

CORPORATE VIDEO

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Corporate video remains a highly effective communication tool, but it takes discipline on the part of producers and courage on the part of commissioners to create programmes that really connect with their audiences.

According to the International Visual Communication Association (IVCA), the trade body for video and events professionals, turnover in video production reached over £463,500,000 in 2005. Corporate video budgets average approximately £35,000 with a range from £10,000 to £250,000. In fact, budgets have remained largely unchanged for 20 years and prices have been maintained thanks to the greater use of one person, self directing crews using DV cameras, eliminating recces and reducing the number of shooting days. The Government remains a major user of video for topics such as health and safety, training and public relations. A significant proportion of videos are produced for live events and trade shows.

The days of the clunky VHS cassette are drawing to a close and the majority of videos are now distributed on high quality DVD. As broadband speeds increase, the internet will become a major channel. However, video works best when it used in the context of a presentation so the idea that users can be turned on to your message at the click of a mouse are overly optimistic (viz e-learning).

A cottage industry

In spite its huge turnover, video production remains a cottage industry. Production companies range literally from one person and a dog outfits to companies of twenty or so people that include a small sales team, line producers, PAs and a runner. The production company manages the budget, picks the right creative team, oversees the production and makes sure the video meets its communication objectives. Most production companies survive on the loyalty of a handful of regular clients and just about get by. If demand increases, they can easily scale up because most of the actual work is carried out by an army of freelance mercenaries; directors, camera operators, animators, graphic designers and writers, of whom I am one.

Still the most effective medium

Video has persisted because it remains overwhelmingly the most effective medium for delivering high impact messages. It deploys all the traditional film maker's skills of narrative, visual metaphor and dramatisation combined with succinct exposition. And it will continue to persist because there will always be a need for well articulated messages that engage the emotions as well as the intellect. There has been a general increase in their communication effectiveness over the years and the best corporate videos can be outstanding in terms of production values and the care with which the message is crafted. Alas, there continues to be a huge runt of really terrible programmes, often commissioned by leading corporations

and Government departments and one wonders what planet they or their production company were on. This is based on my experience as a judge for the IVCA awards over many years.

An enduring problem is that the vast majority of commissioners are inexperienced at buying creative service and often succumb to internal pressures to include specific content or interviews with managers that may not add to the programme's effectiveness or even have an adverse effect. They will probably more concerned by the reaction of their bosses to a video than that of the audience.

Shortest is best

The most common sign of weak production is a video that has been allowed to become over long. A point well made after five minutes begins to pall after ten and becomes seriously tedious after fifteen or twenty; shortest is always best. It takes much more skill and determination to cut down a lot of good material to make a short and impactful video than it does to make a long one. A bloated and repetitious video will leave the audience feeling both bored and patronised.

Producers are pivotal

The role of the producer is pivotal because she/he manages the client's expectations and makes sure that the final result isn't marred by factors such as concept creep and information overload. The producer's job is to represent the needs of the audience as much as the commissioner. And if a video doesn't work out, the person responsible is invariably the producer, provided that is that there was a good enough reason to make the video in the first place. If you are reading this because you may want to commission a video at some point, the most important decision you will make is not the creative approach but the producer. That's why creative pitches are not always the best way to choose a production company. It would be better to choose a producer with a great track record and then trust him or her to do the job. If you are about to commission a video here are some useful tips:

Do

Make clear your overall business and communication objectives i.e. you want the video to achieve.

Identify the key messages you want to convey as well as any potential barriers to communication.

Engage the audience in a dialogue so they don't feel they are being talked down to.

Tell the producer roughly how much you have to spend. And remember; good, quick, cheap – any two!

