

Advocacy Story Telling for Nonprofits

We are hardwired to tell stories. From cave painting to twittering we weave stories to make meaning of our experiences.

The best documentaries are:

- Emotionally Compelling
- Well Structured
- Visually Expressive and
- Well-Crafted

Emotionally Compelling

Successful narratives grab us emotionally. In Hollywood it's sex and violence that demands our attention. For storytellers driven to share ideas as much as experiences, the hook is often a person, a personality, a character — a catalyst for our empathy. Sometimes the storyteller embodies the story— a personal journey. Sometimes the storyteller is a guide letting us see the “heroine's journey.”

Well Structured

Stories are memorable —stories work — because the way they are told matches the story being told. A successful story has a strong, compelling structure. We can be flexible; we can be creative. Structure can take many forms. It is the connective tissue, which allows us to enter and understand the emotional arc of the story. As the new wave filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard said, “ all stories have a beginning, middle and end. But not necessarily in that order.” Effective storytelling features strong characters engaged in meeting challenges, resulting in a satisfying resolution.

In documentary work a classical structure is Problem/Solution. Part 1: What's the situation? Part 2: How and/or why did this happen? Who is responsible? Part 3: What's to be done? Each story demands its own structure. There is no one size fits all. But all structures demand a firm foundation, respect for basic principles of construction, and close attention to transitions, the threads that link each development and bind the pieces into a coherent whole.

The goal is to create a story that is elegant, unexpected and utterly convincing.

Visually Expressive

The greatest power of a video documentary is in showing, not telling. Pictures in motion are the essence of dynamic storytelling. Talking heads are radio. Don't resort to an expert or executive behind a desk telling us how important the work is. Let viewers discover this for themselves, coming to their own emotionally reinforced conclusions. The power of imagery is its vividness, the potential for metaphor and the feelings, ideas, and connections we discover by looking. This is the pleasure of seeing for ourselves.

Well-Crafted

Our films are on screens. Viewers have come to expect a certain level of professionalism. Today “everything is permitted” — fuzzy sound, jumping cameras, jarring cuts— but only if these “mistakes” serve the story. Not because as my students tell me, “We forgot the tripod.” Video is a collaborative art. You are the content expert. You need to seek out and work with skilled videomakers.

From witness.org
Video for Change
A Guide for Advocacy and Activism
Edited by
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‘Storytelling for Advocacy: Conceptualization and Pre-Production’
Chapter by Katerina Cizek

“What is storytelling for advocacy?”

What makes storytelling different when you are doing it to campaign for a particular social, legal, cultural, political, or economic change? The key difference is that in advocacy, storytelling is at the service of your goal for change and your message, rather than just the story itself or the ideas of the filmmaker. Advocacy storytelling is about effectively communicating this message to the audience and encouraging them to act. Your understanding of the people who make up your audience—and how exactly you want them to act—will define how you will communicate this message to them. Peter Wintonick suggests that simply making films for entertainment tends to create a passive response—entertainment for entertainment’s sake. But when you are using video for advocacy, he says:

“You want to move your audience to action. That’s the difference between advocacy media and entertainment media. Entertainment is a passive experience. It’s laid out by the filmmaker. A good advocacy filmmaker turns things over to the audience.”

How do we shape our stories? What strategies can bring our ideas to life? The goal is to summarize your story in one clear, direct sentence. This is your mission statement. Confirm it by answering three important questions:

- Who is the audience?
- How will we tell the story?
- How will the video be used?

Audience

Who is the audience? Who is your target audience? Identify age, background, and social and/or financial characteristics. It is also important to know WHY this is your target audience. What are they interested in? What will draw them in and heighten their interest? How much background and context do they have? How do you want them to feel after they have viewed your piece? What do you want them to do? (E.g. volunteer their time, get involved with your program, break out their checkbooks, refer eligible candidates to your program, etc.)

Style and Approach

What is the “spine” of your documentary? What content is crucial to provide, and how will you lead the viewer through the program? Who is the storyteller? Whose perspective and whose voice? Who are the participants? What tone would best serve your documentary? Somber? Provocative? Authoritative? Humorous?

Often one of the most effective technique to observe a process, letting people naturally and spontaneously speak for themselves while engaged in activities.

What is the best balance among observation and discovery, interviews, narration, voice-over and re-enactments? How will you use graphics and music? Is the story quick paced or lyrical? What's the optimal length? (Less is almost always more.)

Distribution

How and where will the video be used? What is the primary use of the finished product? Fundraising? Volunteer recruitment? Something else? It's important to stay focused on your primary use. If you design the documentary for multiple uses, you run the risk of diluting the impact. This is because each intended use brings with it a series of specific choices and resulting content. If you generalize your content to accommodate multiple uses, you will by definition be diluting your message.

Where and in what formats will audiences encounter your work? Screen size and venue (theater or cell phone) has a significant impact on attention span and production value. Can the materials be re-purposed for complementary uses? Is there an inter-active component? What is the expected shelf life of the material?

Final Thoughts

- Be Bold. Take Risks.
- Tell the story visually.
- Get creative, stay focused, and above all else, plan absolutely everything that can be planned.

Use the story to provoke discussion. Don't think of the work as standing on its own. It's an opportunity to start a discussion; to make viewers want to know more. Your stories are a catalyst for change. Changing perceptions, making a difference.

By Mark Freeman 2009

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Resources

MarkFreeman Films

www.markfreemanfilms.org

Community Productions

<http://www-rohan.sdsu.edu/~mfreeman/community.php>

Witness

www.witness.org

Bay Area Video Coalition (San Francisco)

www.bavc.org

Media Arts Center (San Diego)

www.mediaartscenter.org

International Documentary Association (Los Angeles)

www.documentary.org

Center for Social Media: Making Your Media Matter

http://www.centerforsocialmedia.org/resources/making_your_media_matter/

Wild and Scenic Film Festival

<http://www.wildandscenicfilmfestival.org/>

(See #7 Brower Youth award)

Documentary Storytelling by Sheila Bernard

Documentary Filmmaking by Hewitt and Vazquez Oxford