

TREATMENTS, SCRIPTS AND STORYBOARDS A BUYER'S GUIDE

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This article is aimed at anyone interested in commissioning a video. Treatments and scripts are two essential stages in the development of a video. The treatment (short for creative treatment) is most likely to be part of a proposal document submitted by a production company as part of a competitive tender. Even if you are working with an existing supplier, it is advisable to request a creative treatment before committing your organisation to produce a video. Storyboards are less relevant and so I will deal with them first and finally.

STORYBOARDS

A storyboard is a sketch of the key frames of each scene to show the camera angles, juxtaposition of characters etc. It's futile to storyboard documentary style programmes because the director and camera operator will work out the best approach on the day, taking into account the location, lighting conditions and any personalities involved. The same applies to dramas, where the design of the set determines the geometry of the scene. The only appropriate use of a storyboard in a corporate video is for animation or computer graphics and should only be embarked on once the script has been signed off.

PROPOSALS

A proposal is the document submitted by a production company in response to a competitive tender. A central part of this will be a creative treatment, which describes the style and format of the video and the creative concept. Every production company will have developed its own unique approach to writing proposals. They may contain the following elements though they won't always be labelled as such:

1. Communication objectives (desired outcomes)
2. Key messages (statements to underpin objectives)
3. Content (main topics covered)
4. Creative treatment
 - a) format (drama, documentary, presenter, animation)
 - b) creative concept (big idea)
 - c) rationale (context, controlling idea, theme)
 - d) style and tone (overall positioning e.g. informal, upbeat, challenging)
 - e) opening sequence (in detail)
 - f) main sequences (in outline)
 - g) conclusion (pay off)
5. Team (producer, director, writer etc)
6. Schedule (production milestones from date of commission)
7. Budget
8. Terms & conditions

CREATIVE TREATMENT

So what is the big idea that's going to encapsulate your message and captivate the audience? This is described by the creative treatment which defines the concept, theme and main stylistic aspects of a video. The treatment may suggest one or more of these formats:

- documentary (voice-over commentary, presenter led, interviews)
- drama (re-enactments, fictional scenarios, case studies, demonstrations)
- drama/documentary (mix of above)
- studio based discussion (magazine format, facilitator)
- animation (cartoon, 3D graphics, claymation)

The format of a video is dictated by whether the subject is visual or abstract, whether the aim is to change behaviours, enthuse or simply inform an audience. This is usually one of the easier decisions to make though within each format there are considerations such as using a well known voice, actor or presenter or taking the shoot to an interesting location – considerations of both cost and style. Good presenters, actors and facilitators command high fees but they also deliver great value in terms of raising the profile of your message and engaging the interest of the audience. There's no point using unknowns simply to save money, it will be money wasted. It's better to choose a more modest format. Whatever format is chosen, the producer should aim deliver the maximum impact for a given investment.

WHAT'S THE BIG IDEA?

If you want to make an impact, you need a big idea. But there's more to big ideas than a flash of inspiration. The diagram below provides a way to channel your thoughts in a way that will deliver the most effective creative solution – and save you time and money. Here are the key steps you need to follow to arrive at the best creative solution:

Strategic Objectives

A Strategic Communication is designed to achieve a specific business objective. Without clear objectives, we have nothing to test our ideas against nor any way of measuring our performance or of taking measures to increase effectiveness. "We need a video," is not a business objective, unlike "I want to increase sales by 10%," which sets clear goals and enables the client to ask challenging questions such as, "How will this communication increase my sales by 10%?"

Audience Take-out

What do want the audience to take away from your communication? Do they need to understand certain facts, trust your judgement or be excited by your vision? Whatever it is, it must support your strategy. Moreover, a communication should not be forced to do too much. The more focused the objectives, the clearer and more successful it will be. If all this sounds blindingly obvious, you would be surprised how little thought is often given to the basics before embarking on a communication project.

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.

Controlling idea

The creative concept should be guided by what is known as the controlling idea; your central message or proposition summarised in a single phrase? Without it, you are likely to be going round in circles looking for your big idea. For screen writers it's a fundamental, it is the fulcrum on which the whole story turns, the essence of the movie. There are simple ones such as 'crime doesn't pay' or 'the ruthless pursuit of contemporary values will destroy your life'; and more abstract ones such as 'belief systems as systems of control'; for the Matrix.