Don't

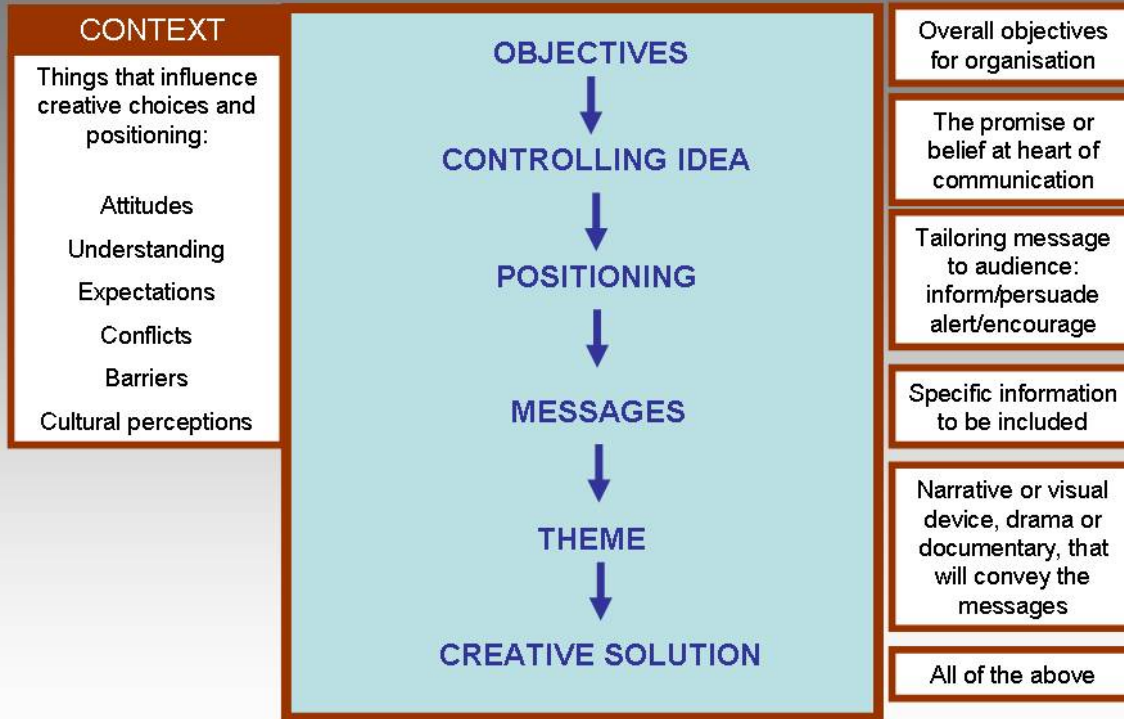
Try to shoehorn in too many messages. Video is best for headlines and hearts & minds.

Box the producer in to using a creative approach that may not work, but by all means throw your ideas into the pot.

Think carefully before featuring interviews with senior managers, these can often be counterproductive.

Be too cautious – big ideas invariably work best.

A STRUCTURED APPROACH TO CREATIVE SOLUTIONS



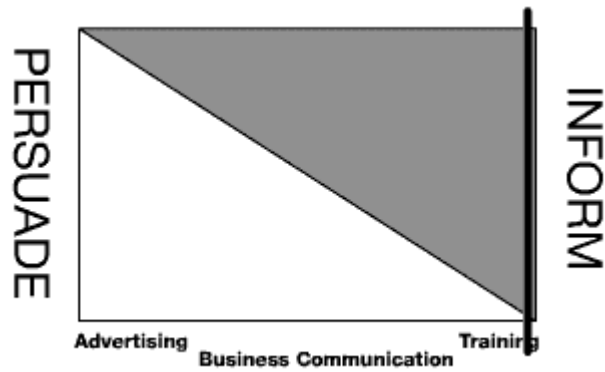
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The right creative solution will emerge once you have clarified the objectives and established a central controlling idea that defines overall tone of the communication.

Positioning and creative approach

Every video must be driven by a controlling idea that shapes the content and reflects the context. This is the promise you make to the audience and could be a simple statement such as "It is only by constantly exceeding customer expectations that we can achieve success."

The factor that has greatest influence on your creative options is the positioning of the message. Any communication is influenced by a combination of somewhat opposing requirements; the need to inform or persuade, alert or encourage an audience. I call this the Communication Continuum.



The Communication Continuum

The diagram above shows the inverse relationship between the ability to inform and persuade in any communication. As you move the vertical line to left or right you can see how the ratio between information and persuasion changes. If your communication is designed to change hearts and minds, such as an advert, then you will need to keep the factual content to a minimum. If you need to provide a lot of information as in a training programme, then dramatic exposition will be a distraction.

