Source Media Group Revs Up a Vibrant Multimedia Enterprise with Wirecast

How Entrepreneur Chris Callen is using Wirecast from Telestream and Restream.io to create a vibrant multimedia streaming business geared to the motorcycle community

"Wirecast and Restream.io literally saved my business and infused it with new life. This software is like the hub of a wheel with many spokes, such as streaming media, video production, and social engagement"

- Chris Callen, Editor in Chief, The Source Media Group, Pittsburgh, PA

When the pandemic hit in March 2020, Chris Callen had an a-ha moment that changed the game for his Cycle Source motorcycle magazine business. While he'd been publishing one of the last surviving custom motorcycle magazines without fail for 25 years, the economic shutdown caused him to shift from monthly to bi-monthly publication, and he feared the slowdown would crush his business altogether.

It was then that he realized that some of the live streams of various motorcycle rallies that he'd been producing–as an adjunct to the print magazine–were now garnering millions of views. With everyone stuck at home in lockdown, motorcycle aficionados were taking to social media channels to find their tribe, and the excitement and experiences they'd otherwise encounter on the road.

In a pivotal decision that transformed his business from struggling to thriving, Callen and his wife Heather Callen decided to go full throttle on streaming media production, making it the engine of their business.

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They chose a new company name – *The Source Media Group* – because it reflected their broader multimedia ecosystem which now encompasses:

- Live and recorded streaming to an affiliate network comprised of 12 to 14 social media channels, with a reach of 3.5 million viewers
- Audio podcasting and blogging
- Commercial and documentary production
- Cycle Source magazine, with over 350,000 monthly subscribers

By repurposing its exclusive content across these outlets, Source Media tells stories–about bikes and the bikers who love them–in new and different ways to a targeted, niche audience that motorcycle advertisers are keen to reach. To fuel their initiative, the Callens amped up their use of Telestream Wirecast and Restream.io for live video production and streaming.

THE CHALLENGE

In repositioning his company's focus, Callen faced many creative, logistical, and technical challenges. These challenges all stemmed from the need to generate 40 to 50 hours of fresh, original content monthly, while maintaining the high (1080/30p) video production standards that attract the avid audience his advertisers and sponsors pay to reach.

The programming is varied, with some shows running 90 minutes to two hours long, including:

- ShopTalk, live Sundays at 9pm EST
- Coast to Coast, live Tuesdays at 9pm EST
- Motorcycle Cannonball Chronicles, live Wednesdays at 9pm EST
- Live remotes of motorcycle rallies and bike shows
- Documentaries on topics like the 80th anniversary of the famed Sturgis Bike Rally
- Grease & Gears Garage Segments, Cyber Swap, and Bikenite, which are pre-recorded in a look-live style
- Torque Performance, which focuses on the younger performance market

Callen's marketing partners carry his programming on their channels in exchange for promotional consideration, such as a logo roll, show mention, or commercial.

He likens this distribution strategy to that of a TV network whose affiliate stations carry its programming. Together, the partners deliver the feeds across roughly 12 to 14 different social media channels and/or websites, giving him a potential reach of millions of followers weekly.

With the help of guest co-hosts and his wife who is his production manager and grip, Callen produces the shows largely as a one-man band. While hosting the shows, he is manning all the key production positions, including line producer, technical director, graphics operator, and audio engineer. He credits the logical, intuitive, and aesthetically pleasing user interface of Telestream Wirecast software, as well as the streamlined workflow he designed and perfected to work equally well in his home-based garage studio and in the 2020 Mercedes Sprinter that serves as a mobile unit.

THE SOLUTION

The ability to restream is a key reason that Wirecast proved to be the ideal solution for Source Media. Restream.io takes the program output from Wirecast and distributes it in real-time to multiple destinations, such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube sites, simultaneously. But more importantly, it aggregates all the user comments on all of those destinations, and deposits them into an on-screen chat box in the program stream.

> "Managing user comments is the key to making all this work. Social media platform algorithms reward video content creators that demonstrate lively, engaged viewer interaction by raising the show's visibility in their feeds. When I give a shout-out to fans joining in, it motivates them to stay watching. Restream.io counts how many comments I'm getting, which tells me how well the show is doing. The more views, the more value I can deliver to advertisers."
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> - Chris Callen, Editor in Chief, The Source Media Group, Pittsburgh, PA

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When he first began dabbling with streaming five years ago, Callen discovered Wirecast and immediately recognized that its video, audio, and graphics capabilities were broadcast-quality. While he considered competing solutions that were relatively inexpensive or even free, he decided that the uncompromised, feature rich Wirecast environment coupled with Restream.io made this choice a no-brainer. In addition, a unique feature within Wirecast, called Rendezvous, is indispensable for bringing in live video of remote guests within the Wirecast environment. He also brings in video of guests via platforms like Zoom and Skype over an NDI network into the live show.

THE EQUIPMENT SET-UP

Having dropped out of high school in the tenth grade, Chris Callen is extremely proud of his newfound mastery of live, broadcast-quality video production and streaming skills, which he learned all on his own from the ground up. He said that Wirecast was advantageous because it's designed to be user-friendly enough for novices and pros alike, and it just works. But despite Wirecast's user-friendly interface and logical layout, he found it necessary to submerge himself in research about the ins and outs of live streaming production. After all, he was starting from scratch with questions like, "What's a video codec?" "What's mix-minus audio?" And "What bandwidth requirements does live streaming demand?"

Callen also needed to design a custom solution that would enable him to quickly move equipment from its usual spot in his home garage studio into his van. While he initially used a fly pack, he soon realized that the need for set-up at every location was time-consuming and fraught with potential problems, such as missing cables and/or systems integration issues.