In business communication, controlling ideas are likely to be more prosaic: 'Arson can be prevented if everyone takes personal responsibility' or 'Anti money laundering measures protect the bank's reputation and increase customer trust.'

Simple though these ideas may be, you can see how they frame a message and provide creative direction. Big ideas that don't work are often the product of a creative whim – a preconceived big idea about a big idea.

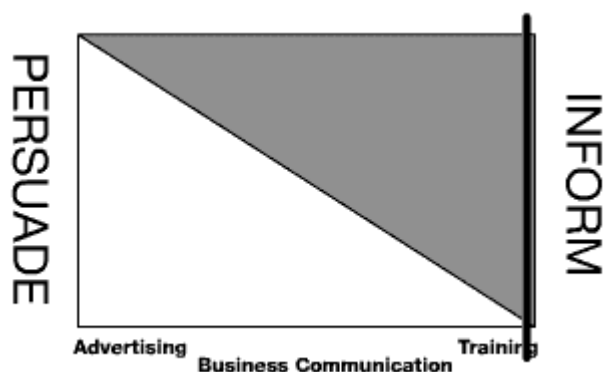
Messages

It helps to define what specific information you want the communication to deliver and to sign these off before you start.

Positioning

Positioning relates to how messages are packaged to meet the needs of a particular audience. The tone of voice, the choice of metaphor and the format of the communication all vary according to whom you are communicating with. The main variable is whether a communication is designed to inform or persuade.

This diagram shows the inverse relationship between the ability to inform and persuade in any communication. As you move the line horizontally you can see how the ratio between information and persuasion changes. This tells you that bombarding people with facts is unlikely to win hearts and minds. Business communications may lie anywhere along this continuum.



The Communication Continuum

Theme

This is the creative glue that holds the messages together. Themes can combine visual metaphors or narrative elements. Sometimes the theme is extant, such as 'back to the future' or 'unseen heroes'. Or it may be an expression of the controlling idea such as taking a customer perspective. Without a theme, you will have an uphill struggle to make your communication work. A theme I suggested for a motivational programme for a retail bank was, 'Part of the Community.' It suggests how bank staff might see themselves beyond their job function, helping local people and local businesses. It's very simple but had a huge impact on the content of the programme.

Context

Context changes everything. The context is all the things that surround a communication that while unseen and often unspoken, have a defining role in its conception and effectiveness. It follows that every creative solution must be unique for that message and that organisation at any moment in its history. The context also includes the attitudes and expectations of the audience and any barriers to communication such as misunderstandings, misconceptions or anxieties about the future.

Creative Solution

The creative solution is the big idea that encapsulates all of the above. By being creative in the way you communicate your messages, not only do you produce something that is memorable and hence more effective, you also tell the audience something about your values. The qualities that make a great video

are easy to recognise after the event but very difficult to prescribe. It helps to think about the videos you have seen recently and what impressed you. Was it their simplicity, their wit and humour, their assured self-confidence, their conciseness or their passion? The bottom line is that the best videos are the ones with bold but simple concepts, beautifully executed with a highly disciplined approach to content.

SHOOTING SCRIPT

So you have chosen a creative treatment and bounced it off a few people and now it's time to go to script stage. If you haven't so far, you will now meet the scriptwriter. This is what the scriptwriter will be hoping for:

- ◆ a detailed brief (ideally face-to-face) with the most senior people involved.
- ◆ opportunities to talk to both managers and members of the audience
- ◆ as much background information as possible
- ◆ a realistic delivery time for first draft and final shooting scripts

A script is likely to go through a number of drafts, the final one being the Shooting Script which is signed off by the client and on which the final budget is based. Unless it's a full drama, the script for a corporate video is usually in the double column format, with visuals on the left and sound and speech on the right.

1. We open on shot of back-lit white engine suspended in space. On the blue background we superimpose shots of ice crystals, key entering ignition, CV engine parts turning, lubricant flowing slowly etc. As the engine starts we super images of smoky exhausts.

