

The moving image and your business

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Abstract

Using online video to promote business is widespread, but the skills required to make effective use of the medium are relatively rare. Dr Phil Moran discusses some basic ways to improve video production, ranging from advice on the technology through to the front of camera presentation. Future developments of online video are also discussed and Dr Moran asserts that the rules of story telling will still be effective.

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Article

There is a story about one of the Lumiere brothers' earliest public film screenings, in which the audience was seen to duck in fear when they watched a locomotive on the screen heading towards them. Although the story itself is probably an urban myth, people were amazed at the perceived realism of the projected image, and in 1895 were prepared to pay to watch 'documentary' films that were essentially just raw footage of everyday life. Five years later, the brothers were still producing many short movies each year, but the majority now had some kind of story, as people had outgrown the novelty of their cinématographe device.

Interestingly, the very invention of the moving image was for scientific purposes rather than public entertainment (see Figure 1), and this progression from spectacle to story can also be seen in modern technologies such as online video. Look up the first clip ever uploaded to YouTube™¹ and you'll find Jawed Karim, a co-founder of the website, in a zoo saying why he likes elephants. Today, the quality of some material that is produced and distributed solely through YouTube™ is comparable to prime time television – as are the audience numbers. Convergence of technology has arrived and now anyone can be a broadcaster, either with a recorded channel like YouTube™, or

even live broadcasting with a site like Ustream.² It's online for you to use for free, and all you need is a camcorder and a laptop to make your film. The problem is that the same is also true for everyone else, so how can you make the medium best work for you and your business, and push yourself ahead of the competition?

First, sound is more important than vision. Strange but true. If your audience can't hear you, it will frustrate them and they will switch off. If the visuals are bad, but they can hear what's going on, they are much more likely to stay with you. Think of films like *The Blair Witch Project* and *Paranormal Behaviour* and you'll see (or hear) that sound is what gives a film bite.

In practical terms this means getting your microphone as close to your source as possible. If you are video blogging using the webcam on your laptop, you might get away with using the inbuilt microphone, but if you're presenting to camera on a busy street, you need either a directional microphone or a lapel microphone. The lapel microphone goes on your lapel (duh!) and so is always close to your mouth, whereas the directional microphone needs to be pointed at your mouth without anything else behind. This usually means pointing upwards from below. Don't use the internal microphone on the camera, it picks up sound in all directions and is never close enough to the source of the sound you want people to hear – i.e. you.

Second, screen personality matters. Nearly, all television programmes have a presenter, and this is because broadcasters know that it's the best way to connect with an audience. If you are going to front your own video, be over the top about it. Gesticulate with your hands, be enthusiastic and speak louder than you do in normal conversation. You want to convey your enthusiasm, expertise, but also genuineness. It's a difficult balance, but practice makes perfect. Get honest opinions about your performance and if you can find someone who can do it better than you, use them. There's no shame in it – screen personality is a developed skill and takes time to learn.

Some great examples of effective use of online video are Maria Forleo³ (www.mariaforleo.com) and Adam Shaw⁴ (www.adamshaw.co). Forleo clearly has money for production – lighting, studio, editing, etc., whereas Adam Shaw is simply using a camcorder. Both use the same techniques though; they speak with authority, smile a lot, and are always positive, giving you confidence in their message.

Third is story. Good audio and on-screen personality will grab your audience's attention, but then you want to keep them watching. Story doesn't only apply to cinematic films and television drama; it can be useful for any film.

Have you ever received those spam e-mails with a link to a website where there is a guy telling you about all the get rich quick schemes that he has tried over the years or all the muscle-building supplements. What are these people selling? Get rich quick schemes and muscle building supplements! The reason they don't say what they're selling at the start is because they want to draw you in with a story – their story.

So what is 'story'? Well that's too big a topic for this article, so let's just concentrate on the main process; building up an expectation in your audience, making them wait, and then rewarding them (or punishing them) at the end. It sounds rather academic, so let's illustrate with a couple of examples:-

Imagine you're a pharmaceutical company who makes a new drug to combat asthma. Do you start with an announcement of the new drug? No, you start with a child coughing and wheezing, trying to catch their breath. Put it to a voice over that says 'When Jamal was a child, playtime meant watching his friends run around outside in the Sun whilst he put on his ventilator'. Voila, we have set up our story – a character that the audience empathizes with and a situation that they want to be resolved. Our voice over can then talk about the company making the drug, and in the end we can reward our audience by showing Jamal playing in the sun with other kids.

Sounds like advertising, doesn't it? That's because it is! Exactly the same principles apply; we need to think about benefits, not features.

How about you being offered sponsorship to make a regular video blog reviewing the latest hospital equipment coming onto the market? The more viewers you get, the more you'll be paid. Do

you simply sit in front of your screen and explain the specifications of the latest hi-res magnetic resonance imaging equipment? No, you announce it and ask the question 'How good is it? I visited Great Ormond Street hospital to have my own brained scanned' – followed by a mini on-location report. Again, you're setting up an expectation by asking the question, but making your audience wait for the answer till the end of your report – it's a story.

As with any story, the more interesting, shocking, engaging, or funny your material is the more likely your audience will keep watching.

