

How to commission a short film: briefs, contracts and logistics

Why make a short film?

Films are a brilliant way to bring your messages to life. Done well, they make what you're saying believable, and they're probably the closest you can come to a face to face conversation with your audience. Films are a particularly emotive medium because they involve real people, and that can make them powerfully persuasive.

What to make a film about?

You could create a film to give your stakeholders a better understanding of your clients' experiences. You could use a film to make a case for new funding, by showing how previous funding has helped you develop your service offering. You could even make one to raise awareness of your services among potential client groups. The possibilities are endless so your choice to use film will really depend on whether you can identify enough uses for it to warrant the investment.

Where to start?

As with all media, you need to be clear from the outset about what it is you want to achieve with your film, as this will ultimately influence the content, length and style of it.

Ask yourself a series of questions:

- What's the purpose of your film? Crystallise what you want the audience to get out of it.
- What is your message? The simpler you can keep your message, the more successfully it can be communicated.
- Who is your target audience? Compare what their perceptions are now in relation to what you want them to be.

Write a brief

Once you're clear on the answers to the above questions, you can pull the information together into a brief for production companies.

In addition to the purpose, messaging and target audience, you will need to include details of your budget and your deadlines. You should aim to allow at least three months to make a short film from the time of commissioning a production company.

If you have any strong feelings on the following points it would also be worth including them, although they are things that the production company will be able to make recommendations on. They are also areas that you may need to compromise on, if the film is to be produced within your budget:

- duration
- need for a voiceover
- music requirements
- acted parts
- number of locations involved
- DVD copies.

Choosing a production company

Once your brief is complete, send it to a minimum of three production companies asking them to propose a treatment and quote for the job. An internet search will turn up a lot of options but you might find it useful to consult a voluntary sector suppliers directory, such as www.charitycomms.org.uk/suppliers or <http://thirdsectorsuppliersguide.blueboomerang.com/>. Alternatively you could ask for recommendations on a charity communications discussion forum like <http://thecharity.ning.com>. It's helpful to give companies a timeframe in which to respond. You will also need to provide contact details for someone at your organisation who they can consult with if they have queries.

Don't just base your decision on price. Think about the quality of what they're proposing, whether they've demonstrated technical knowledge as well as creativity, whether you would enjoy working with them, and the relevance of their previous experience. For example, if you plan to involve advice clients, have they worked with vulnerable people before? If not, do they at least demonstrate an awareness of the need for respect and sensitivity? It's also useful to request a 'showreel' of their work – examples of films they have made for other clients.

The initial meeting

When you have decided which company is right for you, you will need to get together for an initial meeting. This is an information gathering exercise on their part so that they can understand more about your objectives. Sometimes a company will request a meeting like this in order to prepare their treatment ideas and quote. It's a good sign if they do, but it's not par for the course.

Proposal and contract

Based on the initial meeting, the production company will put together a detailed proposal. This will have already been drafted to an extent as part of the pitching process, but it will be refined and developed now they know more about what you want. Alongside the proposal they should submit an actual estimate (quotes being a guide and estimates being binding).

You will have an opportunity to suggest changes or additions to the proposal. Once you have agreed it, you will be expected to sign a contract. This should cover:

- copyright ownership (you will probably find that the copyright lies with the producer unless you proactively request a written agreement to the contrary,

which you should, although it's a common gesture to offer them rights to use the film to promote their business)

- licensing for usage
- timescales
- breakdown of costs (including optional extras and extent of amends that have been allowed for in the pricing)
- payment terms (usually one third on signing, one third just before or after filming and one third on completion).

It is essential that either the proposal (if it's included as an appendix to the contract) or the contract itself makes it clear where the responsibility for various logistical arrangements lies (see Logistics below). If not, you could find yourself landed with unexpected work. Of course you might choose to take on many of the non-technical tasks yourself in order to minimise costs, but it should be a decision you take not a surprise!

Note that the development of a detailed proposal and the calculation of an estimate will almost certainly be chargeable work, whether you eventually go ahead with the film or not.

Script

Scripting is an essential part of the process. It provides a structure for the shoot and ensures you don't lose sight of your objectives. Having a script in place also saves time (and therefore money) when it comes to the editing process – the producer already knows exactly what content they're searching for within the footage, and how it should all knit together.

Even if your film is interview based rather than acted, you will still need a script; not words that are learned and then spoken verbatim, but clarity on what ground you want your interviewees to cover. The interviewer will need to craft their questions carefully in order to elicit the right information.

The most popular format for a script is two columns; one column detailing the visual elements of the film and the other detailing the audio content or dialogue.

Scripts are usually written by the production company, as the experts, but your input is extremely valuable because you will inevitably be more familiar with the subject matter than them.

Logistics

Once the script has been agreed the shoot can be planned and logistics arranged. Depending on the nature of your film and how you have agreed to split responsibilities with the producer, you or they will need to:

- source actors or case studies
- prepare interview questions

- choose a location (possibly involving a recce visit to check lighting and acoustics)
- secure permission to film at the chosen location
- book travel and accommodation if necessary
- produce a contacts sheet to be distributed to all involved
- prepare release forms (recording people's permission to have their image used in the film, without payment and without further consultation)
- compile a shot list (to ensure you capture everything you need).

Any deviation from the agreed script once filming has commenced is likely to involve extra time that would be charged at cost over and above the original budget.

Post production

'Rushes' is the term for raw unedited film footage. The producer will filter through the rushes, select snippets and join them together to tell a story that they believe meets your brief. This will be a 'rough cut' – in other words an unpolished first draft – this is done without your involvement.

The rough cut will be presented to you for feedback. This is your opportunity to fine tune it, maybe asking to play some aspects up and others down. The producer will be very familiar with the footage having shot it and edited it, and often they will be able to suggest alternative clips if you can articulate what it is you would like to see.

Once the edit has been approved, the finishing touches can be added: start and end screens, captions, graphics, credits, subtitles, music, voiceovers and so on. Don't forget to refer the production company to your brand guidelines so the film is consistent with everything else you do.

Additional uses for your film

- Upload it to your website.
- Upload it to Youtube.
- Include a DVD with your annual report.
- Include a copy with your reports to funders.
- Screen it at your AGM.
- Screen it at volunteer open days.

