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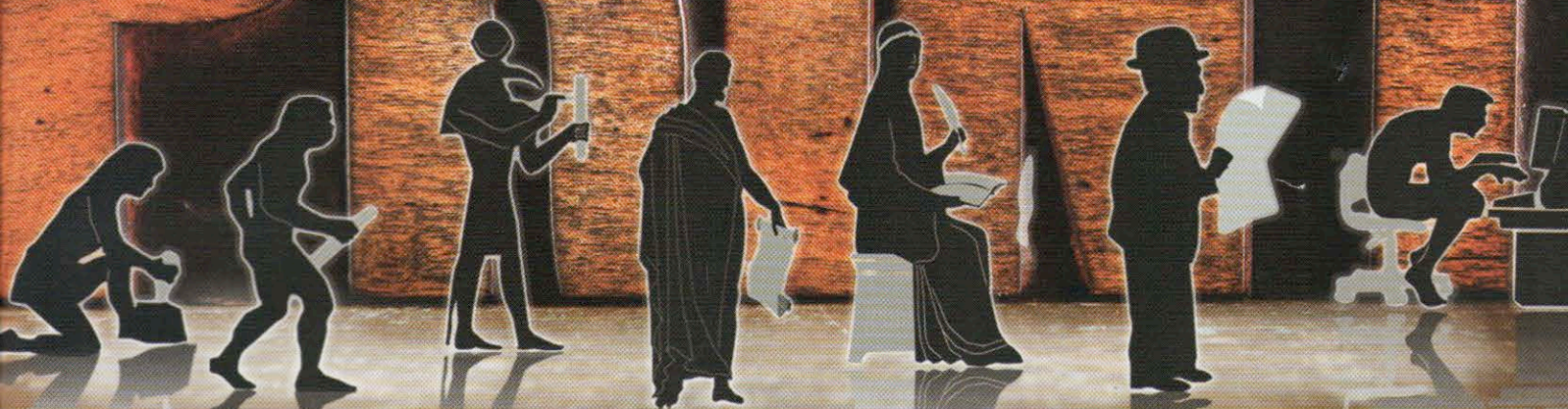
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The Power of **Craft** in Video Production

By **Matthew Billings** Guest Columnist

The video and film production business is in a state of relentless flux. There are always new technologies, improved equipment and ever-evolving notions of what's hip and what's not. Trends come and go, but *craft* is eternal.

I define "craft" as the sum of all the small decisions that ensure the highest quality in every aspect of the production. Craft makes a statement about your company. It tells your audience that you care about your image and, by extension, your products, your customers and your employees. Craft sets you apart. Craft makes a difference.

Great video is created. The key word is "created." This is not a tangible product that can be mass-produced. Each program is custom-made to the specifications of a discerning client. It is storytelling brought to life with words and music.

Of course, quality is highly subjective, but here are some of the elements that define craft for me.

Story. An effective video begins with a great story and it's important that the primary concept that holds the program together makes sense and connects to the audience. *Craft* is about making a powerful connection to the viewer.

The Creative Brief. Ideally, a strong creative brief is both creative and brief. It presents the rationale for the project and clearly states the goals and objectives. This is critical because at various points along the way, you will need to determine if a given decision will achieve the stated goal. A good producer will raise a warning if a production decision strays from the stated goal and will get things back on track. Craft works from a clearly defined vision.

Creative Treatment. Before a word of the script is written, an overall direction and framework for the program must be agreed to. In the creative treatment, the elements are defined and decisions made that will determine the plan of action. Most important, the client and the production team must agree. Otherwise you will be going through multiple versions of the budget and the script.

Script. This is the blueprint for the final product you are all building. The writer should indicate what action is occurring on the screen, as well as what's going on while we see it. What is the narrator saying? Is there music? Are there special effects or graphics? A good script will drive consensus and guide the way to a successful shoot.

Production Execution. The creation of a video is a logistical dance. Craft makes that choreography seamless. Planning is extremely important if a shoot is to be successful. Your production team should work closely with you to stay on schedule and on budget. Craft is economically responsible.

Location. Where will your program be shot? In a studio? Your corporate offices? At a customer location? Wherever it happens, it must look like some thought has gone into the visual design. Interviewing a customer in front of a cinder block wall is not likely to create viewer interest, unless perhaps the customer sells cinder block.

Run and Gun. Spin does not send out crews to "see what happens." We don't document meetings, weddings, baseball games or news stories. We don't show up without a plan. We don't bring cameras, lights and crews so a product manager can "wing it." Run and gun wastes time and money—and often misses opportunities (due to poor planning) to elevate storytelling impact. Craft does not.

Audio Quality. The visuals may be stunning but if the audio is garbled it not only creates a bad impression, but also threatens the success of the video. If a production company tells you that the camera microphone is adequate, find another production company. If they tell you an audio engineer is unnecessary, find another production company.

Lighting. Effective lighting gives your production texture and depth. It is neither too light nor too dark. A competent videographer knows that shadows are as important as light. It sometimes surprises clients how many artificial light sources it takes to make a shot look natural. In a visual medium, good lighting is key.

Plan What to Shoot & Shoot What You Plan. The script is an agreement between the production company and the client that specifies what elements will be included in the finished product. The script is also a tool to stay on budget. If it isn't in the script, it's probably not in the budget.

Quality Interviews. Great interviews don't just happen, and great planning will make a good interview better. The key is an in-depth pre-interview. The director and producer should know what points will be covered before the camera is turned on. A pre-interview lets you know what the subject will say and how well they will say it.

The Director. It may seem obvious, but an effective director should be good at working with people. Even if you're shooting food or cars, the director must communicate well with the stylist, the producer, the DP, the grip—and of course the client. Which reminds us of the shoot where the director was composing a shot, looked up from the viewfinder, and said, "Lose the bald guy." The bald guy was the VP of marketing.

Talent. Sometimes a client will tell us that Sid on the loading dock has a great voice and should narrate their program. Or Melissa in accounting is taking acting lessons. Most of the time, Sid and Melissa should keep their day jobs. Unless they are being interviewed about what they do, craft requires the use of professional talent who have the right look and know how to perform for camera.

Camera Movement. Video and film captures movement. That's why you're not just handing out brochures. Sometimes the movement also includes the camera. A fluid, traveling shot with the camera on a dolly or a Steadicam can gracefully draw the viewer into the scene for greater impact.

Graphics. The artful use of type can enhance almost any program. But don't let the graphics overwhelm or distract from the message. Tasteful yet creative is important to support the storytelling.

Fix It in Post. The cost of video production rises as the production moves towards completion. Post-production—the step where the footage is organized, narration recorded, music composed and edited—is not the place to solve problems that occurred during the shoot. It makes no sense to make major changes during the most expensive phase of the process.

A well-produced video, with quality at every step in the process, can compel an audience in a way few things can. Craft is what separates an adequate product from an unqualified success.

Matthew Billings is principal and creative director at Spin Creative, a video production company in Seattle. For more information, visit www.spincreativegroup.com.