

# Don't say "ACTION!" just yet...

## Questions to ask before producing your video

by Rich Tolsma, President Rich Tolsma Productions

**OVERSEEING THE PRODUCTION** of a video or multimedia project for your organization is a formidable task. Whether it's your first time or your twenty-first, knowing what questions to ask can save you time, trouble, and money. More importantly though, taking the time to ask some questions will help to ensure that the product you get is the product you need.

The following ten questions are essential to ask yourself (and your organization) as you begin planning your project. Providing this information to your producer or production company will enable them to better target your needs, your audience and your budget.

### *What is the purpose of your program?*

Don't make the mistake of trying to develop a program that is all things to all people. Ask yourself whether the program has to train, inform, motivate, entertain or sell. Focus on one idea and describe the program's purpose in a single sentence, such as, "The purpose of this program is to inform community members about our mission and motivate them to contribute to our capital campaign."

### *Who is your audience?*

The producer and the writer will want to have a good idea of just who your target audience is. Define this demographic as clearly as possible. Often, there will be a primary and a secondary audience. The audience may be obvious to you, but spell it

out anyway, just so everyone involved in the project can agree.

- What is the purpose of your program?
- Who is your audience?
- What do you want to achieve?
- What is an appropriate budget?
- What will be the approximate shelf life of your production?
- Are there other potential uses for your program?
- Where and how will your program be shown or distributed?
- What resources do you already have?
- How should your program coordinate with your branding and other materials?
- Who will be involved in the approval process?

### *What do you want to achieve?*

What actions do you want the viewer to take? What do you want the viewer to know,

think, or feel after they've viewed the program? Limit yourself to no more than three or four clearly defined objectives. For example: "After viewing this video, the audience will know that our programs have proved to be highly effective in combating juvenile delinquency." Or, "The viewer will be motivated to visit our website to learn more about our products and services."

**IDENTIFYING** and defining your audience and program objectives provides a strategic roadmap for the production team, which can include your writers, producers, directors and editors. It provides your team with clarity to:

- develop the best style or treatment for the program
- write an effective script that is in alignment with your message
- capture appropriate shots and visuals
- conduct on-camera interviews
- integrate key elements such as graphics, editing and music to achieve your purpose

*What is an appropriate budget?*

There will be a number of different ways to achieve your goals and, consequently, a range for what your production might cost. Give your production company a general idea of what you might be able to spend. Doing so will allow them to recommend workable solutions to your needs and avoid wasting time spent on ideas which may be out of reach

*What will be the approximate shelf life of your production?*

Will the program be used only once for a specific event or purpose and then discarded, or will this information be timeless? If the program will be useful to you for sev-

eral years, it's certainly easier to justify a greater effort and expense. If you're looking for longevity, you'll want to avoid anything that may date your program. The writer, producer and director need to be aware of the desired shelf life. They can often provide you with creative options to "re-purpose" your program and ideas to extend its life.

*Are there other potential uses for your program?*

How many additional uses can you imagine for your program? A video that is developed especially for a large meeting or special event might also be screened at smaller gatherings, distributed as a gift or premium, posted to your website or made available as a podcast. Your production company needs to be aware of all the possible subsequent uses so they can develop a program that will be effective in each.

Are you planning to produce another program at a later date? Try to make the best use of the time you spend on location shooting your video. For example, if you're taping a public service announcement, don't tape just one – record three or four. You don't have to edit and distribute them all at once, but the footage will be "in the can," available when you're ready to create that second spot. Maximize the use of your program and your shooting days. You'll save money and again, you'll be able to better justify the funds being spent.

*Where and how will your program be shown or distributed?*

If your program will be shown on an enormous screen for a large audience it should be produced differently than if it will be delivered via the internet and viewed on a computer. Will it be broadcast on television stations or cable TV, viewed by hundreds of people on DVD or to thousands as a video podcast? How many copies will you need?

The answer to this question will affect not only the cost, but the style in which the program is written and produced.

*What resources do you already have?*

Is there footage shot by a local television station for the evening news that you'd like to include? What about high-quality digital photographs? Do you have access to someone who does professional voiceovers? Is there an intern who could assist in gathering materials or information? What about monetary resources? If you're a nonprofit organization, is there a board member or foundation that might be interested in funding your project?

Bear in mind that while you will naturally want to look for opportunities to save money, you also want to ensure that your production is thoroughly professional. Avoid using inexperienced volunteers and poor quality images. The money you save will not be worth the reduction in the quality and effectiveness of your end product.

*How should your program coordinate with your branding and other materials?*

Your brand is important. Determine if the program's look should fit in with your website, your print materials or your branding. If so, you'll want to obtain logos as well as information on colors and fonts for your production company to use once the project begins. They'll tell you what they need.

*Who will be involved in the approval process?*

Serious problems can arise when the individual responsible for approving the finished production is not involved at key points in the process. Decisions, or indecisions, on major or even minor changes can be frustrating, time consuming and very costly. It's also unnecessary. Before you begin, determine who will have the final say for approv-

ing the production. Make sure that individual is consulted along the way. Be certain that person reviews and approves the budget, treatment, and script. Make sure he or she views a work progress copy of the program. Keep your review and approval team as small as possible in order to avoid the "indecision by committee" syndrome. When preliminary copies are circulated to too many people, progress often slows to a crawl, adding unnecessary delays and costs.

*WHY bother with these questions?*

Producing a video or multimedia project can be satisfying and fun. Or it can be a living nightmare. Answering these questions will help you make your project more like the former and less like the latter. Answering these questions is the action you take before the director says "action!" The place to begin is right in your organization, focusing on what it is you're trying to achieve and thinking about the issues we've outlined here. Then, share the answers to these questions with your production company or use them to issue an R.F.P. Sharing this information will help you to clearly communicate your needs. Once you've identified a producer who you feel will work with you to meet those needs, there are some additional questions you should be asking of them. But we'll save that for another article.

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