

Inside WWE's divide-and-conquer YouTube strategy

With over 108 million subscribers, WWE has truly colossal reach on YouTube. The company currently sits just behind PewDiePie at number 11 on the list of most-subscribed channels across the entire platform. When you're at that level of popularity, there's constant communication with YouTube about best practices, key viewership metrics, and the latest strategies for pulling in even more eyeballs.

Last year, WWE decided to shake up (and split up) its YouTube strategy. The company introduced a new standalone channel called WWE Vault that became the new destination for classic live events, full matches, and rare archival footage – much of which fans are seeing for the very first time. For a company with a fanbase that's never universally happy with *anything*, the Vault became an instant hit. Scroll down to the comments of any video, and fans heap praise upon the channel. For some, it has filled the void that was left when WWE Network went dark after WWE and Peacock announced their streaming partnership several years ago.

The Vault also helps the flagship channel stay focused on modern WWE programming as the company continues to do big business with stars like Cody Rhodes, Roman Reigns, Gunther, and CM Punk. "The current product on our main channel seemed to be outpacing a lot of what we were doing from a historical perspective," Steve Braband, who oversees WWE's digital team, told me this week. "So a few of us sat around and said, 'our historical content still means a lot to us on YouTube.'"

Older programming still has its place on the main WWE channel; this month has featured a countdown of the 50 all-time

greatest *WrestleMania* matches as part of the run-up to *WrestleMania 41* in Las Vegas this weekend. But the majority of it now gets forked off to the Vault. "It's fun to see the internet wrestling community kind of try and figure out who the admin of the Vault is," Braband said. In reality, it's a group effort that involves many longtime employees. "We have a ton of knowledge within the building of clips from years in the past and clips that we haven't unearthed," he told me.

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Being able to stream some of yesteryear's best pay-per-views (now "premium live events" in WWE parlance) for free on YouTube without a Peacock subscription is nice, but it's the unpolished, never-before-seen clips that have kept lifelong fans coming back and hitting the notification bell. Not all that long ago, it would've been unthinkable for WWE to pull back the curtain to this degree. Maybe you'd catch some raw, unrehearsed moments during a DVD documentary – but now they're popping up weekly on the WWE Vault channel. Full matches easily still get the most views, but it's these random segments that prove so addictive.

Easily the highlight among them is the "Found Footage" series. WWE's team of archivists, researchers, and video editors sift through the company's vast library to find backstage gems, fan signings, and even footage from un-televised live events. "There's been a few examples of content that was filmed from house shows, which in the past we wouldn't have shown," Braband said. "Now we're a little more flexible with some of that unseen footage going out on Vault."

In the clip above, you'll see wrestlers playing on an arcade cabinet in between takes for *Monday Night Raw*'s TV opening. At the end, Bret "Hitman" Hart very casually offers Jerry Lawler – his longtime rival in WWE lore – a hookup for Cavaliers /

Celtics tickets. Even if you stopped watching WWE decades ago, these shots of nostalgia might reel you back in. The Vault also includes “The Story Of” compilations that pack entire feuds and storylines into single videos, which means viewers don’t have to hop between a playlist to see everything.

“We have people that really, really like to do it,” Braband said of wading through all that footage. “It’s a good team of people led by Ryan Murphy and John Clapp utilizing both content research and ultimately our video editing teams. As much as people want to believe it’s one person just clipping and posting the best video they could find off a server, there’s a whole cohesive digital strategy to it.”

Like WWE’s primary YouTube channel, some videos posted to the Vault will eventually disappear. But others are meant to be more evergreen. As John Cena continues his final year of in-ring action for the company, a collection like the one below is guaranteed to rack up views. “The edit is really raw and it’s not a full in and out of each moment,” Braband said. “So we’re hoping that sits on the channel for a while as Cena does this last run.”

Encouraged by Vault’s success, WWE has recently launched a dedicated channel for WCW, the wrestling promotion that it famously spent decades competing against and eventually acquired. Soon there will be another for ECW and its extremely brutal events. “It’s a clear destination telling fans where to go,” Braband said of the strategy. For now, the recipe is largely the same with new matches and full events posted weekly. But eventually more original programming might weave its way into these split-off WWE channels as the company makes every effort to reach fans wherever they are.

<https://www.theverge.com/youtube/652094/wwe-vault-youtube-interview>