

VIDEOGUIDE

Even the calm of this yoga teaching video could have been compromised by any one of the five deadly sins of video production



The five deadly sins of video production

Five fatal traps that anyone considering a video must avoid at all costs

ONE: NOT BEING CLEAR ABOUT WHAT YOU WANT

By Paul Harvey

Now this may sound very obvious but before you go anywhere near a production company or even start writing a simple script yourself, or for that matter decide on any course of action regarding your video, you really do need to do some serious thinking about what it is that you're trying to achieve. However sometimes that's easier said than done. Often the problem can be that you're too close to the subject and you just can't quite see the wood for the trees.

One of the problems these days is that people don't set

aside any time to think – we're all too busy just getting on with it. So, before you make any decisions about your video, find some quiet time just to think about what you want the project to achieve and what it is you need to say.

If you find yourself thinking in circles and the answers just won't come then you can always try some gentle brainstorming - either by yourself or with the help of friends or colleagues. There's very much a right and wrong way of going about this and while asking people to help can be a

good idea, if they're not used to this type of working or are just too dominant, the results can be even more confusing, particularly when it comes to a creative process like producing a video. Faced with the exciting prospect of producing a video – because let's face it everyone's a budding Steven Spielberg - most people will have dozens of ideas about how it could be done and that is the danger – the whole process gets swamped with ideas. Some ideas will be good, some will be bad and every one of them will be totally irrelevant. The reason being

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that at this early stage you are not looking for clever ideas. You are seeking the answer to just one very simple question:

Once people have seen your video what do you want them to do or think that is different from before?

In many ways a video is no different to an advertisement or piece of marketing material. No matter how clever or creative, every successful ad must contain a call to action, the action or actions that you want people to take as a result of seeing that ad or for that matter video. Once the answer to that question can be clearly and concisely written down in one short simple sentence, you have taken the first and most important step in producing your video. It maybe nothing more than:

“The video should make managers more aware of their obligations to the safety of contractors working for the organisation”.

or

“The video needs to inform people about the process of adopting a child”.

CRITICAL POINT ONE

The audience must be in no doubt what it is you expect of them when the end credits roll.

CRITICAL POINT TWO

Remember a successful video, particularly for business, is about understanding the way we human beings communicate and harnessing the correct language to motivate your audience towards a specific action – to laugh, to cry, to buy, to give, to learn etc. The one thing we must have is a clear vision of what we want to achieve? And that must be decided at the very earliest opportunity.

Further on in this series you’ll often hear me refer to the techniques used by scriptwriters, screenwriters and novelist because a lot of their methods apply equally to the production of video. When a writer sits down to create an individual masterpiece he’s also working to a tried and tested formula. What he does is to create a complex web of events, storylines and characters that all need to come together at a single critical moment – the climax of the story. So how does he do that, how does he manage to time everything to coincide at that very precise moment? Well although writing is a complex process this technique is actually very simple, he starts at the end and works backwards. Rather like when we set off on a long car journey we always know the final destination before we start off. In identifying our call to action we’ve already established our final destination. All we need then is the map to get us to it and that’s what we’ll talk about next. In video terms it’s not called a map, it’s called a brief and writing one will be the best investment of time you can ever make in your video. How to write one is coming up next, but before that let’s just recap on the main points we’ve covered.

Take some time to think things through and be very clear about what you want your video to achieve

If necessary brainstorm with friends or colleagues but be aware of the dangers

Identify your call to action – what do you want the viewer to do differently as a result of seeing your video

When you’re sure about all of those things then it’s time to move on to prepare your brief. What is a brief and how do you write one is covered next in the guide to the Five Deadly Sins of Video Production.

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Dangerous work in the e.on health & safety video. Not writing a fully detailed brief exposes clients to a different kind of danger



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TWO: NOT WRITING A BRIEF

By Paul Harvey

So what is a brief and how do you write one? First of all don't get put off by the terminology it's not at all complicated.

