ADVOCACY
SHOW, DON'T TELL

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Abstract

This article presents a practical case study that addresses the challenge of awareness-raising for public library foundations. It analyzes awareness of the of the Huntsville Library Foundation using Grunig's situational theory of publics to segment the foundation's targeted audiences. It also describes an effort to determine the medium with the most effective reach as well as the logistical process of creating a persuasive video for converting the foundation's latent and aware publics into active library donors. Tactics used in the course of this process included leveraging an e-newsletter already in use by the library, a simple poll, a six-and- a-half- minute video, websites, social media, and in-person viewing. A supplemental e-mail campaign used segments of the video for an end-of- year appeal for donations. While full evaluation of the video's impact was still under way at the time of publication, an early measure of its value merited an award at the American Library Association PR XChange. A summary of evaluation efforts to date is included.

Keywords: public, library, situational theory, video, persuasion

"Show, don't tell." This phrase is repeated often to authors, usually when their writing suffers from an abundance of exposition and lacks ways to let the reader experience the story through thoughts, actions, and senses. Instead of telling the reader that a character is starting to cry, one might describe eyes welling up and a lower lip quivering. Painting this image is much more impactful than the simple statement, "He is crying."

Not only limited in its application to writing, the "show, don't tell" principle is an effective marketing tool and is often overlooked in the busy world of library marketing. The typical library website tends to be an informative, dense resource filled with links to databases, event calendars, and ways to donate, and library print collateral (fliers, brochures, handbills, calendars, etc.) is usually full of useful information such as hours of operation, amounts for fines, and contact information. Nowadays, libraries also often curate entertaining content on their social media accounts. All of these methods are necessary for presenting pertinent information, but do they tell the story of the library? Do patrons come away from marketing materials with an understanding of the value that the library brings to the community? Do the materials inspire them to visit more often, donate more money, or advocate on the library's behalf?

Marketing for a public library can feel like a Sisyphean effort, a constant uphill climb to get more people through the doors, more circulations through the system, and more funds to work with—all while pushing against a boulder of misconceptions about what a modern library does with only minuscule communication budgets. Although the profession tries to chip away at the antiquated image of libraries as shushed and somber spaces filled with dusty old tomes, that is, in fact, the image that prevails for infrequent library users. That is the story that many patrons have read and committed to memory.

It is time to change the story and provide new memories, and to do it by showing rather than telling. It is possible to break through this obsolete depiction of libraries, and the best way to do so is by leveraging the fastest growing communication medium: video. What follows is a summary of the recent experience with video marketing of one public library system and its foundation, which will demonstrate the effectiveness of this medium.

How Did We Get Here? Identifying the Problem

Huntsville-Madison County Public Library (HMCPL) is a 13-branch system in north Alabama that serves about 350,000 people. In 2015, the Alabama Public Library Service (APLS) statistics showed HMCPL in first place across the state for circulation, door count, and programs attended, but 128th in per capita funding. Huntsville Library Foundation (HLF), the 501(c)(3) fundraising arm of the system, helps fill funding gaps through annual

grants raised through end-of-year giving and a large annual fundraising event, the Vive le Livre gala. Branch and department managers apply for grants for identified funding needs, then a foundation committee evaluates applications and makes awards based on merit and fundability.

At the time that the APLS statistics were released, anecdotal encounters with HMCPL patrons demonstrated a pattern of unfamiliarity with the foundation and the initiatives it funded. This, plus a slower-than-usual end-of-year giving campaign, prompted the HMCPL public relations (PR) director to investigate whether there was a more systemic problem and, if so, what its specific cause was. Quantitative evidence resulting from this investigation would be used as justification for requesting money to start an awareness campaign for the foundation. To gather such evidence, the PR director leveraged an existing HMCPL marketing tactic, the Check It Out! e-newsletter that was sent to more than 69,000 library cardholders on a biweekly basis. At the top of the newsletter under the masthead, a simple poll was inserted that asked three questions: (a) Have you heard of the Huntsville Library Foundation? (b) Do you know what the mission of the Huntsville Library Foundation is? and (c) What sources have you used in the past to find more information about the Huntsville Library Foundation?

