
Content that converts: How to co-create powerful video stories that keep audiences engaged all year long

Received (in revised form) 18th August, 2021



Michael Hoffman

CEO, Gather Voices, USA

Michael Hoffman is the co-founder and CEO of Gather Voices, a technology company that automates the creation, management and publishing of video content. He is also the founder of See3 Communications, a digital marketing agency in Chicago and founder of the DoGooder Video Awards which honours the best social cause video on YouTube each year. Hoffman has been an advisor to association and non-profit leaders for more than a decade and teaches marketing at the University of Chicago. He is an internationally sought-after speaker and trainer.

4245 Knox Avenue, Chicago, IL 60641, USA

E-mail: michael@gathervoices.co

Abstract At a time when trust in brands and institutions is low, the growing preference for content that is authentic, passion-driven and human-centric is accelerating. It is no longer enough to simply create and curate high-quality content consistently. To cut through the noise in the crowded digital landscape, organisations must find ways to invite the community to join in the conversation. People demand to be active participants in organisations' content, not passive consumers of it. User-generated video offers a powerful means for organisations to achieve these goals. By collaborating with the real people at the heart of its mission to produce authentic user-generated video content, an organisation delivers content that people actually want to engage with. This paper examines how: 1) communication preferences and digital marketing trends are reshaping the future of community engagement, 2) to use the Hero's Journey framework to tell video stories that resonate and drive real results and 3) simple steps to get started with user-generated video.

KEYWORDS: video marketing, user-generated video, user-generated content, engagement, authenticity, content marketing, content co-creation

INTRODUCTION: CONTENT THAT CONVERTS

Creating content is an essential part of the marketer's efforts. It is not simply another thing on the to-do list, another metric to check off, another thing to claim. It is an incredibly important thing, especially when it is relevant to consumers and when it is timed well. The right content, seen at the

right time, can drive leads and convert prospects into customers.

Content is not just a collection of words or visuals, strung together in the hopes that someone, somewhere will appreciate it. Content can enable an organisation to tell its stories, influence its community and demonstrate that a product or service is worth investing in.

But, not all content is created equal. At a time when trust in institutions is low, organisations cannot simply publish content and hope that people engage with it. Instead, innovative organisations are approaching content differently, inviting the audiences to join in the conversation. Instead of talking *to* the audience, strategic organisations use content to enter into authentic conversations with their audience.

And, when it comes to communicating with an audience, video is becoming the preferred method. Some 87 per cent of businesses say they use video as part of their marketing strategy.¹

That is not to say that every organisation should forsake text-based campaigns. Doing so would be foolish, as text remains a powerful medium. However, relying solely on text is no longer an option, as more and more marketers turn to video.

But it is not enough just to produce more video content. Organisations must incorporate more authentic user-generated video content into their marketing and engagement strategies. Without real video content from real people, not only will the organisation fall behind the competition, it will lose a powerful mode of connecting, meaningfully, with its audience. The video revolution is here.

DIGITAL MARKETING TRENDS THAT ARE SHAPING THE FUTURE OF ENGAGEMENT

The history of the phrase ‘content is king’² might be surprising. It comes from Bill Gates, who wrote about the phenomenon in a 1996 essay. Though it was written in a different Internet era, the ideas are still relevant today. Gates wrote about how online content can engage in ways that traditional media cannot. Gates said that people ‘need an opportunity for personal involvement that goes far beyond that offered through the letters-to-the-editor pages of print magazines’. And, in particular, it is important

to notice this sentence: ‘No company is too small to participate’.

Content marketing has consistently proven to be an effective and efficient way of attracting and converting leads. Content marketing generates more than three times as many leads as traditional, outbound marketing and costs 62 per cent less.³

For the purposes of this article, it is important to define content marketing. According to the Content Marketing Institute, content marketing is a ‘strategic marketing approach focused on creating and distributing valuable relevant and consistent content to attract and retain a clearly-defined audience — and ultimately, to drive profitable customer action’.⁴

But which content to use? There are so many forms. The word content encompasses it all, from blogs to tweets, essays to Instagram lives, LinkedIn posts to webinars, infographics to speeches.

Video content, and especially user-generated video content, is an effective channel for achieving business goals and serving customer relationships.

That is because people want to support real people. Seventy-six per cent of people say they are more likely to trust content from ‘normal people’ than from brands.⁵ Consider customer testimonials. Fifty-six per cent of consumers find customer testimonials helpful in their purchasing decision.⁶ Watching a real customer explain why they love a product or organisation is invaluable. It gives prospects the ability to see the emotions behind a purchase: the why as opposed to the what.