How about you want to set up a website using video to sell people a get rich quick scheme ... oh hang on, we've already done that one.

A great example of the use of story in online video is 'Will it Blend'?⁵ Blendtec, a blender manufacturer started demonstrating how good their equipment was with a regular show on YouTube™ in which they blended a different item each week – iPhones, Barbie dolls, silly putty. You name it, they blend it. The very title of it sets up the expectation – and of course you are always rewarded at the end.

So what about the future? What's the next technology that we'll all want to play with? It's always difficult to predict, but there are signs that 3D will become mainstream. It already is in the cinema, and YouTube™ recently launched a 3D channel.⁶ Consumer electronics such as 3D video cameras are widely available and you can even get laptops and cell phones for viewing 3D material that work without glasses – incredible.

For myself, I've made a few 3D films for the corporate world and I have noticed that we are now transitioning from spectacle to story. Most of my early jobs were only of footage – the clients simply wanted to show something new. But now the requests are also for 3D with voice over and story – 3D alone is losing its wow factor.

Whatever way the technology goes, I'm certain that the three principles I have discussed here will still hold; get good sound, use a good on-screen personality, and above all, tell a story.

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The first motion picture

The first motion picture was a scientific experiment conducted by Eadweard Muybridge in 1878. If you happened to have searched Google on 9th April you might have noticed that the banner on the search engine were a series of silhouettes of a horse galloping as a birthday greeting to Eadweard Muybridge. Had he lived that long, he would have been 182 years old. He made the 'film' to resolve a debate about whether all four hooves of a horse are off the ground at once when it gallops. A series of cameras were set up in a line, each of which took a photo as the horse galloped past. The images were then copied onto a disc and viewed through a 'Zoopraxiscope'. Thus Muybridge proved that indeed there is a point when all the hooves are off the ground. The experiment was commissioned by a race-horse owner in 1872 but was interrupted while Muybridge faced a charge for murdering his wife's lover with a shot gun. He was acquitted for 'justifiable homicide'. After this episode he put his son into an orphanage believing his wife's lover to be the father, which is unlikely as the son looked very much like Muybridge. While Muybridge became famous with his motion pictures lecturing to audiences at the Royal Institution in London, his son became a gardener and ranch hand.

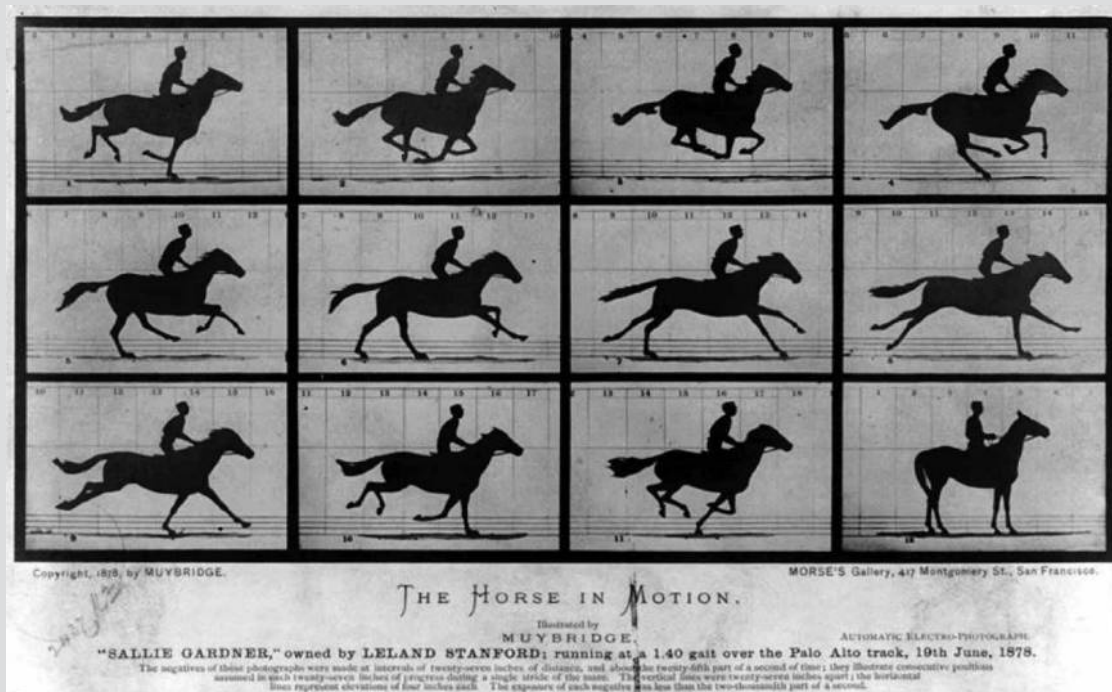


Figure 1: This image is reproduced from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:The_Horse_in_Motion.jpg. Under the Wikimedia Commons licence.

Author information

Dr Phil Moran is a former physicist who became a film-maker in 1999. His work ranges from television documentaries to cinematic features and he acts as a consultant for several international corporations on their use of video. His company FFAB (www.ffab.co.uk) works throughout Europe and the company recently launched new services in New York.