Of the respondents, two thirds had never heard of the foundation and three quarters were unfamiliar with its mission. The number of people who had never searched for foundation information was twice the total number of people who had. The results immediately indicated a problem. How could HMCPL expect people to want to give to its foundation if they had never heard of it or did not know why it existed?

Variables to Consider

The situational theory of publics, developed by James E. Grunig of the University of Maryland, College Park, is an effective tool for choosing media to reach a particular audience. Simply put, Grunig defines four classifications of target audiences: non-publics, latent publics, aware publics, and active publics (Cameron, 2009). He also establishes three factors that identify the public to which a particular audience belongs; these factors can also help one choose the medium best suited to compelling that public to engage in solving a problem. In the case of HMCPL, the library needed to determine who its patrons and community were and use that information to understand how to fix the problem of under-giving.

The first factor in identifying publics is problem recognition. Members of a target audience are not part of a solution if they do not recognize there is a problem. According to HMCPL's poll results, the foundation's audiences lacked problem recognition. As noted above, twice as many respondents were unaware of the organization as

those who were aware of it.

The second factor is constraint recognition. If the target audience believes obstacles are standing in their way, they will be less likely to act. In HMCPL's poll, most respondents did not know where to go to find information about the foundation. This was a serious concern, especially because HMCPL had spent a great deal of time and effort on a website that people clearly were not finding easily.

The final factor is level of involvement, which measures people's investment in a problem or organization. In short, the more involved people are already, the more active they will be in the future. HMCPL identified several groups that were already highly involved in foundation giving, such as an active foundation board, several regular donors, and attendees of its Vive le Livre fundraiser. However, HMCPL was also able to identify others who showed a lack of engagement, i.e., people who had heard of the foundation but were unsure what the foundation did or how it differed from the library.

The Most Effective Solution

Now armed with poll statistics, the HMCPL PR director moved to convince foundation stakeholders that the foundation's communication strategy needed to change. The foundation's existing strategy was publishing one formal position paper annually. It was published on the foundation website, where information-seeking active publics found it easily. However, the paper was virtually useless in converting latent and aware publics because, as the poll and anecdotal evidence proved, they were not as aware of the website's existence and thereby almost certain to miss any mention of the position paper. Latent and aware publics who did find it were also less likely to read all the way through. Something new was needed to capture the attention of patrons, current donors, and potential donors and connect them to the worthwhile cause in their own backyards.

Ultimately, HMCPL decided to concentrate on its latent and aware publics by creating a video that explained why it was important to give to the foundation. As with any communications endeavor, planning was key—especially an effort such as this, which would take limited foundation funds away from other library materials and programs.

The choice of video came down to this: If a picture is worth a thousand words, then video is worth a thousand pictures. In social media, for instance, one's attention is far more likely to be captured by images and streaming video than by text-only posts. HMCPL's poll revealed that respondents often were not aware that cardholders regularly benefitted from foundation-funded programs, materials, and initiatives. Research by major PR firms such as Edelman and See3 as well as the experiences of everyday content marketers shows the importance of video in strategic marketing campaigns (Kanter, 2014). In fact, according to the blog

of online advertising company Word-Stream (2017):

- Fifty-one percent of marketing professionals worldwide name video as the type of content with the best ROI.
- Video on a landing page can increase conversions by 80% or more.
- Viewers retain 95% of a message when they watch it in a video compared to 10% when reading it in text.
- Marketers who use video grow revenue 49% faster than non-video users.
- Fifty-nine percent of executives agree that if both text and video are available on the same topic, they are more likely to choose video.

Moreover, according to Beth Kanter (2014), a marketer with more than 30 years of nonprofit experience:

- Click-through rates increase 2 – 3 times when a video is included in an email. (Digital Sherpa)
- Companies using video require 37% fewer site visits before a person responds to a call to action. (Aberdeen Group and Brightcove)
- Videos reach a younger audience. According to a 2013 Com-Score study, 83% of 12 – 17 year olds and 91% of 18 – 24 year olds are watching online video on a regular basis.

