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Telling stories

Video delivers the message

By John D'Onofrio

IN TODAY'S WORLD, if a picture is worth a thousand words, then video must be worth a million. Having been nurtured by television and inundated with Web-based video ala YouTube, we have become a society that insists on experiencing the world and getting information via video.



Lars Kongshaug started Vid-Smith in 2000 after a career in broadcast news.

And increasingly, video production is not just the domain of large production companies based in Los Angeles, New York or Seattle.

Case in point: Bellingham's Three Sixty Productions. Started by Michael Pearce and his wife Whitney in 1993, Three Sixty Productions has grown into a full-service advertising, design and film production agency – offering everything from marketing strategy to feature film work.

Among numerous success stories, Three Sixty Productions “helped make ‘the Juiceman’ a household name,” according to Pearce, referring to a well-known infomercial featuring Jay “the Juiceman” Kordich. “That infomer-

cial generated \$144 million in just 18 months.”

The Juiceman aside, Three Sixty Productions has made a name for itself in a big way. Their production team has been nominated for three regional Emmy Awards and received numerous Telly Awards. And Pearce is passionate about the value of video for all businesses.

“Every business is selling; whether it be a product, a service or an idea,” he says. “Video is an excellent way to present a consistent message.”

“Many sales men and women have their own marketing and sales style,” he explains. “However, with video, the ‘company message’ is always consistent – nothing is lost in the translation.”

Three Sixty Productions emphasizes a local connection while serving an increasingly far-flung client base. “We have a strong commitment to the Bellingham and Whatcom County community,” Pearce says. “We’ve also worked with global clients that have taken us to the Democratic Republic of Congo, Zambia, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Peru, Mexico, Canada and throughout the United States.”

Video is, in many ways, a new universal language offering opportunities to convey information on a deeper level than words or pictures on their own.

“The real power of video is its ability to connect with people on an emotional level,” says Nate Hanson, owner

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of Pilothouse Films in Anacortes. "Moving images set to music and highlighted with bits of text can reach people in a way that no other medium can."

And the use of video to promote businesses and convey marketing messages is clearly here to stay. As technology evolves, it has become easier to both produce – and receive – information via video.

"With the increase in broadband connections to most homes, video is a part of daily life for most of us," Hanson explains. "Video is the best way to communicate your message to customers because it is such an engaging medium. My clients use video to carefully tailor their message to connect with customers in a meaningful way."

Hanson started Pilothouse Films in January 2009 to meet what he saw as a growing need for professionally produced video content. Long the exclusive domain of companies with deep pockets, video was becoming an affordable and effective tool for even small businesses.

"When the video on your company website looks like it could have been produced and shown on TV, even a small business can look like a big deal," Hanson observes.

Hanson says that his company "can produce a stunning, high definition

"With video ... nothing is lost in translation"

Michael Pearce,
Three Sixty Productions

video highlighting whatever the client wants. That video can be placed on the company website, Facebook, YouTube, and other social networking sites.

"Then the video can be shared with as many social connections as you can make," he adds. "Each social connection will also have the ability to share the video with others. The cost of this social exposure (with exponential

growth potential) is zero dollars!"

And digital video can be used in a staggering variety of ways.

"Last year's manufacturing floor footage can be used in this year's TV spot ... or as part of next year's how-to video for viewing on a smartphone," notes Lars Kongshaug, owner of Bellingham's Vid-Smith Digital Video Production.

Kongshaug moved to Bellingham in 1995 and started his company in 2000, after many years working for CBS news in New York and KNBC-TV in Los Angeles. Although he says that he is "not an entrepreneur by nature," Kongshaug soon found himself running a full-service production company, offering a wide array of video services.

"This being Whatcom County, we do a bit of everything – 30-second TV spots to 30-minute how-to videos to two-hour presentations for BTVC Channel 10," he explains. "Our clients are mainly small companies, educational institutions, non-profits and government entities."

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"The real power of video is its ability to connect with people on an emotional level," said Anacortes filmmaker Nate Hanson, owner of Pilothouse Films.

According to Kongshaug, Vid-Smith specializes in a documentary-style approach. "The information and message comes directly from primary sources – unscripted interviews with the people (experts, customers,

employees, participants, stakeholders, etc.) who are directly involved with the subject matter," he says.

The result is a video statement that rings true for its intended audience. "The finished product comes across as

more genuine, and the viewer doesn't feel he or she is being lectured or 'sold' on an idea," he adds.

Vid-Smith has enjoyed widespread success with this approach. A 30-minute informational video that they created for the Northwest Clean Air Agency was shown at some regional and national conferences, and was extremely well received. Health departments and medical associations from all around the country started contacting NWCAA requesting copies by the hundreds. The requests soon overwhelmed NWCAA's duplication budget and they began distributing DVD masters so these groups could order their own copies. Currently more than 20,000 copies of the video are in circulation (now including Spanish language versions), used by agencies and organizations including the CDC.

