

Creating a Video Documentary and Building Community

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Abstract

Creating a documentary video can be more than an artistic or interpretive endeavor; it can be an activity that builds relationships among the participants. Identify experts from various organizations that can benefit from getting to know each other, empower the participants to provide the material and emotional content, and host production-related events to involve them in a common activity. We will give hints on how to build relationships while creating a powerful interpretive documentary video.

Keywords

documentary film-making; video and videography; volunteer programs; lighthouse; cultural interpretation

Introduction

So you want to make a movie. Good idea! There are several good reasons to do this. The public is open to interpretive messages that touch their deepest convictions. Equipment is easy to use and readily available. It's a good method to spread your message in a cost-effective way. And there is another reason that is just as compelling as spreading your message: to build connections between your organization and people outside who share your values and passions. This shared project can provide an economical, socially responsive approach to extending your resources and your presence in the community.

That is what we did with *Point Bonita Lighthouse: Vital Link Between Keepers and Sailors*. We wanted to achieve two goals: to fulfill our interpretive vision, and also to link the talents and values of the exceptional docents in Golden Gate National Recreation Area's Marin Headlands with experts outside of the park.

We felt that if our participants experienced confidence and excitement in this project, they would make significant contact with each other. We saw them as subject matter

experts and ourselves as facilitators and filmmakers. This bottom-up approach mobilized enthusiasm among participants and helped build community.

Developing topic, theme, and threads

Select a broad topic with room for multiple perspectives, so that you can involve experts from different organizations that could gain by a closer relationship. After choosing your topic (ours was “vital link between keepers and sailors”), identify perspectives that could become major sections within the documentary (i.e., sailors, immigrants, lighthouse keepers, U.S. Coast Guard, National Park Service, docents).

Next identify and interview people who represent these perspectives (i.e., historical society directors, sailors, living history professionals, docents, NPS employees). Let the general theme guide your interview questions. Remember, your theme may not be fully developed until after you have reviewed all the interview material.

After filming, editing the tremendous array of video clips into a cohesive whole can be a daunting task. The job of creating continuity will be easier if you develop one to three threads that can be woven through the documentary. We used three threads: excerpts from lighthouse logs (central theme); ocean scenes (visual transitions); and scripted narration (movement through major sections).

Conducting interviews

The audience needs to connect with the documentary, not just hear facts. Rely on the passion and expertise of your interviewees. Frame interview questions to elicit emotion and enthusiasm by asking about feelings, experiences and desires. “How do you think the immigrants felt when they sailed through the Golden Gate?” got us a fervent response. In contrast, the answer to “Where did the immigrants come from?” was uninspiring. Use narration for facts and leave emotion to the interviewees.

Help the interviewee answer briefly, 30 seconds to 2 minutes, by crafting questions to elicit concise responses. Keep an eye out for appropriate visual coverage and plan the interview accordingly. Beautiful footage coupled with passionate interviewee responses give the documentary life.

Shooting video footage

Be sure to shoot plenty of raw footage, including shots that tell a story, involve scenery, and provide pans of still images. During the interview and research phase, envision which images would best evoke the critical parts of the documentary’s message. Expect and plan for retakes.

Turning the camera on a vibrant situation will invoke emotion. Our footage of immigrants sailing into the Golden Gate was dynamic because the people were experiencing the immediacy of sea mist and rolling waves as they were being filmed on the historic sailing ship.

Using reenactments

Reenactments help actors immerse themselves in the material. The intimacy of their experience is conveyed naturally and easily to the audience. There are two keys to helping actors give natural performances. First, have fun. Use costumes. Allow your actors to show off. Second, be prepared to edit. Get lots of takes and pick the best.

Effective reenactment techniques include voice-overs, scripted and ad-libbed scenes, and living history performances.

Just as important as the effect on the audience is the effect on the actors. This experience will stay with them beyond the production of the documentary. This type of benefit builds long-term involvement and loyalty among your participants.

Selecting music

Most musicians want their music to be heard. Invite local musicians to record original or traditional music. Hear a commercial recording that you like? Call the label and explain your project. Many are willing to let you use the music for free as long as you do not plan to make a profit. Always get written permission. Always give credit.

Arranging for adequate equipment, budget and time

We recommend use of digital video (mini DV) equipment with computer-based editing. This system allows you to translate your vision easily into a final product. For digital production, a digital video camera, Lavalier microphone, digital videotape, and video tripod produce the best product. For editing, a computer with video editing software. For screening, a sound system, video projector, VCR and projection screen.

Our budget, excluding equipment (which you can borrow), was approximately \$1000. Expenses included transport to shooting locations, videotape, video projector rental and chartering a historic ship. Production time was four months. We spent 10 hours in production for each minute of the finished documentary. Don't be afraid of spending a lot of time on this project.

Celebrating completion

Now that the hard work is done, celebrate everyone's success. This will help the new relationships last and reinforce everyone's feeling of community. To celebrate we held two events. During production, we chartered a historic vessel and invited everyone to sail with us in costume and in character as Gold Rush immigrants. The "premiere," which both participants and park visitors attended, began with a sunset tour of the lighthouse, followed by the screening and a party in the visitor center. Invitations to the events were personal phone calls, designed to make each participant aware of their importance to the project. After the premiere, we sent formal thank-you letters along with a gift copy of the documentary.

In closing

The audience sits spellbound in front of the big screen. In the flickering light of the credits you glance at their faces and see joy, sadness, laughter, tears, as they relive their favorite parts. You know the message has touched them.

Just as important, you see satisfaction on the faces of the participants. Before this project, they were simply docents, employees, and outsiders. Now they are actors, narrators, musicians, and experts. They feel proud to see the story splash across the screen, proud because the documentary has captured their passion and will touch new audiences in the future. As the premiere ends, everyone stands and applauds. The movie has created relationships that will last for years to come.

To learn more...

- www.macfilmmakers.com - Hot links on this site provide connections to other web sites about digital video, including resources, tools, festivals, vendors, and media.
- *DV Magazine* - monthly magazine about digital video filmmaking, covering digital video acquisition, audio, editing, and distribution. See - www.dv.com.
- Research on the San Francisco Bay and lighthouses:
 - Kimball Livingston. 1998. *Sailing the Bay*.
 - Ralph Shanks. 1990. *Guardians of the Golden Gate*.