This experience motivated him to develop an inventive rolling rack solution that could be moved from his garage, lifted into the Sprinter and bolted to the floor. Since the equipment is pre-mounted in the rack, there's no need to plug, unplug, or remove any gear for set-up or strike at the remote shooting location. Once at the site, he can now be ready to start streaming in just 20 minutes.

The Source Media equipment complement currently includes:

- Several Panasonic HCX-1000 4K cameras
- 3 Logitec C615 webcams
- Tote Vision monitors (four in-studio and six in the van)
- A FLYCAM Galaxy camera stabilization harness
- AKG P220 mics in-studio; Sennheiser mics in the field
- Hollyland Mars-400 HDMI HD-SDI wireless transmitters
- Elgato Stream Deck XL keypad
- Stiger Dynamics Infinitum Core 19" custom-built, server-grade computer
- Behringer XENYX X2222USB 22-input USB audio mixer with effects
- An analog audio mixer
- Behringer MDX-4600V2 Multicom Pro-XL Compressor
- Rolls HE18 Buzz Off 2-Channel Hum and Buzz Remover
- Furman Merit Series M-8Dx 9-Outlet Power Conditioner
- Focusrite Scarlett 2i2 2x2 USB Audio Interface (3rd Generation)

A key production concern, however, is that remote sites must have a dedicated Cat-5 (or better) Ethernet hook-up that he can use; wireless connections are not robust or reliable enough for streaming.

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The only wireless transmission systems in use are the Hollyland HD wireless transmitters that send roving camera video and audio signals back to the Wirecast switcher in the van. His future plans include acquiring a bonded-cellular transmission system and converting the Sprinter into a satellite uplink van.

> "I've looked at other products on the market, but nothing runs like Wirecast. While I'm hosting live shows, I'm single-handedly switching multiple sources—including two co-hosts that come in directly via Rendezvous, as well as managing the external NDI video and audio of guests coming in on Skype. All the while, I'm confident it will run smoothly because of the way that Telestream designed and built the program."
>
> --Chris Callen, Editor in Chief, The Source Media Group, Pittsburgh, PA

THE WORKFLOW

Source Media shows can be quite complex, featuring panels of co-hosts and guests in video mortices, bike collectors and custom builders, band performances, as well as interviews with celebrities like Comedian Jay Leno, who is known to love motorcycles. Viewers also get to watch stunts, such as loud, crazy "burnouts" where bikers take their bikes out of gear and get the back wheels spinning till there are clouds of smoke. Callen has covered major motorcycle rallies, such as annual events in Sturgis and Daytona, as well as putting together his own staged or virtual rallies during the Covid lockdown, some of which have been day-long events with dozens of featured guests and performances.

To streamline live production demands, Callen uses all five video layers in Wirecast to pre-build the look of the show using the following elements:

- Logo rolls
- A sponsor banner at the top
- A chat box left of screen
- Broadcast design graphics and backgrounds
- Lower third supers and other on-screen text
- Two windows center-screen to fill with video

During live shows, this strategy allows him to roll all of these elements in as a single layered composite, which frees him up to focus on other tasks, such as switching and keying video into the windows, rolling in clips, showing photos, and making sure the audio levels and quality are right.

In the field, he often resorts to look-live recording, which allows him to do postproduction editing, such as inserting commercials, and popping in photos and B-roll, to create the finished product. He then broadcasts the pre-recorded shows out of Wirecast with a 5-minute pre-show countdown window that further adds to the look-live quality. The Wirecast output goes directly to Restream.io, which distributes it to the multiple destinations while sending back the viewer comments. Callen then interacts with those viewers to get them excited and drive-up engagement.

Whether in-studio or in the field, audio presents huge challenges. His audio set-up is elaborate, and the result of much trial and error. According to Callen, people will be way more forgiving of video issues than they are of poor audio, and the longer the bad audio persists "you can just watch your audience run away like sand through an hourglass". Through extensive experimentation, he's determined that having all of his audio sources going through an analog audio mixing board is far more stable and dependable than a digital audio mixer in terms of controlling the audio flow into the computer. He explains that with the analog mixer, settings are either on or off, whereas Windows 10 can cause audio settings to change when the mixer is unplugged and plugged in again. He uses the mixer to set, adjust, and control audio levels during the show.

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THE RESULTS

When the pandemic hit in March 2020, Callen's print business came to a screeching halt as retail outlets that sold his magazines closed, and the motorcycle rallies and other big events he covered were cancelled. He was concerned that he was risking brand awareness, market leadership, and reader loyalty.

To his amazement, he soon discovered that he could produce his own live shows and events featuring custom builders, biking aficionados, and experts, and those streams got millions of hits. With his multimedia ecosystem, he's now giving the motorcycle community a much-needed framework where they can convene and immerse themselves in all aspects of their passion.

There's also a smart synergy between all the Cycle Source channels. For example, when Callen shoots a feature about any person, company, or event–such as a high-profile custom builder or legendary biker–he often repurposes that content into a variety of short and long format videos and ads to use across the social media network. Advertisers help sustain the business while buying impressions at very low CPMs.

"If you use Wirecast and Restream.io together the way I'm doing, you'll see a very big difference in audience interaction where social platform algorithms will just open up naturally, without having to pay to boost or force them open. What's more, one viewer could be on Facebook, another on Twitter, and another on YouTube. Wirecast and Restream.io are powerful, and the key to making this streaming model succeed."

--Chris Callen, Editor in Chief, The Source Media Group, Pittsburgh, PA

Check out these sites for more information:

For Cycle Source Media Group, visit:
http://www.cyclesource.com

And find out how Wirecast helps you stream like the pros at:
http://www.telestream.net/wirecast/overview.htm

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