To try and produce even the simplest video without any kind of final brief has to be an almost guaranteed way to ensure a huge disaster and throw away lots of money at the earliest opportunity. But who needs a brief anyway? Don't you just ring up a production company tell them how long your video needs to be and provide a rough idea of what should be in it and off they go? After all they're the professionals; besides which you're far too

busy to start doing their job for them!

Well it has to be said that there are many companies out there who do set about things in exactly that way – and some of them are household names that really should know better.

A brief is a document – in its simplest form perhaps no more than a single sheet of A4 - detailing what it is that your video must contain, both technically and creatively. It's the deliverables that you as a client expect, e.g. “The video should provide visitors with a detailed history of the gardens from their creation in

1790 to the present day. This should include historic research, scriptwriting, an agreed voice over, graphics to illustrate the layout of the heated glass houses, music and will require delivery on both tape, DVD and a compressed file for the internet...”. etc etc.

A moment ago I used the phrase, ‘final brief’ because it's not unusual for the brief to evolve over a period of time. You may prepare one for your initial meeting with one or even several production companies and find that as you discuss the project your thoughts evolve, ideas emerge and the initial

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brief changes beyond recognition. The most important thing is that you and your production company agree on which version is the final brief then mark it and date it accordingly. As a safeguard for both parties it's always a good idea to confirm the price in the same document, that way there will be no misunderstanding about what is and what is not included.

While a brief can be quite a simple document, writing an effective one does take practise and in my experience receiving a well written brief from a prospective client is quite a rarity. In the real world clients are often either too busy or not too sure how to write an accurate one, so, after a couple of initial meetings I often suggest I write one for them and then simply get them to confirm it covers everything they need.

As I said, a brief doesn't have to be complex just as long as it outlines everything you require from the production. Its main function is to enable you to describe to others exactly what you want. Even if you suddenly decide to take a video night class and shoot the thing yourself, it's vital you go through this process just for your own benefit. The brief is important in several ways, no more so than the act of writing one can actually clarify your own thinking as to exactly what it is you're trying to achieve. It's also the starting point in the very important process of conveying to others, your colleagues, your boss, the production companies, exactly what your production is all about, including even the look and feel you have in mind, i.e. 'a powerful corporate production, an attention grabbing sales production for the internet, a precise and educationally sound video for the training department' etc.

At the heart of your brief is the objective – the call to action we discussed earlier. At this stage it's probably a good idea to begin defining exactly who this video is aimed at. For example an induction video would obviously be targeted at people with little or no previous knowledge of the company but are these people likely to be quite young? If so this would impact not only on the way any script was written, but also on the visual style

of the programme which, in order to build rapport with the audience, would need to be shot in a style younger people could identify with.

And if further down the line there is any disagreement between you and your production company, or even your boss and colleagues about either the style or content of the programme, the final brief will be the document that settles the argument. If things escalate to a point where the situation has become very unpleasant with claims and accusations flying around all over the place, please remember that this is exactly the position you almost certainly would have arrived at anyway, had you gone ahead without a brief and told someone to just get on with it. The only difference being that now, in the wee small hours when the nagging gremlins of doubt and fear conspire to push you out of bed in panic, you can at least fire up the computer and reassure yourself that yes, you really did tell them to shoot the damned epic in beautiful wide screen, and not in the old fashioned square format of four by three that they actually delivered. You know that because it says so in your final brief....doesn't it?

So there we have it. In a very short space of time you have very clearly and precisely defined the objective of your video and then prepared a fairly accurate brief describing the project. It's probably safe to assume that it's downhill all the way from here then? Well... if this video is solely for you and you are answerable to absolutely no one else then the answer is yes. Otherwise...well it's a most definite no and we've arrived at one of the most neglected and potentially dangerous areas of video production. It's all about someone taking ownership of the project and that's what we'll be covering next.

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This refuse collector isn't talking rubbish, in fact he's part of a well thought out plan to help a local authority get its message to the public



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THREE: OVERLOOKING THE CONCEPT

By Paul Harvey

So, you've carefully defined what you want the video to do, you've put together a brief and now up pops something called a concept...so what's a concept and what does it do?

