gripping stories into high-quality reality – real reality – TV.

by Paul Martin

**When Regina's Chris Triffo, an emerging documentary maker who was rapidly earning international recognition, needed a partner to take his enterprise to the next level in the 1990s, he immediately zeroed in on Ron Goetz. At the time Goetz was well-known in the Regina broadcast community as the head of CKCK-TV's production arm. But it wasn't so much his filmmaking credentials Triffo was eyeing, he was looking to find someone who could handle the business side of the business now called Partners in Motion.**

Triffo is the yin to Goetz's yang – a creative talent partnered with a strong business head. The pair, in the 15 years since striking their 50/50 partnership, has become the dominant player in the province's broadcast production community but also a big name on the commercial scene claiming the Saskatchewan Business of the Year title at the ABEX Awards in late 2007.

In fact, this partnership has struck a high note at virtually every level. They've claimed the most coveted award in the television community – the American Emmy Award, TV's equivalent of the Oscars. Similarly, they've filled a shelf with ABEX Awards. They've soared to the highest levels on both the creative and business sides. It's a partnership in motion.

# That's why we're looking to do more in Saskatchewan.

## We want to run with the winners and there are a lot of winners in this province.



Triffo started the business in 1993, a time when the television industry was undergoing a monumental transformation. The days of television stations dominating the production end of the business, producing their own content, was giving way to the emerging independent or freelance production unit. Triffo was one of those independents. But, like all transformations, it was incremental so commercial productions for private companies were still the primary business line. Nonetheless, producing TV shows was gradually accounting for a larger and larger percentage of the average independent's income stream.

"There were a lot of opportunities in the marketplace at the time," explains Goetz, Partners in Motion's chief executive. "The industry was moving to independent production companies. You could see the future in it."

### Big Break

The Triffo brand of storytelling came to prominence with an extremely honest, controversial and personal documentary called *Dad* which chronicled his relationship with his father and a family in crisis. It caught the attention of HBO, the American cable network known for taking a different approach to things, which bought his documentary to play on *Father's Day*.

"That really got a lot of attention," says Goetz. "People began saying, 'Wow. Who is this director and who is this company?'"

Goetz, who joined Triffo two years after the company was formed, had to negotiate the deal and had no experience in dealing with an American network so he sought out advice from colleagues in the production community. He was told the network always low-balled the first offer so he should hold out for more. He was also given a ballpark figure to shoot for.

It turns out HBO's first offer exceeded the minimum target so he grabbed it, forgetting to hold out for more.

He did gain one bit of insight, though. "I realized there was a lot of potential to produce television in this country but you could also sell it internationally. You could make a lot of money if it sells in a lot of countries. We wised up to that early in the game."

So they went after international markets as soon as they could, building relationships and spending a lot of time on airplanes as they met the industry players on their own turf or at global trade shows in places like Cannes.

Just as the relationship between Triffo and Goetz provided a foundation for the company, relationship building with global buyers became the company's walls and roof as they learned that buyers "care more about the story than where it was situated."

### Rebels of Regina

As this partnership was pioneering market opportunities previously untouched by Saskatchewan filmmakers, they pioneered production techniques as well.

"We were considered rebels," Goetz recalls of the early days. "Most (independent producers) didn't have permanent employees, we did."

They also broke with the industry's tradition on the technical front. Usually, production companies doing history pieces would dredge up some old photographs and use them to cover the narration of the program. Triffo and Goetz decided to employ re-enactments instead to give the storytelling a bit more life.

It was a move that drew the ire of the industry as critics charged they were fabricating or distorting history.

"We used re-creations, sort of mini-dramas," Goetz explains. While this is considered commonplace today, the part-

ners were blazing a new path when they decided to employ it.

One other key development was a blossoming relationship with U.S.-based History Television that would become a key to its growth. The cable network airs hundreds of documentaries annually and, when Emmy time came around, they could submit only a handful for the award consideration. One of the documentaries they selected was Partner's examination of the Vietnam War era called *13 Seconds: The Kent State Shootings*. The submission made the list of award finalists, up against the likes of ABC and CBS.

Goetz smiles when recalling the ceremony in New York City and feeling that being nominated was enough. But, when the winner was actually announced he missed most of it.

"I heard 13. That was all I needed. I didn't hear the rest of the announcement," says the rebel who was recognized as the best of the best in the most competitive market on earth.

"It opened a lot of doors, gave us credibility and attention," he explains in describing the importance of this milestone.

But it also solidified the company's place in the provincial film business.

When he returned to Regina from NYC others in the provincial industry were there to greet him and his prize. Goetz has high praise for the sector which is centred in the Queen City. With the backing of a tax credit among the most competitive on the continent, the Saskatchewan industry boasts a top-notch sound stage, has attracted feature films and has produced hit shows like *Corner Gas* and *Little Mosque*.

"When people call it the fledgling industry it drives me crazy," Goetz says of the business in the province.

