



To Tell the Real Story: Stop "Farming," Start "Hunting"

Marj Safinia and Kristina Robbins have an intriguing way of talking about their work. Their company, The Department of Expansion, helps good causes tell their stories through short films - see for yourself [here](#) - but thanks to a background in documentary filmmaking, the duo is particularly adept at telling authentic stories that stand out from the Internet video crowd. During their [talk](#) at frank2016, Marj and Kristina used the metaphor of "hunting" versus "farming" to describe what makes their approach so distinctive.

Farmers, they explain, rely on rehearsed talking points in highly controlled environments, and while that may keep you on message, it rarely yields real moments. Hunters, on the other hand, observe their subjects in their natural habitats - where anything can happen - and while they plan meticulously in advance, they also let spontaneity be their friend. Several years ago, the Department of Expansion embarked on a hunt for the Hewlett Foundation - in this case, to tell the story of a new project-based learning initiative - and the "rules of the hunt" they followed are excellent guidelines for anyone who wants to capture more authentic stories. [Full Story](#) *Please note: Apple Mail users may need to scroll down manually.*



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The films that the Department of Expansion would produce for Hewlett needed to get different groups of stakeholders excited about the initiative, known as "deeper learning". One of these groups was teachers, many of whom were skeptical about adopting yet another education reform. So Safinia and Robbins went hunting, rulebook in hand:

Rule #1: Choose your animals wisely.

Vetting storytellers (i.e., interviewees) in advance is vital to ensuring that the film will feel authentic but also get the point across. In the initial screening phase, Safinia and Robbins spoke with several teachers over the phone, asking them to describe their teaching process step-by-step, the impact they'd seen on their students, and the impact this style of teaching had on them. "We were looking for a teacher that was confident, articulate and passionate, but equally important, we needed to find a person whose personal story and voice actually matched with the strategic message," Robbins says.

Rule #2: Big animals aren't always the best.

One of the people Safinia and Robbins spoke with over the phone was an English teacher who had received awards for excellence on both a state and national level. Her school had also been recognized as exemplary, and it was clear she and her colleagues were doing exceptional work. After careful consideration, however, Safinia and Robbins determined that this teacher was perhaps too exceptional. "We realized if we put her in the film, teachers in the audience would think, she's in an extraordinary situation, she has an extraordinarily supportive school, I could never do that, and then we'd lose people because this woman sounded like a superhero," Safinia says.

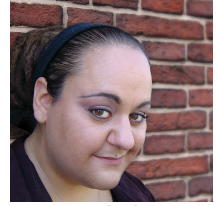
They decided to go with Collin, a high school math teacher who was a few years into his career. Though he was clearly a great teacher, he didn't have all the intimidating accolades that might make him less relatable. Safinia and Robbins also thought featuring a teacher who had made math, a notoriously difficult subject to enliven, more engaging, would be more compelling for the skeptical teachers they were targeting with the film.

Rule #3: Be nimble when you find surprises.

When Safinia and Robbins got to Collin's classroom for the interview, they unexpectedly found a veteran teacher, Brian, there with him. As they started to speak with Collin, Brian excitedly joined the conversation. Safinia and Robbins took it in stride, and rather than sticking to a predetermined plan and "farming him out the door," they invited Brian to sit and join them.

Collin was recently out of college, and had come into a project-based pilot program at LAUSD with great enthusiasm. Brian was a battle-hardened English teacher who had spent 15 years in the field. Over their hour-long conversation, Safinia and Robbins noticed that the dynamic between these two teachers was at the heart of their story. The pilot program, as well as Collin's excitement for teaching, had helped to re-engage Brian in his experience of teaching.

"Hearing someone who already felt like they were broken by the system tell you how they got revitalized by another teacher's fresh energy had more impact than the other way around," Robbins says. "It is a perfect



Marj Safinia



Kristina Robbins

coming to get," Safinia adds.

Rule #4: Follow their tracks.

After their initial interview, Safinia and Robbins went back to Collin and Brian's school to film them doing an interactive exercise with their students. Collin and Brian had created a mock international trade forum, with students representing various countries, to simultaneously teach the students about different economic principles and sharpen their communication skills. Safinia and Robbins filmed the students sitting at rounds in business attire, intensely focused on their negotiations with one another as Brian and Collin looked on. When the exercise was over, Safinia and Robbins decided to keep that camera rolling as Brian and Collin debriefed the activity.



Click the image to watch the video about "deeper learning."

The informal conversation between the teachers showed how passionate they were in a way that would have been difficult to create. At one point, Brian relayed something the kids said that showed how well they were collaborating. Then he made a gesture miming that it had blown his mind. "It was a really natural moment and came through as utterly genuine excitement," Safinia says. By just continuing to observe even after they had gotten what they had come for, Safinia and Robbins got an authentic moment the showed how much this model was inspiring teachers.

Rule #5: Assess the spoils.

As they filmed, Safinia and Robbins were careful to gather as much relevant information as they could, even if at the time, they weren't completely certain where it fit into the project. "We could afford ourselves the liberty of being completely open in the field because we knew that afterwards, there was an assessment period," Safinia says. They also used this freedom to help Collin and Brian feel more comfortable to speak openly. "We let them know that we have their best interests at heart, and anything they say that goes in the wrong direction won't be used," Robbins says. Once in the editing process-and only then- were the range of authentic moments and stories shaped to articulate the strategic message.

Allowing for authenticity means embracing some degree of unpredictability but for Safinia and Robbins, the trade-off pays back in spades. "We feel authenticity has a unique power to engage people who are otherwise disengaged," Robbins says. "Instead of leaving people with the feeling that they are being sold something, we leave them with the feeling that we have shared something. When something feels authentic, I'm simply in that moment with [the storyteller], experiencing things with them as they experience them," she adds. "When this happens," Safinia says, "we are able to successfully transcend the outer layers that we have, and get to that core bit where you and me and everyone are all the same."

Watch Marj Safinia and Kristina Robbins' [talk](#) at frank2016 to hear more rules of the hunt.

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