MUSIC & SFX
DRAMATIC MUSIC & COLD WIND.
SOUND OF COLD ENGINE STARTING, WITH REPEATED TURNS OF THE IGNITION, THE SOUND IS FILTERED TO ACCENTUATE THE GRINDING NOISE INSIDE THE ENGINE.

VQ Commentary
There are dark moments in the day of every engine.

2. Super images of oil flowing up lubrication Channels.

MUSIC & SFX
MORE GRINDING ENGINE SOUNDS.

VQ Commentary
Oil, cold and viscous, has to be forced from the sump to the cylinder head through a maze of ducts and channels ...and it takes longer than you think.

The period between start-up and oil-up takes heavy toll on the engine and the environment.

3. Cold room engine tests

Test have shown that it may take several minutes before all the components of an engine are fully protected.

4. CU cars on a cold morning in traffic queues.

It's the period of highest engine wear, highest fuel consumption and highest unwanted exhaust emissions.

5. We see slow motion images of liquid flowing over smooth metallic surfaces. The surfaces are complex engineered shapes cut out of alloy or Perspex. Background changes from blue to red.

This delay in achieving full protection and efficiency is a problem that engine designers have been struggling with for decades.

The script provides enough information for the both the client and the director (who may also be the writer) to see how the video will unfold but no attempt is made to describe the scenes in great detail, that is left to the imagination. Drama scripts tend to be similar in a similar format to plays or feature films, with the dialogue centred on the page.

Look, no script

A large number of corporate videos are not fully scripted these days as they consist purely of interviews and general shots on location. The video is based on the creative treatment alone and a set of questions agreed with the client and perhaps some bullet points to identify the key messages the interviewer should be looking for.

Most of interviews are conducted 'off-camera' which means the interviewer (usually the director) is unseen and the questions are cut out. The interviewee will need to make his/her statements self explanatory so they make complete sense without the question to explain the context.

Budgets

Budgets for corporate videos range from £10K for a one day shoot and edit up to £250K, the average being around £35K. The main determinants of cost are number of days shooting, travel time, hotels and air travel and of course any actors and presenters used. A video requiring a five day shoot, some actors, extras and a good presenter (£5K upwards) might come out at around £70K. You can of course do things a lot more cheaply but it takes a very talented film maker to achieve that but they may be happy to put in the extra effort if they believe in the end product. But generally, if you want to win hearts and minds or create something that reflects your brand values, then you need to put some value on the screen.

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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.

APPENDIX ONE

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	

APPENDIX TWO

TERMINOLOGY

Certain terms and acronyms are commonly used in scripts and the most important ones are these:

SOUND

- ♦ **VO** – Voice Over i.e. VO Commentary the voice that runs over the picture
- ♦ **Sync** – Synchronised sound i.e. 'Mr Jones in sync'. We are hearing the sound recorded live during the scene, such as someone talking to camera or being interviewed.
- ♦ **In sync and VO** – i.e. 'Presenter in sync and VO' where the person on screen is seen but then his/her voice continues over some 'cut away' shots.
- ♦ **SFX** – Sound Effects – this generally refers to the sound track including music and sound effects such as footsteps, heartbeats, traffic or crunching noises.
- ♦ **Vox Pops** – Vox Populae (the voice of the people) i.e. interviews with the general public

VISION

- ♦ **CU** – Close up shot
- ♦ **BCU** - big close-up
- ♦ **Wide shot** - takes in whole scene
- ♦ **Wide angle shot** - using wide angle lens
- ♦ **Long shot** - using telephoto lens
- ♦ **Zoom in/out** - gradual change of focal length
- ♦ **Track** - camera moves to follow action
- ♦ **Pan** - camera turns to follow action
- ♦ **Tilt** - camera tilts up or down
- ♦ **Time lapse** - slow motion
- ♦ **Cut to** – i.e. Cut to boardroom, a switch to a new location
- ♦ **Cut away** – a shot used to shorten a sequence by inserting a 'cut away' and then returning to the original sequence.

- ♦ **Live action** – shots of people and places as opposed to **Graphics, Visual effects** created in post production or **Animation**