To make the case for the video, these and other statistics were circulated by the PR director to HMCPL and foundation decision-makers along with ideas for how the video could be used, such as on the foundation's website, on social media, and in communications with potential donors ahead of solicitation visits. All agreed that the video should show, rather than merely tell, HMCPL audiences about the wonderful impact the library was having on its communities.

Creating a Video (Without Breaking Your Spirit)

Once decision-makers were on board, sorting out the logistics of creating a video was next. Budget was the biggest limiting factor. HMCPL contacted three local video production companies for estimates, hoping its status as a nonprofit and as a library might bring about a good deal. The quotes were reasonable and within industry standards for the area. In addition, the PR director also reached out to an old college friend, Brandon Marshall, who had his own video production company and asked for a quote and work samples. Marshall provided the quote with the lowest cost as well as impressive samples of his high-quality work.

That was how HMCPL came to hire Brandon Marshall of Reel Past Media in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. Although calling on old friends may not be a typical route for library marketers, personal networks can be valuable when looking for services and products.

Friends bring trustworthiness and like-ability, which are important for projects that could take weeks or months to complete.

Work on the video began right away, but not the actual filming. In the weeks leading up to Marshall's arrival, efforts focused on outlining an action plan that would support the goal of creating an awareness video for the foundation. This involved a lot of coordination: HMCPL's 13 branch managers needed to be informed of the project, and decisions needed to be made as to which foundation-supported programs would be highlighted. The PR director worked closely with the director of institutional advancement and the foundation chair to identify the best staff members to speak about the impact of the foundation's annual grants.

Because this was a "show, not tell" endeavor, the PR director also looked for patrons who could speak well on camera about how their lives had been impacted by foundation-funded library services. One of the library's goals was that the personal stories and expressions of the patrons would serve as genuine, compelling testimonials about the worth of the library, which could then be leveraged to convert non-donors into donors.

The video project was complex enough to require a dedicated team, and the PR director established a small committee. Its members clearly understood the foundation's mission and the aims of the video. They were HMCPL's PR director, the director of institutional advancement, the executive director and the foundation chairperson. The committee brainstormed and came up with a simple concept: an awareness video that showed what the foundation was and gave specific examples of how it supported the HMCPL system. The committee held a meeting with Marshall via Skype a week before his arrival to share ideas and hear his thoughts about what to expect. He answered the committee's questions fully, and all members came out of the meeting with more confidence in the project. The call was a crucial step in creating trust between the committee members and Marshall.

The committee decided that the video would have three parts: an introduction to the foundation and its mission, brief examples of the branch grants and resources that they funded, and a simple call to action to donate. The committee was aware that the examples section would be the most important and potentially the most persuasive part: It would show HMCPL patrons in action, benefitting from and enjoying programs and resources that were supported by the foundation. For this part, the committee chose to highlight HMCPL's summer reading program, the Digital Media Zone collection of Overdrive and other digital materials, its puppet shows, its teen ukulele and music program, the Ready Readers community outreach program, its homeschool science club, the BookMobile, and its senior services. Each of these programs was featured

in a short segment showing a diverse cross-section of HMCPL's service areas. The segments also illustrated how the library is a cornerstone of the community and is supported by the foundation's efforts.

Once these programs were identified, the committee worked on finding the right people to appear in the video. Staff who worked with the selected programs were asked to identify individuals who could speak clearly and passionately about them. Several librarians who had nurtured the programs from concept to fruition became enthusiastic and outspoken library advocates when they spoke about their programs; they were the clear choice for being on camera. Google calendar was an essential tool for scheduling all the interviews, travel times, and breaks involved in this process.

In the continued effort to show rather than tell, the committee ultimately ruled out written scripts and extensive voice-over narration. Initially, some committee members wanted to rely on a preapproved script, but this was a critical sticking point for the PR director. She was able to persuade them that one of the most effective ways to convert a latent or aware public into an active public is emotional appeal. She explained that having librarians and patrons read a script was more likely to remove the passion and emotion they brought to the video.