Well, the concept is the creative part of your video and as such is the thing that binds everything together while providing the viewer with a better incentive to watch your video to the end. Let me use a real example to explain things a little better.

Some time ago we were asked to produce an information video for a local authority. I think just about everyone would agree that a production describing the workings of a council has all the makings of

a pretty uninspiring video and almost impossible to put across in an entertaining manner. However, there were important issues that the public needed to be made aware of and video was considered the most suitable medium.

Think of this type of video as a sugar coated pill. The potentially boring information – in this case how a local authority functions – was the essential but not very palatable medication, while on top is the sugar coating of the concept, it's this that helps make the core message a little more pleasant to swallow and hopefully allows it to slip into the viewers awareness without too much of a problem.

In the case of this production, instead of having the video presented with either the usual formal voice over or the Chief Executive giving a personal message, we came up with a concept that really held the audiences attention. A refuse collector presented the programme by chatting to the viewer as he and his team went about their daily rounds. Thanks to careful scripting and casting most people were completely unaware that this particular refuse collector was an actor. Something that allowed us to provide all the information without the audience feeling they were being talked down to.

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What producers often fail to appreciate is that people have a very low boredom threshold and are likely to switch off – literally or mentally – if something doesn't grab their attention immediately. But this negative trait also has a positive side that, if we're clever, we can use to our advantage. The positive side is that people are also hopelessly curious if something intrigues them. To see how this is really done we need to look at effective newspaper headlines or successful advertisements. 'World War Two bomber found on moon', was the absolutely unbeatable headline famously used by The National Enquirer many years ago. Who could fail to be intrigued by that? Of course everyone knew it was rubbish but even before you can finish grappling with the enormity of the statement the hook is already in place.

People's attention span is getting less and less as they demand more and more information and faster. On broadcast television pop music videos are now cut so quickly that just ten years ago they would have been considered unwatchable. Drama series and documentaries all start with a frantic synopsis of the entire plot from start to finish, the producers terrified that they may lose viewers before the opening titles have finished. News programmes must have on screen captions to squeeze in more information. While in drama the camera always tracks around the actor during even the briefest of shots, and while this doesn't actually reveal any more detail it does help convince the brain that something is happening and it is getting yet more visual information.

So how does this affect the smaller budget corporate or company production, not to mention the good old training video? The answer is that it affects them a great deal and for this reason. The television you watch every evening becomes the yardstick by which you measure everything else, including that rather uninspiring promotional video someone is going to show you first thing tomorrow morning. Probably without you even realising, your appreciation of video and television has become very sophisticated indeed and just

like the broadcast productions even the most basic corporate or promotional production needs to hook you in if they are to retain any credibility. There is a misconception amongst many production companies that this can all be achieved by off the shelf visual effects and the obligatory rock music track, all of which only serve to underline the dated appearance.

However, the more modest production can still excel by keeping things relatively simple and opting for a simple well considered concept to intrigue the viewer and draw them in while getting the all important message across. This is something if done well can be as effective communicating with your audience as even the most lavish and expensive production costing hundreds of thousands of pounds.

When working on a concept or script I often use the video equivalent of effective newspaper headlines or advertisements to draw the viewer in.

So, by now you should have a good idea of how to very clearly and precisely define the objective of your video, prepared an accurate brief detailing what the project needs to deliver and from this section understand the importance of a good concept to hold everything together. It's probably safe to assume that from here on it's downhill all the way then? Well ... if this video is solely for you and you are answerable to absolutely no one else then the answer is yes. Otherwise it's a most definite no and we've arrived at one of the most neglected and potentially dangerous areas of video production. It's all about someone taking ownership of the project and that's what we'll be covering next.

