



Behind the scenes of a multimedia startup

May 6, 2012 | By Elena Rue

We recently launched a visual storytelling business, StoryMineMedia, with the release of our first independent project. “The Council” is a series of short, quirky webisodes about a middle school student council election. We wanted to tell a different election story and to conduct a bit of an experiment by producing a web-based documentary series in three short episodes.

We knew it was a risk. And frankly, we’re not sure yet if it paid off. But it allowed us to ask (and maybe even answer) some interesting questions about web-based visual storytelling.

How do we get people (other than our moms) to see our work?

As a visual storytelling startup, by far our biggest challenge is finding ways for people to see our work. The new media landscape affords us (and all storytellers, bloggers, inventors, and DIY-ers) the opportunity to self-publish and self-distribute our work. This is awesome. But believe it or not, there’s a lot of stuff on the Internet. And competing for clicks in a world full of excellent content, and surprisingly terrible content (real life Barbie, anyone?) is incredibly daunting.

Let the story tell itself....however long it takes

While we were working on “The Council,” we had distribution in the backs of our minds. But we come from a place where the unofficial Hippocratic Oath for storytellers is “first, do good work.” Clicks, plays, and views don’t matter if what you’re producing isn’t any good. And while conventional wisdom tells us that people are more likely to watch a 3-minute online video than a 10-minute one, we firmly believe that the story should dictate the length and structure of a video, not the other way around.

One evening, while showing Catherine’s family a 10-minute rough cut of the project, her brother-in-law said, “So, are these going to be episodes?” Before that moment, the thought of splitting up “The Council” hadn’t crossed our minds. We realized he had a point, the story did indeed lend itself to a multi-part structure. We meet the candidates, we see the election and we learn the results. What if we released it like this? It would maintain the integrity of the story and give us a chance to build a little anticipation before the release. We re-visited the cut (which still needed some tightening) and began experimenting with edits that would work as stand-alone episodes, or one full piece. Once we had the final webisodes cut, we started promoting the web-series and our launch. Then we sat back, crossed our fingers, and hoped someone other than our moms would watch them.

If you build it, will they come?

When Elena was twelve years old, she didn’t make a trip to the Field of Dreams because she was looking for a baseball field on a farm. She went because she was in love with Kevin Costner. In our industry, shooting, editing, and posting a video is not enough to guarantee an audience. Because StoryMineMedia is brand new, our first challenge is letting people know that we exist.

Cut a trailer....and send it to people

A few weeks before our launch, we sent a trailer to several movers and shakers in our field. A week later, we found out that we were being featured on a couple prominent blogs. This was a key factor in getting our work seen by people outside of our small network of followers (read: our Facebook friends).

Make it easy on the viewer

An added challenge with our launch strategy was getting people to watch three videos instead of just one. When we designed our webisode launch, our hope was that people would get hooked on our student council story, love the characters as much as we did, and go to our website for the second two webisodes. In reality, the first webisode was viewed seven times more than the other two. That hurt. But what we can deduce from this is that people are more inclined to watch a video that is placed where they were already looking. For the most part, the blogs that picked up our story only embedded the first webisode. Just because we posted the second two webisodes on our website, doesn’t mean that people were going to come looking for them. That’s just a lot to ask.

Thanks, mom.

Despite all the challenges we faced with our risky launch strategy, we stand by our decision to release “The Council” in webisodes. What we don’t know is if we had only released the full eight-minute version, would people have watched more than three minutes anyway? Would blogs have picked us up if we didn’t have a unique hook to set us apart?


What we do know is that our moms watched the whole thing.

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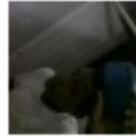
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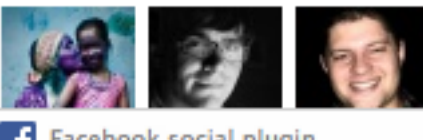
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