Kongshaug also works as an independent contractor, offering his exper-

"Craftsmanship is not just about the tools."

Lars Kongshaug,
Vid-Smith

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tise to other production companies and projects. For example, he recently worked with David Brancaccio and PBS during filming of *Fixing the Future*, a documentary about sustainable business practices that features several Whatcom County businesses (the program airs Nov. 18).

Regardless of the format, video – like any marketing message – succeeds based on its ability to tell a compelling story. And like any story, the delivery is as important as the story itself. This is where engaging a professional comes in.

"The technical quality of low-cost video cameras is pretty amazing these days, and for some applications, non-professional video might work fine," Kongshaug says. "However craftsmanship is not just about the tools, and as with any line of work, the advantage

of hiring a professional is that you can take advantage of their knowledge and expertise."

"They may not know exactly how your company does what it does," he explains, "but they will have the storytelling skills to translate your objectives onto the screen, plus the experience to make it look good."

"I view working with clients as a collaboration," Kongschaug adds. "They are the experts in their subject matter, and I am an expert in how to creatively translate their vision onto the screen."

"Working collaboratively allows us both to play to our strengths," he observes.

"No matter what business you are in, you and your company are judged by what you produce—not only the quality of the products, but every marketing and collateral material used to promote your business," adds Pearce. "If your video looks amateurish, that's a direct reflection on you and your company."

"Having your story told in a sympathetic fashion is worth a hell of a lot," agrees Max Kaiser of Hand Crank Films in Bellingham. "We help people understand what a company, a non-profit, a city, what-have-you, is really all about," he says. "We show why you should care about what the 'thing' is doing."

Kaiser opened Hand Crank Films in 2005 after successfully directing a feature film, *Desolation: A Comedy*. Since then Hand Crank Films has produced more than 100 commercials, 40 corporate videos and a documentary that was recently broadcast to more than 2 million people in high definition on PBS.

After producing the successful PBS documentary, *On a Wing and a Prayer: An American Muslim Learns to Fly*, in 2008, Hand Crank suddenly found itself in demand for projects associated with the Muslim community across the United States. As a result, they recently filmed ads for the controversial Community Center at Park51, the so-called "Ground Zero Mosque" in New York. "These ads have been seen over three-quarters of a million times

on YouTube, Yahoo, etc., and over 12-15 million times thanks to CNN coverage," Kaiser says. Although he's gotten used to the viral nature of video, "nothing seems to come close to the Ground Zero Mosque ads."

"It is really wild to see your stuff on national television," Kaiser explains, "and to see CNN anchors parroting the copy you wrote."

Controversy aside, Hand Crank is well, cranking. This year they've shot in Los Angeles, Seattle, New

York, Washington, D.C., Ferndale, and Bangladesh. They produce video for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, being one of only five preferred vendors for all of their video projects worldwide.

Video professionals agree that the demand for videos has grown, at the same time that the videos themselves are getting shorter, in keeping with the demands of the Web.

"I have more demand for shorter videos—one to two minutes, more



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Mike Pearce of Three Sixty Productions shooting on location in the Andes.

in line with Internet attention spans," observes Vid-Smith's Kongshaug.

Three Sixty Production's Pearce concurs. "Many of our clients want us to create commercials or short-format marketing videos that can be used through direct-mail as well as com-

pressed for their website," he explains. "More and more clients are pushing prospective buyers to the Web."

"We definitely see video going more and more to the Web," Pearce continues. "Access speeds are dramatically increasing and people are becoming

more and more accustomed to seeing programming on the Web, especially in formats like NetFlix and Hulu."

"It's just the most natural next step," he explains.

In fact, Three Sixty Productions was asked to help design a new Web platform for Native American Entertainment Network (www.nae.network.com). The website is totally video based, divided into multiple categories and interests, and free to the viewer.

In addition to getting shorter, video is also getting smaller.

"The real power of video is its ability to connect with people on an emotional level."

Nate Hanson,
Pilothouse Films

"The trend in video seems to be moving to the smaller screens of smartphones and other mobile devices," observes Kongshaug.

Pearce agrees. "Many companies are using new mobile devices such as notebooks, iPhones and iPads," he says. "These are great tools that can be easily carried by an entire workforce. High definition video on an iPad looks phenomenal."

It seems clear that the use of video to convey information is the wave of the future. Yet, as in so many technological improvements, it still comes down to basics.

"The heart of any good production is still storytelling, no matter what your medium or technology," says Kongshaug. "And the visual language used to tell those stories has not changed all that much since the development of motion pictures more than 100 years ago."

It would seem that the more things change, the more they stay the same. ■

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