

Production of personal documentary videos

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What are the main differences between a network commissioned documentary film and a personal documentary video? Other than the obvious, and the active involvement of the customer in the initial content selection, we found out that the process is quite different.

Unlike TV docs, where the duration of the film is given and is often known before the first frame is filmed, in personal video biographies we begin with content evaluation, and then we have to make an assessment of the duration of the video. Although this assessment may be changed in the editing phase, any such change can result in dissatisfaction of the customer or in overspending, as the projected budget will be based upon our video duration estimate.

The research phase is much more precise and focused than in commissioned films for TV. As a matter of fact, the customer sets the research boundaries. We try to deepen research within these boundaries, and we often suggest additional directions and deviations from the main story line, but at all times we stick to the narrative set by the customer.

During filming, the job definition of our production teams is to use their best technical and creative abilities, but always be attentive to the customer's preferences. There is a built-in conflict here, as the customer is not a professional filmmaker, and unlike an experienced commissioning editor, the customer can't always imagine the final result based on reading a script, hearing the director's description of the edited scene or even watching raw footage. The best way to do it, as we found out, is to eliminate the professional jargon and explain the film in laymen terms. People often do not admit that they don't really know what certain cinematic terms mean; we want to keep the customers confident and at ease, and use of professional vocabulary can harm that.

In editing, we are obligated to show a rough cut before we move to the final post production phase. In personal video documentaries we always try to give the rough cut another round of smoothing and polishing before presenting it the customer. We never assume "he can imagine that"; we never leave a caption "animation here" if we can show at least a crude version of the animation, or even a JPG and a caption with a short description. We don't expect the customer to make up his or her mind immediately after viewing. If time permits, we ask them to sleep over it, to take a few days and write down all their comments.

We learned that what we consider minor issues can quickly turn into major dissatisfactions; after all, the customer is always right when we work for him. Throughout the production process we get to know the customer, and the producer in charge of the production can feel when another explanation is necessary, or when a production-related issue is a done deal, and there is no reason to bother the customer again with that.

Often the customer is more than one person. In such a case we always make sure that the process is not democratic... Someone has to make the final decision, and we will follow that

decision. We often offer our customers to get notes and comments from everyone involved. We then take the notes and work accordingly, but in any case of conflict, the decision maker rules.

The final product, a tape, DVD, digital file, should always be at the format desired by the customer. Professional videographers always aspire to use the best possible format, but we don't want to force our customer to buy new appliances just in order to watch their own video. So we produce at the format of choice, and in addition we give the customer the best format we have. He can have a BluRay disk even if he doesn't have a player; we are pretty sure he will have one in the future.

To sum up, these are our main guidelines for producers and video professional working on a personal biography video:

1. The customer is always right. It's his story, and we are here to turn it into a professional video, not to change it.
2. The first stage in the process is hearing the life story you are about to produce: listen to it, absorb it, and only when you understand it begin asking questions.
3. The time frame is crucial. It takes experience to decide that a certain video should last 40 minutes, and another one won't hold more than 20. Think carefully, and make a detailed script breakdown before deciding. Tell the customer that a 10-15% deviation in the duration of the video is reasonable, as long as it works for the benefit of the film.
4. Always remember that we provide a service; we do not have creative liberty which may inflict on the satisfaction of the customer. Do not insist on stylistic matters.
5. Don't expect the customers to become filmmakers. They are not; that's what we are hired to do.
6. Don't sell. Offer. Specify alternatives and explain their consequences.
7. Never say: "We can't do that" just because YOU don't want to do it.

And last, marketing: a video biography customer is usually a one-time client, but the potential sales derived from one satisfied customer are very high. In network-commissioned docs, we do what we feel is the best, and then we try to satisfy the commissioning editors. In personal video biographies there is only one person to satisfy: your customer. If he or she are satisfied, it's a success. That is the only bottom line in this business.