



Viral Videos: Why Setting Out to Produce One is Unwise

“I WOULD MAKE A FORTUNE IF I COULD CREATE A VIRAL VIDEO.” PERHAPS THAT THOUGHT HAS OCCURRED TO YOU; IT’S A COMPELLING THOUGHT, BUT IT JUST ISN’T SO. EXCEPT FOR GIGANTIC CORPORATIONS, NOBODY CAN AFFORD VIRAL VIDEOS AND, EVEN IF YOU COULD AFFORD IT, THERE’S NO GUARANTEE.

Among the current favorite high-scoring videos is a series by Friskies. The *Dear Kitten* videos feature advice from an adult cat to a kitten. Although they are popular, most of them never truly become viral.

Maybe you remember the 1999 *Herding Cats* video by Electronic Data Systems that ran in the Super Bowl. That was 6 years before YouTube, so the video didn’t go viral for several years. As for EDS, the company was acquired by HP and has been defunct since 2009.

Despite spending an enormous amount of money on highly produced videos that corporate advertising and marketing professionals hope will go viral, most of the videos that actually do go viral are amateur productions with names like “Surprised Kitty”, “Ninja Cat”, “Dancing Baby”, “Dramatic Chimpunk”, and “Keyboard Cat”.

The first thing you may have noticed about that list is that most of the titles indicate that the video has some relationship to cats. The Internet, after all is designed as a technologically advanced location containing the entirety of information known to humanity and is used to argue with strangers and look at pictures of cats. So if your goal is to make a viral video, cats are a good starting point.

Babies are good, too. Or doing something stupid such as jumping off a roof into a snow bank – the kinds of activities that might garner an honorable mention in the annual Darwin Awards.

So if your video is less exciting than jumping off a roof, less fuzzy than a kitten, and doesn’t

feature a cute baby, you’re going to have trouble completing with the 300 hours of video that are uploaded to YouTube. Every minute. Every day. Do the math: That’s 3,024,000 hours of new video uploaded to YouTube every week.

And that’s just YouTube. There’s also Vimeo, Facebook, Netflix, Livestream, and dozens of other smaller services throughout the world. Competition is fierce.

By the way, the professionally produced Friskies *Dear Kitten* series benefits from narration by Ze Frank, an online performance artist, composer, humorist, and public speaker. Based in Los Angeles, he is also executive vice president of video at BuzzFeed.

Consider Upworthy, the operation that constantly sends out information about videos they think will be popular. For every 300 videos that Upworthy promotes, approximately 1 will go viral.

And yet you’ll find services with websites that promise to “get your video seen by millions of people! From as low as 5 cents per view, you can promote your video on blogs, mobile apps and



Facebook.” In other words, sign up with them and they’ll spam social media with links to your videos.

It’s Not Hopeless

THAT’S NOT TO SAY THAT YOU SHOULD GIVE UP ON VIDEOS. JUST DON’T SET OUT TRYING TO CREATE A VIDEO THAT WILL GO VIRAL. VIDEO CAN BE AN EFFECTIVE WAY TO COMMUNICATE YOUR MESSAGE AND THAT MAKES IT USEFUL.

People share videos when the information provided is compelling. So if you’re thinking of creating a video, a better goal might be to create a sharable video. It’s not particularly difficult to define the characteristics of a shareable video.

First, make it short. Modern life has shortened our attention spans to the point that 60 seconds seems like a long time. If your video exceeds 60

seconds, it's unlikely to be shared much. Obviously there are exceptions; a video that consistently amusing, surprising, or entertaining can hold an audience for several minutes, but creating a video like that isn't easy.

Second, put on a happy face. Upbeat messages are far more likely to be shared than are videos that are filled with gloom and doom. Find a way to tell your story in a way that's encouraging and upbeat. That's Upworthy's niche, by the way, uplifting stories with a positive message.

Third, think like a news editor. Two other characteristics of a video or a story that will be shared are the timeliness of the message and its utility. One of the catch-phrases in journalism is "news you can use." In other words, if your goal is to cause someone do something, the message needs to explain what the viewer should do, when, and why.

"A Scientific Approach to Creating Insanely Viral Videos" by Rohan Ayyar in Fast Company is a detailed summary that provides a good foundation for anyone who's thinking of using video and wants to make the video a candidate for being shared widely. Read the article [here](#).

There are lots of tips and tricks, including recommendations to release videos on Monday or Tuesday so people will see them at work, to spend time getting the title right, and to submit the video to services such as Reddit. All too often, though, one key point is overlooked.

Video Quality

IF YOU WANT PEOPLE TO WATCH YOUR VIDEO, YOU NEED TO MAKE IT SOMETHING THAT LOOKS LIKE WHAT THEY'RE USED TO SEEING ON TV.

Today "broadcast quality" can be achieved by someone with just a few thousands of dollars worth of hardware and software. And nearly broadcast quality is possible with a \$200 consumer grade camera, some software, and a little knowledge of video and audio production.

The point here is that no matter what you include in your video, if the production quality is poor, people won't watch.

A well constructed video can explain a complex topic in just a few minutes, so don't allow concerns about the difficulty of creating a viral video scare you a way from the medium. Even if it doesn't go viral, video can help sell a product or service through clear communication. [Ω](#)

Boasting Without Boasting

SOMETIMES I WORK WITH CLIENTS WHO WANT TO INCLUDE INFORMATION ABOUT HOW GOOD THEIR SERVICE OR PRODUCT IS. WHILE IT'S A GOOD IDEA TO LET PEOPLE KNOW YOU'LL DO A GOOD JOB, JUST SAYING SO ISN'T PARTICULARLY EFFECTIVE.



those letters and use the quotations with attribution.

Most of us don't receive letters like that on a regular basis, though, so we have to go fishing. There's nothing wrong with calling a client and asking how you're doing. If you're not doing well, the client will tell you and you'll have a chance to solve a problem. If you are doing well, you can ask permission to quote the client. Most will readily agree.

When the client agrees, type the quotation you'd like to use and send a copy to the client with a request that the person you're quoting approve the words, sign the page, and send it back.

Be sure to observe one important procedural point, though: While it's fine for you to present a quotation to a client and ask if the words you'd like to attribute to them are accurate, it's not OK to change words that the client has written and then use them without obtaining additional approval.

When you're rewriting words from a client, retain as much of the client's *voice* as you can. If every testimonial you use delivers the same message with similar words and phrasing, they all lose believability.

When it comes to convincing people that you're good, one well written, attributed testimonial is worth lots of useless boasts. [Ω](#)

If you say it, it's nothing more than a boast. I could say, "I'm a really great person!" but would you believe me? Without attribution, it's a meaningless boast. Of course you think you're doing a great job. What else would you be expected to say – *Hey, we're not very good, but we sure would appreciate your business!* I think not.

Attribution is essential. It's what allows a reader to determine whether a statement is reasonable and believable. In advertising a product or service, attribution has a different name: Testimonials.

If you're in the enviable position of doing your work so well that you regularly receive letters of thanks, get permission to excerpt quotes from



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