Organisations that use human-centric video stories build stronger communities and achieve results faster. And video content is not just for marketing departments. Teams across the organisation are using video to achieve results like:

- Groundwork Ohio delivered 30 per cent more unique page views, exceeded its applications goal by 11 per cent, and drove a 17 per cent increase in applications

from diverse applicants,⁷ by incorporating authentic video testimonials from past fellows into its e-mail, website and social channels.

- The American Society of Transplant Surgeons (ASTS) drove a 320 per cent higher click-through rate in its event invitation e-mail and a 6 per cent increase in attendance simply by including an authentic video from the chair of the event planning committee.⁸

What these examples show is that it is no longer enough to just *create* good content. It is no longer enough to even simply *curate* great content. To truly stand out, organisations need to partner with and engage community members, transforming people from passive consumers of content into content co-creators and collaborators.⁹

Content co-creation is, at the core, a way to translate passion into profit. It is a way to collaborate with the real people that make up a community to produce something better than what a copywriter could write alone. It is a way to lift up the voices of the people at the heart of the organisation's mission. It is a way to create stronger, more loyal communities. Not only is this an effective strategy to bring in new business, but it is also critical to building stronger, more loyal communities.

Co-creating content does not depend on large budgets. It can, however, be difficult, without the right knowledge and tools. In this article, we will explore a powerful framework for collaborating with your community to produce engaging video content and share the simple steps needed to get started.

A FRAMEWORK FOR POWERFUL AND ENGAGING VIDEO STORIES

It is not enough to simply publish more video content. Organisations need to publish more of the right video content. What is the right video content? It is real people sharing their real ideas, insights and stories. When

an organisation makes its staff, volunteers, customers, members and donors the heroes of the organisation's story, powerful, high-converting content is the result.

Heroes have a long lineage in literature and storytelling. Indeed, Joseph Campbell's theory of a Monomyth describes the typical hero's journey.¹⁰ This storytelling framework is incredibly powerful. Some of history's great epics, from the Ramayana or Yamato, have followed this framework. This framework — a hero, with the help of others, does something fantastic to change the world and themselves — is enthralling, because at its core, it is the journey of someone doing something great, despite the challenges.

One of the key parts of the monomyth is the idea of the helper. The helper is the protective figure, the mentor, the one who encourages the hero to recognise that they are, in fact, a hero. The mentor enables the hero to write their story.

Often times, an organisation casts itself as the hero of its story. In this type of content, the organisation does the work and the customer helps. But this is misguided. In reality, the customer (or the member, or the donor, or the employee, or the supporter) is the hero. The organisation is just the mentor.

An organisation whose content follows the hero's journey framework instead says to its customers: 'You have the power to make a change and I'm going to show you how'. The best way for an organisation to make its community members the hero of its content is by letting the community members tell their own stories.

Organisations' community members regularly follow the path of the hero's journey framework. People set out on a journey, whether it is purchasing a new product, experiencing a service or joining a membership organisation. Many organisations tend to centre themselves (or people with close ties to their organisation, like paid influencers) when telling their stories. Instead, organisations should think of themselves as mentors and facilitators.

To tell engaging video stories that resonate, the member, customer or volunteer needs to be the hero. Real people are the ones making the ultimate difference in an organisation.

Consider the National Association of College Auxiliary Services (NACAS). The organisation made its award recipients the heroes of its recognition campaign. With user-generated video content, award recipients shared authentic video stories about their work with the association. The award recipients' voices were front and centre. The approach resonated with the community, with the award videos generating 80 per cent more engagement on social media than their previous campaigns without video.¹¹ That is the power of authentic user-generated video.

The hero's journey resonates for a reason — it is relatable. People are heroes of their own stories, going on adventures, undergoing trials and tribulations, receiving feedback and guidance from mentors and hoping to find a community to share those stories with. When an organisation empowers the members of their communities to be the heroes of its stories, the resulting content is more authentic and passionate.

And when it comes to video, authenticity and passion are paramount. When choosing what type of video to watch, content that relates to peoples' passions is 1.6x more important than whether video production value is high.¹² There is a time and a place for traditional video production and heavily polished content. But, the production value is not more important than authenticity. When an organisation collaborates on video content with real heroes — not paid promoters — who are passionate about their product or service, it creates compelling content that people actually want to consume.

The Society of Interventional Radiology (SIR) put these ideas into practice for the launch of its SIR Guidelines Mobile App. Rather than asking the marketing team to write promotional copy to support the app,

SIR lifted up the voices of the volunteer developers who built the app. The developers co-created video content with SIR in just a matter of hours. And the content resonated, delivering 220 per cent more engagement¹³ on social media and above-average e-mail click-rates.