Cost and creativity

Producing a video on a small budget requires even greater skill and professionalism than a large one. I have seen some really excellent videos produced on a shoe string because the writer or director came up with a very clever concept or visual metaphor that was inexpensive to pull off.

Drama is expensive for obvious reasons, and there's no point doing drama on the cheap by casting inexperienced (i.e. cheap) actors. For some communication needs, where you are dealing with conflicting emotions, hidden dangers, complex relationships or need to raise awareness about an otherwise dull subject, drama may be the only effective approach.

If you are opting for a documentary style of programme, then the choices are fairly straightforward:

- ♦ A fully scripted programme with voice over commentary and a few interviews i-tends to be more formal, but right for certain topics.
- ♦ A programme comprising mainly vox pops and/or interviews sometimes with captions to provide additional information and idents - this format is now very common and is quite economical.
- ♦ A presenter-led programme where an actor or professional presenter fronts the video and takes you through the content step by step. Can be very powerful but well-known presenters may cost around £5-10k per day.

The only approach that positively doesn't work is filming someone delivering a lecture or presentation. Watch any conference webcam and you will see what I mean. Very few non-professionals are good on camera, even (and sometimes especially) with the help of teleprompting. The best approach to capturing a lay person's words of wisdom is with an off-camera interview where the interviewer is unseen and the questions cut out.

The production process

The shoot is the end of a long process of testing concepts and challenging assumptions; several drafts of the script may be required before final sign off is achieved. The table below provides a breakdown of the key stages in production, how long they generally take and what proportion of the budget they consume.

KEY STAGES OF PRODUCING A CORPORATE VIDEO				
PHASE	SCHEDULE	ACTION	WKS	% BUDGET
1	CLIENT BRIEF	Identify need * Define objectives * Analyse audience * Decide communication strategy * Agree budget * Select production company * Provide brief * Provide access to key personnel and company locations		
2	CONCEPT	Research * Creative treatment * Approximate budget breakdown * Schedule * Agree treatment	2	10%
3	DEVELOPMENT	Write script * Agree script * Detailed budget breakdown * Storyboard if appropriate * Finalise schedule * Brief director	3	15%
4	PRE-PRODUCTION	Set shoot dates * Cast actors * Hire Crew * Book studios * Design sets * Find locations * Negotiate all contracts & rights e.g. music & library footage	2	15%
5	PRODUCTION	Shoot all material and deliver rushes to editor	1	30%
6	POST- PRODUCTION	Digitise rushes * Off-line edit * Client previews * Final changes * Client approval * On-line edit * Record sound & dub * Make masters and show copies * Distribution	1	30%
7	COMPLETION	Budget reconciliation * Archive material * Music returns * Final administration	1	
			10	

Technology is moving on and the distinction between off-line (low res) and on-line editing (high res) is fast becoming blurred and many productions are essentially on-lined from the outset. This is simply because computer memory is now so much cheaper. From the client's standpoint, the only difference is that what you see during the edit is pretty much the finished job. Previously, the sound and image quality were considerably downgraded during the off-line.

To guarantee success, find a producer you can trust

Unlike marketing, advertising and PR, corporate communication has no academic foundation so there's no research base to draw on. Apart from collecting a few happy sheets, few commissioners analyse the effectiveness of their videos. The only detailed research is carried out by large corporations that use video systematically, but they don't tend to publish their findings. The guidelines as to what works and what doesn't reside in the minds of writers, directors and producers and the solutions they come up with are almost entirely intuitive – but given that this is a creative industry, maybe that really is the best approach.

Because the technology makes the production process look easy, there is a temptation to think that anyone can make a corporate video. The technology is the least part of the process, what really counts is the analysis of the communication objectives, the development of the theme and creative concept and the careful articulation of the message, all consistent with the commissioner's brand values. So if you suddenly find yourself in the commissioner's seat, don't get distracted by all the paraphernalia of filming. Think carefully about what you want the video to achieve and find a producer whom you can trust.

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Do you have a message to articulate, a business to develop, people to train? Do your marketing communications reflect your true value? If not, it may be time to get creative with your communication.