Corporate Scriptwriting...
Lessons from the School of Hard Knocks

In an attempt to find the silver lining behind a cloud, I mined a few ingots from a stormy writing experience. I will spare the thunderous details and share the lessons learned from this project.

Always give clients what they want. As the writer, however, you are allowed to influence, persuade and educate through your early participation in the "want-making" process. Trust your experience and expertise. Help pin them down about what they really need, then come up with creative concepts based on the audience and these needs.

Remind the client why they chose video to deliver this message. The power of video comes from its intimacy. Even in a group setting, the video is speaking to only one person at a time. As a communication tool, video is best for conveying high-level concepts, generating image awareness and evoking emotions. Save the facts, statistics, and details for elsewhere.

Be bold --particularly with bold directors. Being conciliatory has its place, but stand up for what you believe. You will be respected. Have written and approved objectives before proceeding. Meet and get to know the final decision maker(s). Insist upon being involved in any meetings where your work is to be reviewed, discussed, critiqued or edited. This allows you to explain your reasoning, get and give immediate feedback, and be there to put out fires and make adjustments on the fly. When you can see their faces and hear their voices, you do not have to guess where they stand.

Be involved from the beginning and participate as an equal partner. Set some parameters. Don t let them handcuff you or force you to shoot at a moving target. You could be the most creative and precise writer, but you can never be effective unless you are allowed to do what you do best.

Help close deals. Participate in early creative meetings during the proposal phase

Have a written contract. Make sure it outlines your involvement (e.g. - 4 hours of research, 2 outlines, 2 drafts and a final approved script), fees and the payment schedule (typically 50% deposit and balance due upon completion)

Have confirmed written objectives. Do this before you start writing.

Always write to the audience. (Who are they, where will they be viewing the video, etc.)

Draft a rough outline. This will help ensure you are on the right track

Do not get attached to your first draft. Remember, a first draft is just that, a first draft

Provide written ground rules when clients edit. For example: If you add anything, you must remove something to keep the video the same length. Read all changes aloud to hear how they affect the flow or rhythm and to determine if the script still clearly communicates what you intend. Gather all feedback from everyone involved in the final decision before returning the script with notes for the next draft. Set a deadline for review and indicate consequences for missing it.

If they insist on having you do something a certain way and you think if will compromise the quality of your work, gracefully acknowledge their position and suggest an alternative. Generally, if you are a good writer, the writing part is relatively easy and fun. The challenges include: finding the work, pinning down objectives, adjusting to different client personalities, dealing with bureaucracy, and the kind of corporate thinking that leads to fear, indecision, and watered-down communications.

Writing corporate video involves a certain balancing act between ownership and non-ownership. Take pride in what you are doing. Act as if this will be your best work and write accordingly. But be careful about loving anything about the script; you will need to let it go. Ultimately it is not your script; it is the client s. Heed the wisdom of another producer who once told me, "Beauty is in the eyes of the checkbook holder."

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