



A Tale of Two Videos

The difference between making a video and making an impact

Why do some nonprofit videos motivate donors more than others? Below are two videos produced for the same organization, Fresh Lifelines for Youth (FLY), a nonprofit focused on getting formerly incarcerated kids back on track. One helped FLY reach an annual fundraising goal in just four months. Take a few moments to watch both videos (just click on the images), and see if you can figure out which one accelerated fundraising.



On the surface the two videos appear to have a lot in common: both include staff and clients discussing the way FLY's programs work, an external partner describing his experience with FLY, and shots of clients engaging in FLY's programs. So why did the video on the right attract dramatically more support for FLY than the one on the left? The difference between the films lays not so much in their content as in the way that content is being presented. Generating impact for your cause is not simply about telling a powerful story--it is about telling that story in a *strategic* way.

Marj Safinia, Kristina Robbins and Nick Higgins are documentary filmmakers who founded [The Department of Expansion](#) and understand strategic storytelling. "We realized that all our documentary tools could be really well applied in the nonprofit arena, where people had fantastic stories but weren't doing a good job of telling them," Safinia says. When Christa Gannon, FLY's Executive

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Director, hired them, she was mainly looking to make an updated version of FLY's first mission video, which had been produced pro bono by a local production crew following Gannon's script. But The Department of Expansion wanted FLY to think bigger.

"We don't start by asking, 'What are we going to film?'" Safinia explains. "Rather, we ask, 'What are the key problems your organization is facing in terms of growing and being successful?'" Once they determine what the organization needs the film to accomplish, Safinia and Robbins are then able to choose stories that will move the film's audience in the desired direction.

Through an in-depth interview process with the FLY team, donors, clients, and system partners, Safinia and Robbins discovered a major hurdle FLY was facing. In the past, FLY had received a majority of its funding from the government, but as the recession dragged on, they needed to find a way to dramatically increase funding from private donors. Once this issue was pinpointed, The Department of Expansion began to investigate what stopped private donors from giving.

"We learned we needed to help private donors get over their preconceptions that kids who had already committed crimes were throwaways, unworthy of investment," Robbins says. To do this, Safinia and Robbins needed to portray FLY's clients as authentic people with strong core values. They also needed to help potential donors see that FLY's programs could consistently enable dramatic changes in their kids.

To accomplish these goals, Safinia and Robbins made sure FLY's clients were introduced to the audience in a positive light *before* they went deeper into their histories. This helped the viewer identify with the client immediately, which in turn helped the viewer relate to their story. (For more information on the topic of identification, check out last month's [newsletter](#). The way clients were interviewed was also part of The Department of Expansion's strategy--they avoided scripting anything and instead filmed interviews that were natural and conversational. "It's subtle but incredibly powerful to let people speak in their own voice. That conveys authenticity," Robbins says.

To illustrate program effectiveness - and not simply have interviewees recite data - the Department of Expansion filmed FLY's clients moving through the program and experiencing transformative moments. They filmed clients interacting with mentors and didn't shy away from showing clients both struggle and shine. "By showing what is actually involved in the process, we make the audience understand how much is expected of the kids and why the work is so transformative," Safinia explains. Giving the audience a real picture of FLY's clients working through the programs lets them plainly see how these young clients change.

Once FLY began screening the second film to potential donors, its targeted approach clearly proved to be effective. After showing the video for just the first four months of the year, FLY's annual goal for private donations had been met. And today FLY receives a majority of its funding from private donations rather than the government - an important shift for the organization, and one that its leadership attributes to more strategic storytelling.

"The film absolutely sensitized people to our population and to the

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work we do in a way that is very profound", Gannon describes. "People who have watched the film have told me: 'I had no idea' and 'it makes me think so differently about those kids'. Regardless of how much we've raised, if we're able to change people's perspective of kids in the system, that's a value add not just to our organization but to the movement in general. This process really taught me to empower the filmmakers."

Want to help your organization communicate more strategically?

See details below on our upcoming webinar
Strategic Communications: Cutting Through the Clutter.

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Creating Campaigns That Connect

Learn how to engage and motivate your audience in our February webinar.

Strategic Communications: Cutting Through the Clutter is a two-hour webinar that will show you how three classic public interest campaigns engaged and motivated their target audiences and achieved remarkable results. In reviewing these success stories, we'll cover:

- The basics of framing
- Message creation and delivery
- An easy-to-use template for campaign design



The webinar is divided into two one-hour classes that will be held on February 5th and February 12th from 11a-12n PT (2-3p ET) each day. Tuition is \$250 per student and discounts are available for organizations that register 3 or more students. Learn more and register today at [The Goodman Center](#).

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Readers Write: Pet-the-Dog Scene Revisited

What if the hero of your story is a dog?

Amy Mayers, a long time reader of this newsletter, is a passionate advocate for animals. After reading our January newsletter, she sent an email with this question, "How would you add a pet-the-dog scene, say, to a story about farm animals or wild animals? Any suggestions?" Here's what I wrote back:



"Believe it or not, I've gotten similar questions before when storytellers wanted to make their protagonist a tree, a fish, and once even a virus! I think the same principles hold true: the audience **MUST** identify with someone (or thing) within the story to gain true entry into the world of the narrative. And to do that, they must find something in common with the protagonist.

In the case of the virus -- which is about as extreme an example as I can think of -- the storyteller started his story about tuberculosis this way: "I am the TB bug. And I am very, very patient." He then described how the bacteria behind tuberculosis can lodge in your system for years before becoming active. ("I wait...and I wait...and I wait.") Those qualities of patience and persistence were the characteristics that humans could relate to, and I believe that's how they identified with the bacteria and saw the story from its perspective.

The same goes for elephants, chimpanzees, birds, bees, etc. -- while they are different from us and we should celebrate those differences, for storytelling purposes, it's the similarities that give us a way into their narratives. So a

story about a wild elephant, for instance, would benefit from an early scene in which we see the protagonist being protective of its young -- something any human can identify with."

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