However, retaining control over the message was important. The PR di-

rector and her committee developed a set of open-ended questions for each segment that would prompt interviewees—the active librarians and invested patrons staff had chosen—to discuss particular aspects or impacts of the program they were to discuss. At each filming location, as Marshall was setting up lights and testing sound, the PR director engaged interviewees in light discussion to break the ice and describe how the interview would proceed. She explained that during the filming, she would ask interviewees prompting questions, but these would be edited out of the final video. For that reason, interviewees would need to restate the questions within their answers. The PR director also told interviewees that they would be able to film their segment multiple times; the camera would simply keep rolling. She assured them that the goal was to make them look and sound like the informed and passionate people they were, and any rough spots would be edited out.

"It's just like having a conversation with you!" said Elaine Leffel of Bailey Cove Public Library after she finished her filming. As the hours of raw video were reviewed, it was easy to see on interviewees' faces the moment when they finally relaxed into the process, when every ounce of fervor they held for their roles at the library shined through. This was the "show, don't tell" magic HMCPL was hoping for. Marshall then sorted through and whittled down hours of recordings, including shots of area landmarks to

help viewers identify the library as an integral part of Huntsville and Madison County. He ultimately put together a video slightly longer than six minutes that was engaging, beautiful and, the committee hoped, powerfully persuasive.

Rolling Out the Video

HMCPL came up with a strategic plan for rolling out the foundation video. Two weeks after the video's completion in November 2016, it premiered at the annual Vive le Livre gala, which was attended by HMCPL's most active audience. The attendees clearly already supported the foundation's efforts, but many of the 450 guests still remarked, "I didn't know they did that!"

Staff posted the video on the foundation's website, HMCPL's Vimeo channel, and both the foundation's and HMCPL's Facebook pages. The biweekly Check It Out! e-newsletter included a link to the foundation's "About Us" landing page, where readers could view the video and then explore the rest of the website for other foundation news. A majority of the e-newsletter recipients were latent and aware publics; HMCPL hoped this would encourage them to become active foundation supporters in the future.

For HMCPL's end-of-year giving campaign, staff separated the grant section of the video into eight 30-second segments. Each week in December, they sent an appeal e-mail using Constant Contact that highlighted a different segment. For example, the December 29 e-mail focused specifically on the BookMobile. At the top of the e-mail was the video followed by a short description and call to action with a donation-form link. This e-mail clearly had an impact: Following the mailing, a potential corporate sponsor reached out to HMCPL to ask about sponsoring the BookMobile; evidently, one of their employees had seen the e-mail and forwarded it to her supervisor. A former non-public suddenly became an aware public—and now held a distinct possibility of becoming an active public.

Bang for Your Buck

No campaign is complete until it is evaluated for success. Initial indicators showed several upticks in engagement immediately following the video's release. In addition to the contact from the potential BookMobile sponsor, the end-of-year e-mails with video highlights resulted in several donations. In addition, the foundation's Facebook page earned 73 new followers. The video had 141 views directly on Vimeo and additional views on the foundation's website and in e-mails.

The video's strategic plan called for full evaluation one year after the premier. As of this writing, however, less than a year has passed; staff are yet unable to make a conclusion about the video's overall effectiveness. However, an upward trend of website views, new donations, increased attendance at foundation functions, and rising positive sentiment echoed in comment

cards and on the various foundation and library social media sites indicate success well worth the $3,000 cost to produce the video. In fact, the videographer himself became an active public after completing the awareness video by donating $500 of his payment to the Ready Readers program. HMCPL went on to produce three additional videos with him for its capital campaigns shortly thereafter.

Instead of hearing people say, "I didn't know they did that!" HMCPL now hears, "I'm so glad you do that. How can I help?" The video shows HMCPL's community the value of supporting the library and is an instrumental tool in fostering new library advocates.

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