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Producing a video for Europe's largest manufacturer of patisseries turned out to be a piece of cake once someone took ownership



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FOUR: FAILING TO GET SOMEONE TO TAKE OWNERSHIP

By Paul Harvey

This is one area that if neglected is almost guaranteed to produce a catastrophe. So what do I mean by getting someone to take ownership? Well, the scenario usually develops like this.

Someone high up in an organisation – the MD, the owner or a board member - decides the company needs a video for x,y or z reasons. This requirement is then passed down until it finally lands on the desk of some poor soul who will oversee the project. Given that MD's, owners and board members will never have the time to even fully consider what they

want from a video, let alone write a brief, the individual who has inherited the project now has to try and figure out exactly what it is that the people upstairs actually want. Being an employee and further down the food chain he or she can't insist that they are given more input, instead he and a few sympathetic colleagues get their heads together and prepare a brief based on what they 'imagine' those in charge actually want. Note the word imagine, because quite simply no one knows for sure and even this early in the project things have already moved into deep and dangerous waters.

Heads of organisations always feel they're wasting their time being part of the production process so they don't want to know how the project is evolving on a day-to-day basis, however, they do want to approve the video once it is finished. In short they are giving the responsibility of the job to someone but unless they give them total freedom to do exactly what they like, they are not giving them ownership.

Ninety nine times out of a hundred the finished programme will be nothing like the people at the top imagined, simply because

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they did not or could not accurately articulate what they wanted. Plus they will not have been part of the project as it evolved through various stages of the creative process. The only time they become very definite about what it is they want - or more likely don't want - is when they see the completed video. And by then of course it's far, far too late.

A few years ago I was asked to produce a corporate video for Europe's largest manufacturer of patisseries, (yes video production is all about making sacrifices). Word had come down from the very 'hands on' owner that they should have a corporate video and the HR department had been given the task of getting it produced. The more I discussed the project with them the louder the alarm bells rang. As usual what they were doing was trying to forward guess exactly what the owner would want.

Eventually I had to say, 'sorry I really do need to discuss this with Mr X the boss'. The effect was really interesting, they were completely horrified. 'Absolutely no chance, he was far too busy and besides he didn't see 'creatives' like me anyway'. At this point I knew the safest option was to walk away because there was no way we would get lucky and deliver exactly what this man wanted. Without my discussing it with him face to face disaster was inevitable. Having explained all that in the nicest possible way and resigned myself to the fact that the job was gone, I was suddenly granted access to the man himself. It only took a couple of minutes fairly direct questioning to confirm that even so early in the process the HR people were miles off in their understanding of what he was looking for.

While I had his attention I set up a white board, looked at my watch, and told him I'd take up just fifteen minutes of his time to sort this out. On the white board I drew three columns and explained that the column on the left was to list all the things that absolutely, definitely had to be covered by the video. The centre column was for everything that he'd quite like to cover and the right hand column was everything that he'd like included provided there was enough time and

budget. Before we were finished there was quite a bit of shuffling of items between lists but in the end we had a result that he was happy with.

Later that day I worked through his list of must haves and from those prepared a detailed brief and emailed it to him. The following day I received his reply agreeing the brief. At that point he'd actually taken ownership by specifying exactly what he wanted and at that point the job had suddenly become achievable. Three months later along with the by now less troubled HR people I showed him his finished video. There were a few changes of course, a few tweaks here and there but nothing major regarding content or emphasis, simply because he'd agreed all that right at the very beginning.

IMPORTANT POINT

Getting someone to take ownership is really about managing expectations. You may have produced the best video in the world but if the end result doesn't match the expectations of the client then it not going to be acceptable.

The secret of managing those expectations is in making sure that as the client you express them clearly and unambiguously. As the producer I always list them and either incorporate them into the brief or bounce them back to the client as a separate list and ask for them to be confirmed. As with the call to action in the first section, asking someone to confirm a list of their own expectations is a great way to focus their attention on the project and ensure nothing has been overlooked.

Escalation of costs is perhaps the number one cause of problems during any production. Failure to keep an eye on costs is the last but not least of our five deadly sins and we'll be dealing with that next.