Time and again, the research supports this. People find user-generated content 9.8 times more impactful than influencer content.¹⁴ Beyond that, 79 per cent of people say that user-generated content impacts their purchasing decisions.¹⁵ When implementing user-generated content on webpages, brands saw an uptick in conversion rate, in some cases reaching over 50 per cent.¹⁶

HOW TO GET STARTED CO-CREATING POWERFUL VIDEO STORIES TO KEEP YOUR AUDIENCE ENGAGED

Video has traditionally been seen as difficult, expensive and slow. Fortunately, organisations that take a human-centric approach to video content are able to scale video marketing efforts in an efficient and simple manner. Collaborating with community members to generate authentic, personalised content is increasingly simple, thanks to advancing technologies and innovative software solutions.

To get started, organisations need to evaluate their strategic initiatives and look for opportunities to incorporate authentic user-generated video content. Outline the specific objectives for videos supporting a campaign and define upfront how the results will be measured. This foundational step is critical for success with video.

From there, identify the people that are best suited to become content co-creators. Think about the people whose stories, insights and perspectives will add the most value to your campaign. Remember, representation matters. Make sure the video collaborators look like the target audience of the campaign. Consider the following questions:

- Who are the people most impacted by the campaign?
- Who are the people with an active voice in the industry you serve?
- Who are the people that love sharing their stories?
- Who are the people who drive the conversation forward?
- Who are the people whose voices are too often left out of the conversation?

Anyone can be a content co-creator. Smartphones, tablets and computers have exceptional video recording capabilities. And, with user-generated content, there is no need to send camera crews across the country to capture videos. Instead, people can use the tools they have at home to record videos anytime, anywhere. This enables organisations to give more people a voice in the conversation.

When inviting people to record user-generated videos, direct, personalised outreach to invite works well. And, when possible, organisations should include the request for video content directly into the workflows the contributors already follow.

For example, organisations who are putting out a call for speaker submissions for an event should consider requesting a simple video promoting their session pitch part of the speaker application process. Trade associations should request testimonial videos during the membership renewal process. Non-profit organisations should ask peer-to-peer fundraisers to create a video about why they support the cause during the registration process.

After inviting content collaborators to create videos, organisations need to offer simple guidance to ensure the video content tells the right story. Clearly articulate the goals of the video campaign, including where and when the video content will be published and the initiative it will support.

Offer simple talking points rather than a rigid script. Remember: authenticity and passion are critical for high-quality content.

It is obvious when a video is heavily scripted. High-level talking points empower content collaborators to share perspectives in their own authentic voice.

And while the production value is increasingly less important than authenticity, organisations can ensure the user-generated video content is high-quality by offering simple coaching for video contributors. Remind collaborators about the importance of quality lighting, sound and framing.

Once the video content is gathered, some simple video editing — nothing requiring professional video editing expertise — can take user-generated videos from good to great. Thanks to innovative technologies and software solutions, it is becoming increasingly simple for professionals with varying backgrounds to publish high-quality videos.

Captions and transcripts are one of the most important edits that user-generated video needs. For one, captions vastly improve search engine optimisation. When Discovery Digital Networks added captions to their videos, they saw an increase of 7.32 per cent in total views.¹⁷ And a study by Liveclicker compared 37 web pages that added transcripts against those that did not. The ones with transcripts saw an average of 16 per cent more revenue, because of the increase in search-based traffic.¹⁸

Secondly, the vast majority of mobile videos are watched without audio. According to a study by Verizon, 69 per cent of consumers view video with the sound off. Further, the study found that 80 per cent of consumers are more likely to watch a whole video when there are captions.¹⁹ Adding captions means more potential customers will watch the whole of the video.

Thirdly, captions are critical for accessibility. In this context, accessibility means making videos accessible to people with disabilities, including those who are hearing impaired. Captions enable web content that meets the standards of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Further, adding multilingual captions is a great way to increase the reach of a video. It

optimises search results in languages besides English and allows for a wider range of humanity to view the content. Not only does it lead to a huge boost in views, but it also increases the market of potential customers. Easily available software programmes to translate from English to a variety of languages makes this a simple process.

Beyond captions, there are not many more requirements for producing a high-quality user-generated video to use across digital marketing channels. Simple, raw footage has the potential to drive amazing results. With minor additions, such as trimming out unnecessary clips, incorporating the organisation's colours, logo and branding, and adding open and end cards to introduce the theme of the content, it is more than enough to polish user-generated video content for publication.

