Few other communication forms have the power to reveal a unique perspective, capture imagination and even motivate change. In this three-part series, you’ll discover how you can move your story from dream to distribution.
Walk onto the working set of any television production studio and almost every person on the crew has a documentary they are just posting, getting ready to shoot, or trying to fund.

**Why?** Because everyone from the Director of Photography to the Key Grip has a story to tell, they feel compelled to share their stories with a larger audience. True, the percentage of would be documentary filmmakers is potentially greater within the film/television community than among antique car salesmen, but there are many people from all walks of life who want to share their story or a significant piece of history through documentary filmmaking.

In today's world dominated by high tech gizmos and reality TV, documentaries have never been more popular and the equipment to shoot and edit them more accessible and inexpensive.

Is Your Story Compelling?

The founder of our agency and I were approached one day by a reasonably well-known and respected individual in our community. He wanted to pitch a documentary idea to us for possible production by our company. The man went on to explain that although he still seemed to exist as a “regular” guy in our community, since his divorce he had lost everything and was living between his car and an abandoned building. We asked many questions, but despite his having managed to hide his status from the rest of the community, there just wasn’t a strong enough plot line to hang a documentary on. We felt horrible for the guy but there was no universal truth, no significant lesson to be learned that we felt warranted filming a documentary.

Two months later a woman named Patti Miller came to my office and described how 40 years ago as a Drake University junior, she had traveled to Mississippi to participate in the Freedom Summer, in order to help African Americans sign up to vote. Patti, “a lily-white Iowa girl” was fundamentally affected by her experience, an experience shared by others who had participated. She pointed out that the fortieth anniversary of Freedom Summer was approaching and many of the volunteers were now in their fifties and sixties. Patti’s story was a part of history that could easily start to slip away and the 40-year anniversary presented a seminal opportunity to share the story. The story moved me, and my crew and I headed to the South to start filming. Patti’s story had universal appeal and importance. We decided that we would tell this story of national racism, politically controlled hatred, and the individuals who fought oppression, through the very personal eyes of one Iowa undergraduate female, alone and out of her home state, for the first time in her life.
Tell Me a Story

What's your story? Is it universally applicable? Is it simply a slice of life anecdote, but very funny or very profound? Would someone who doesn't know you care or benefit from becoming aware of your story? Is it a scholarly piece addressing an issue or topic discovered through research and others should be made aware of? Could others benefit by seeing the world through your eyes, watching you follow a particular person or group of people around as they do what they do? If you can find a way to turn your personal experience into a universally shared or recognized experience, you have the foundation for building a documentary. At this point, identify your eventual audience and keep them in mind as your documentary morphs toward its final form.

Putting it Together, Bit by Bit

So, you've got your story, now what? Old fashioned as it may seem, try to get all the elements of your story written down in simple outline form using 3x5 index cards. Keep it loose, put each element on one 3x5 card so you can shuffled and re-shuffled them. Lay your story out and look at it. Examine all your possible elements. (Of course, you can do this with a computer too, but the index cards work well for sorting out thoughts and ideas.)

If you have old 8mm film from your youth, log it and list it as an element. Do you have old photos or access to old newspaper articles? Who are the people you want to interview and what subject matter will they cover? Record every element and every topic on a card and separate the cards with only one topic or element per card. Lay them out in an order that makes sense to you and use this to create your first outline. Keep these cards! You will use them over and over again.
Dramatic Structure

Every story needs three things, a beginning, middle, and end. You must define where these points exist in your story. Does your story have a great hook that will involve the audience from the outset and hold them? Is it most effective when told chronologically or should it jump around in time? Will your story be narrated, will you write the narration, or will the subjects you interview tell the entire story in their own words? Will it be a combination? You must discover what is most dramatic and engaging about your story and tell it in a way that highlights those points.

Tone and Treatment

How do you want your story heard? Do you want to create a formal documentary with voice-over narration and drops to interviews and B-roll, or do you want to do a cinema vérité piece where the camera seems to just exist as it captures everything around it? Many documentaries these days have the raw reality look of the “Cops” TV show with hand-held cameras loosely carried on shoulders. Other documentaries use guerilla tactics; they surprise people by simply shoving a microphone in their face.

Michael Moore is famous for this.
An Emotional Center
Regardless of your choice of treatment or subject matter, almost every documentary needs an emotional center. The audience needs someone or a group of “someones” to care about. A message or idea is not enough. The characters in your documentary will carry your plotline as strongly as your storyline. Very few documentaries based solely on intellectualism succeed. Give your documentary some heart and some emotion.

Formulating a Plan
As soon as you have determined the structure and treatment of your documentary, you are ready to take your outline and create a projected timeline and budget. In order to create a budget you must decide the format in which you want to shoot your project. Will you shoot film or video? What type? How often will you need sound? Will you be lighting with instruments or will you be shooting in available light? How many days and in how many locations will you need to shoot? How big of a crew and how much equipment will you need? How long and with what means will you edit?

After you answer these questions, you will be in the best position to get close to a bid for creating your project.
Go Find Some Funding

Collect your outline, timeline, bid and distribution plan (distribution will be fully covered in part three of this series but it must be fully fleshed out in your pre-production planning if you wish to raise funds from someone other than your parents or credit cards). Create a printed proposal using these elements to pass for your fund-raising efforts to support your project. **Documentary film budgets can run the gamut from low-budget to multi-million dollar ventures, but many make it on a very limited amount of hard capital.** Documentary filmmakers as a group are notoriously successful at getting “sweat equity” from people who volunteer their equipment and their expertise for a stock in the project. There will always be some hard costs though, and if you are not in a position to cover them yourself you should see an attorney and get help setting up a simple system that will enable you to accept funds on behalf of your not for profit project. Some filmmakers seek financial support by asking existing non-profit organizations to sponsor their project, then take in the funds, and allocate them back to the filmmaker.
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