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If someone offers you a cheap video run a mile, it will probably end up costing you dearly



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FIVE: TAKING YOUR EYE OFF THE BOTTOM LINE

By Paul Harvey

I've lost count of the number of people who call us up and begin the conversation by saying, 'I want a fifteen minute video, how much will it cost?' What the video should look like, who it is aimed at, or what it is supposed to achieve just isn't on their radar. At that moment cost is everything, however, it almost certainly won't be if further down the line things start to go wrong.

A common misconception is that cost is somehow dependent on the length of the production. The fact is you don't buy video production by the yard or by the pound like fish, it all

depends on the complexity of what you are doing. A five minute piece to camera of the managing director rallying the troops may only cost a few hundred pounds, while a 30 second ad for a car like the one on TV could well set you back a few hundred thousand pounds.

What people often fail to explore – and this is usually as much a failure of the production house as it is of the client - is that for any video requirement there may be at least half a dozen different ways of delivering a solution. Giving a production company a ball-park figure is not blowing any perceived

bargaining advantage. A good production company should come back to you with several alternatives. A proposal that spends your entire budget, one that comes in just under it and a third to show you what they could achieve for you by spending just a little more.

Ten to fifteen years ago to produce high quality video you would have needed a camera costing the best part of £30,000. To edit the programme you would need equipment costing perhaps six times that. Today you can achieve comparable results with equipment costing just a fraction of that.

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The result is that anyone and everyone can suddenly afford to be a video producer – but in truth they are not. Yes they may be able to assemble something that looks passable on YouTube but that does not mean they are capable of delivering a production on which the future success of your business may well depend. Remember the old adage, you never get a second chance to make a first impression. Your video is likely to be that first impression so don't entrust it to anyone who hasn't got a long track record in video production no matter how cheap the price might be.

So how should you find the right people to work with? Well a recommendation from someone who's commissioned something similar is probably the best place to start, failing that by all means use the internet to start the process.

Looking at a production company's web site will speak volumes about their approach even before you see their work. These are supposed to be creative people working with visual media on a day-to-day basis. I'm not suggesting that their website should be covered in bells, whistles and flashing neon logos, but if it looks a bit dull and dour it's a fairly good indication that your video will probably end up the same. Next take a closer than usual look at their copy. The Achilles heel of many production companies is their script writing and concept skills. Unlike video clips that can be prettied up with all kinds of effects and the odd bit of music, there's no way to hide a bad concept and poor script writing. The copy on their website will be the best they can produce – after all it's selling their own services so take particular interest in that. Like the visual aspect of the site if the copy is dull and lacking any creative spark then these are probably not the people to produce a highly effective piece of communication.

Perhaps most important is finding the type of people you feel comfortable working with and above all people you can trust. Any medium to large size production is going to involve very close co-operation between all those

involved so take care over who you choose, you're going to get to know them much better than you perhaps realise.

EXTRA COSTS

When agreeing a price with your production company make sure you understand exactly what is included and what is not included in their quotation and have it confirmed in writing. Travel, VAT and your choice of voice over artist or actors are all possible points of contention if neglected. The real biggie however is music and I'll come to that in a moment.

As I said in an earlier section, videos tend to evolve during production, for example, someone has an idea that would improve a shot, say the use of track to follow a critical piece of action or an extra prop to make a scene more authentic. These are all things that the production company could reasonably not have predicted before work commenced however, it's only right that you as the client have the choice of whether or not you want to spend the extra money to make this idea a reality. To protect yourself it may be best to agree that any additional costs will only be covered if agreed in writing before they are incurred.

MUSIC

A very misunderstood area of cost is music, something made much worse by the fact that music is usually not chosen until very near the end of the production process and therefore very difficult to predict for the original quotation. Many clients assume that music can be used for free, something that is very definitely not the case. All music is regulated by very strict licensing laws with the cost based on your specific usage. I have lost count of the number of corporate clients who have been shocked to find that to use their favourite track would cost perhaps twice their entire video budget.

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