CONCLUSION: LEVERAGING THE POWER OF VIDEO

Video is powerful. It is emotional. It is engaging. It is authentic. It provides a way of connection that simply cannot be replicated in text. It is a unique driver of engagement, leads, and results. It has the power to move people.

Creating and producing co-created videos allows donors and consumers to become the hero of the story. By flipping the storytelling framework so that the organisation is the helper, the facilitator, the mentor and the encourager, it allows the voices of those making the biggest impact — the members of the organisation's community — to be front and centre.

This strategy empowers organisations to produce content that is more authentic. Powerful video begets powerful video, enabling more conversions, higher engagement and increased revenue, along with powerful use-cases to share with prospective users.

Every organisation wants to include video in its marketing strategy. Too many

organisations, unfortunately, either do not have a concrete video strategy or miscast the organisation as the starring figure.

The key is to understand how to implement video in everything an organisation does and shine the spotlight on the ones doing the hard work. When organisations are intentional about video content and raise up the voices of the real heroes of the story — the community — the results speak for themselves.

References

1. Wyzowl (2021) 'Video Marketing Statistics 2021', available at: <https://www.wyzowl.com/video-marketing-statistics/> (accessed 7th August, 2021).
2. Medium (2017) "'Content is King"—Essay by Bill Gates 1996,' available at: <https://medium.com/@HeathEvans/cecontent-is-king-essay-by-bill-gates-1996-df74552f80d9> (accessed 24th June, 2021).
3. Content Marketing Institute (2017) '9 stats that will make you want to invest in content marketing', available at: <https://contentmarketinginstitute.com/2017/10/stats-invest-content-marketing/> (accessed 24th June, 2021).
4. Content Marketing Institute (2021) 'What is content marketing?', available at: <https://contentmarketinginstitute.com/what-is-content-marketing/> (accessed 7th August, 2021).
5. Adweek (2017) 'Infographic: how millennials and baby boomers consume user-generated content', available at: <https://www.adweek.com/brand-marketing/infographic-how-millennials-and-baby-boomers-consume-user-generated-content-175307/> (accessed 24th June, 2021).
6. Ibid.
7. Gather Voices (2021) 'Groundwork Ohio engaged high-quality applicants with GatherVoices', available at: <https://www.gathervoices.co/case-study/groundwork-ohio> (accessed 24th June, 2021).
8. Gather Voices (2021) 'ASTS drove a 320% higher click-through rate using video in their event emails', available at: <https://www.gathervoices.co/case-study/asts> (accessed 24th June, 2021).
9. Think with Google (2019) 'Quality is in the eye of the beholder: new research on what viewers love', available at: <https://www.thinkwithgoogle.com/marketing-strategies/video/video-production-quality/> (accessed 24th June, 2021).
10. Berkeley ORIAS (2019) 'Monomyth: Hero's Journey Project,' available at: <https://orias.berkeley.edu/resources-teachers/monomyth-heros-journey-project> (accessed 24th June, 2021).
11. Gather Voices (2021) 'NACAS exceeded their event goals with video relationship management software', available at: <https://www.gathervoices.co/case-study/national-association-of-college-auxiliary-services> (accessed 24th June, 2021).

12. *Ibid.*, ref. 9 above.
13. GatherVoices (2021) 'SIR drove 2.2X more social media engagement for their mobile app launch', available at: <https://www.gathervoices.co/case-study/society-of-interventional-radiology-sir> (accessed 24th June, 2021).
14. Stackla (2019) 'Bridging the gap: consumer & marketing perspectives on content in the digital age', available at: <https://stackla.com/resources/reports/bridging-the-gap-consumer-marketing-perspectives-on-content-in-the-digital-age/> (accessed 24th June, 2021).
15. *Ibid.*
16. TINT (2019) 'Our year of innovation in review: 2019 tinted', available at: <https://www.tintup.com/blog/year-innovation-review-2019/> (accessed 24th June, 2021).
17. 3PlayMedia (2019) '3 reasons captions increase YouTube views', available at: <https://www.3playmedia.com/blog/3-reasons-captions-increase-youtube-views/> (accessed 24th June, 2021).
18. 3Play Media (2018) '7 ways captions and transcripts improve video SEO', available at: <https://www.3play-media.com/blog/7-ways-video-transcripts-captions-improve-seo/> (accessed 24th June, 2021).
19. Verizon Media (2019) 'Break the Sound barrier with digital video captioning', available at: <https://www.verizonmedia.com/insights/break-sound-barrier-with-digital-video-captioning> (accessed 24th June, 2021).