Still, he acknowledges that today's economic challenges gripping North America are just another obstacle to be overcome but believes the industry's foundation is strong so it will survive.

"Like any industry, economics has a lot to do with it but the government is prepared to keep us competitive (with the tax credit). We have permanent people here."

Partners in Motion has been an important player in that growth, dating back to some decisions taken in the first month that the partnership was forged. Goetz and Triffo asked themselves what they wanted the company to be when it grew up. The vision they struck has helped build both the company and, indeed, the industry.

"We wanted to stay on the factual side, real television. We were not going to produce movies," Goetz says of their decision to forego the path others had chosen which included pursuing transient Hollywood producers in hopes of attracting feature film production in Saskatchewan.

"That really was the right decision at the time," offers Goetz in explaining that it was a time when 200 television stations were coming on stream worldwide. "It was a client-rich environment."

The changing market was also a nice fit for the company's philosophy of producing locally and selling globally as they began producing a string of programs including Crime Stories, Disasters of the Century and The Reinventors that have won audiences in 150 countries. These followed programs such as Trading Places where families swapped lives for five days or Very Odd Jobs which explored unique occupations around the world.

These were complemented by documentaries which remain a vital part of the company's creative efforts. These include Vietnam: Canada's Unknown War and Escape from Iran, The Hollywood Caper, an hour-long documentary that marked the 25th anniversary of the Canadian effort to help American hostages escape after the fall of the Shah. The company won the cooperation of the FBI and the CIA, which actually developed the original plan to spirit the American diplomats out of Tehran. It involved a scheme to have the Americans pose as Canadian filmmakers caught in the country during the coup.

"Up until this interview, we figure the Iranians never figured out how we

(Canada) did it," Goetz says of the project which saw them interview the late Shah's wife, former Prime Minister Joe Clark and Flora MacDonald, his foreign minister for the program.

The documentary and its gripping story remains a favourite for Goetz. "Even though I know how it's going to end up I still get tense when I watch it."

Before working his way up the corporate ladder, Goetz got his start in TV by working at a small-town station in his British Columbia hometown. There, he cleaned films at night and delivered TV Guide magazines by day.

Along the way he's absorbed immense industry and business knowledge. Goetz says the strategy that has served them so well – of creating programming in Canada, then selling abroad – is similar to an oil well. "They produce revenue long after the well has been drilled," he says.

Armed with that knowledge the company took it a step further and established a division charged with creating their own music for their productions, another asset that would generate a royalty stream. Chris's brother joined them to head this unit.

"We found multiple revenue streams for our productions," Goetz offers.

At the same time, they took a conscious decision to once again ignore industry norms and become 'self contained' rather than relying on rented equipment ranging from editing suites to lighting.

"We owned all our own equipment," Goetz says in explaining that relying on rented equipment meant you couldn't always get it when you needed it or would be reluctant to re-edit if it meant adding to the project's budget, all factors that could undermine the final look or quality of a production.

Today the company continues its commitment to quality by becoming one of the first Canadian companies to convert its operation to HD production, pumping \$1.5 million into the expansion.

"We made a commitment a year and a half ago to move into HD," Goetz says, noting that the firm expanded its Regina headquarters to add new editing facilities and a studio facility next door to its administration offices. "Everything we do is in the HD format now. It was one of the more significant investments in the (Canadian) industry."

## Tomorrow

As a company that has striven to stay ahead of the curve, Goetz says today they find themselves going back to the future as they turn, once again, to putting a greater emphasis on corporate videos and the production of commercials. A couple years ago, 98 per cent of the company's revenues came from outside of Saskatchewan and "it was becoming apparent that we were getting disconnected from our community."

Goetz set out to reconnect and says "one way was through doing corporate production (for local firms and agencies)."

The firm has hired a couple people to develop this division which now accounts for 15 per cent of overall sales. "Our long-term plan is double or triple that effect," says Goetz of the company's plan to develop a pan-Western approach by developing relationships with like-minded operators in other provinces.

The company's timing couldn't be any better, given that Saskatchewan's economy is faring better than those in the U.S., the dominant television market.

"Our customers are in places that are suffering. That's why we're looking to do more in Saskatchewan. We want to run with the winners and there are a lot of winners in this province."

While timing may have played a major role in the company's growth and success, for Goetz it's really about finding a balance.

Winning an Emmy was important but so were the ABEX Awards. His personal favourite was the community involvement ABEX, which goes alongside the marketing and investment, as well as the Business of the Year awards. "As a business you have a desire to win both – the creative award and the business award. Both are keys to being successful. If you don't have one, the other side probably fails."

It's a belief that extends to his relationship with his partner – he on the business side and Triffo handling the creative elements.

"That's the marriage you both look for. It's been a successful partnership. When you focus in on your area, two partners can work together who come from opposite ends of the spectrum. And we enjoyed our sides of the business."

"There are partnerships (in a creative industry) where one of them has to do the business stuff and their heart is not into it." ■