

Harnessing the magic medium: Sight, sound and story

The screen is a magic medium. It has such power that it can retain interest as it conveys emotions and moods that no other art form can hope to tackle.

— Stanley Kubrick, American film director

According to comScore, 81.6% of all U.S. Internet users watched an average of 9.7 hours of videos online in August 2009 — an all-time high. These numbers account for an astonishing 161 million viewers who watched more than 25 million videos, averaging 3.7 minutes each.

Why do so many people seek out video on the Web? It's simple. Today's media-savvy audiences seek to experience the magic of the medium — its emotive power, immediacy, and ability to entertain, educate and enlighten — in an instant.

COMPELLING CONTENT IN DEMAND

Now more than ever, companies must harness the power of video and other rich media to reach audiences, who have greater control over what they choose to view, recommend or share. Empowered by the democratization of technologies, users can create and capture high-end video on everything from digital cameras and camcorders to smart phones. And with the Web as an effective stage for this high-bandwidth content, these sophisticated viewers now expect the high quality once reserved for traditional broadcast outlets.

The data also shows that there's a lot of media noise competing for viewership. Adding complexity to this situation is the mistrust of anything that appears scripted or "spun." Recent global turmoil in the social, economic and political landscape has made people more suspicious, skeptical and critical of what they see and hear from companies and institutions. The net effect poses a challenge for any organization wanting to connect meaningfully with these increasingly jaded audiences.

So, then, how can companies craft content that will rise above the din to engage millions of potential viewers? Again, the answer is simple. Our experience tells us that it goes back to the basics of powerful filmmaking. Below, we'll share how three fundamental elements — sight, sound and story — must work in perfect symphony.

SIGHT

Draw on the visual styles that will best engage your audience and convey authenticity, such as a documentary approach. One effective technique is locking down the camera in a static position and orientation to let the subjects move through the frame, rather than moving the camera to direct the viewer's eye. The audience becomes both spectator and participant, as the scenes seem to unfold naturally and organically before it.

SOUND

Consider sound — not just environmental sounds that set context and mood, but also the quality, timing and nuance of what's being said in relation to what's being seen. Be aware that there's a unique tone, tenor and rhythm to a real conversation. It's difficult for even the most skilled actors to make scripted content sound and appear natural and honest. Good filmmakers take the time to relax their subjects and guide them to speak and act in ways that resonate and ring true.

STORY

Use the basic building blocks of a good story to inform, intrigue, illuminate or inspire, such as interesting characters, an inviting beginning, surprises and suspense, action that builds to a climax, and a satisfying or provocative ending. An effective corporate documentary relies on these building blocks to feature believable characters with whom the

audience can connect emotionally, and real situations in which viewers can see themselves. Factual content should frame a compelling point of view and reveal new insights, and the interplay and pacing of sights and sounds should draw in and captivate the audience. Done well, a corporate documentary can weave an engaging story that feels genuine and meaningful to even the most discriminating audience.

Finally, remember that the story is not only what's revealed on screen. It's also part of your organization's ongoing, multifaceted brand narrative. Individually, each story must be distinct and meaningful. Collectively, your stories must reveal the sum of the defining, special moments that bring your organization's brand to vivid life — who you are, what you do and stand for, why it matters and how you are different.

A PERFECT SYMPHONY

The skilled orchestration of sight, sound and story can strike an emotional chord with audiences by creating an immediacy and intimacy that feels authentic. And memorable content can also extend your reach virally in today's digitally connected world, as engaged viewers become advocates, passing on your message to new audiences. By artfully exploiting filmmaking fundamentals, you can not only shape compelling stories through this "magic medium," but also evoke experiences that can deepen the relevance and resonance of your brand's value proposition. The end result can help your organization build greater trust and credibility, and ultimately, forge an enduring connection with your most important stakeholders.

Baker is a brand and communication design firm.