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MORE NOISE ISN'T THE ANSWER.

What 26 years in music and making commercials have taught me about marketing, creativity and what matters.



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Before We Begin

I could begin this book with a list of names. I've worked on projects for companies like Staples and Ford Motor Company, been involved in major international campaigns, and worked with advertising agencies and through our own agency on productions with substantial budgets. A few of those campaigns had budgets over $1.5 million. I'm proud of that work. I also know exactly what mentioning recognizable brands does for a filmmaker's credibility. There is a reason people put those names on their websites. I've done it myself.

I live in Ladner, a community in Delta, just south of Vancouver. My wife April runs Simply Estate Services and is president of the Ladner Business Association. We both know plenty of people who have to make decisions about spending money without the luxury of a large department to absorb the consequences. A five-thousand-dollar mistake can matter considerably more to one of them than a much larger mistake does to a company with a million-dollar advertising budget. I have been self-employed my whole working life. I know how much thought can go into a cheque before you write it, and how quickly you can discover what else that money was needed for.

If the most useful thing you learn from a big campaign is that remarkable things are possible with a million dollars and a large team of professionals, I suspect you already knew that. Most of the stories here come from a recording studio, a local Chamber of Commerce, a small business, a community organization or a commercial that never had a large budget. The size of the job doesn't tell you whether the idea was any good. Neither does the reputation of the company paying for it.

I enjoy making things look and sound beautiful. After years recording music and then moving into film, I'd be in the wrong business if I didn't. I have also watched people put a great deal of money into beautiful things nobody knew how to use, and worked on projects that received all kinds of attention without accomplishing what I'd expected. Some of those projects were my own. That's an educational experience when you're the one paying for it.

You don't need a camera crew to apply much of what I've learned. You can ask better questions, write a clearer proposal, have a more useful conversation or make something with an iPhone. Sometimes the best decision will be not to produce anything. I say that as someone who owns an unreasonable amount of camera equipment and can usually find a reason for wanting more. The equipment is easier to explain than the need for another piece of it.

I would like the ideas in this book to be useful even if you never hire me. Of course, publishing a free book about marketing restraint on the website of a company that makes commercials is also marketing. I realize the irony. I'd still like it to be worth your time.

CHAPTER 01

What Happens If We Do Nothing?

April has decided that Simply Estate Services will not advertise on the sides of its vehicles. For someone married to a commercial filmmaker, that probably sounds like an awkward position to take. A truck is a useful advertising surface. You pay to wrap it, drive around town and let the business advertise itself while you're doing work you would have done anyway. If the phone rings as a result, everybody is pleased. I have spent a large part of my career helping people get noticed, so I understand the argument well.

Her team goes into homes after someone has passed away or moved into care. Some houses have been unattended for a while. Others are filled with possessions that mean a great deal to the people involved, even when nobody has the space or the strength to deal with them. April doesn't want a truck parked in front announcing to the neighbourhood that an estate is being cleared or a property might be empty. Families have enough to consider without becoming the subject of somebody else's observations over the hedge. I've suggested many things to April over the years. I have not tried very hard to win this argument, because she is right.

Now put the same wrap on a plumber's truck. A neighbour learns that someone had a problem with a pipe, which is not usually the beginning of a great neighbourhood mystery. The wrap makes good sense. One decision is about advertising, the other about the people who would have to live with the advertising. Those can point in different directions.

The part I find interesting is how quickly a conversation about marketing moves toward a proposed object. We need a new website. We need to be on Instagram more often. We need another truck. We need a commercial. These may all be good ideas. The trouble begins when they've become the answer before anyone is quite sure what the question was.

I remember talking with business owners who were convinced they needed more awareness. Sometimes they did. More often I wanted to know what was happening with the people who already knew about them. Were inquiries coming in? Were those people the right customers? Did they receive a quotation promptly? Could the owner explain why someone who seemed interested never went ahead? A company with a good reputation and room for more work has a very different problem from a company that leaves customers waiting a week for a reply. If you tell both to advertise more, one may be grateful and the other may become more efficiently disappointing.

Picture a manufacturer making specialized equipment. The owner is proud of the workmanship, and I can understand why. Competitors advertise everywhere, so the owner decides a campaign would help people see how good the business is. Before ordering the campaign, imagine someone follows a few inquiries through the office. A customer asks for a quotation, a busy employee puts it aside, the price takes a week to prepare, and by the time it arrives the customer has made another arrangement. The problem isn't that nobody knows the manufacturer exists. The problem is what happens once somebody does.

Now spend $25,000 showing more people the manufacturer. You may create an excellent campaign that brings far more inquiries through the door. All you've really bought is a larger queue of people waiting for late quotations. The customer has a stronger impression of the company,

though not the one anybody was hoping for. Fixing the quotation process before spending the advertising money wouldn't be very photogenic. Nobody has ever asked me to film a particularly moving montage of an efficiently organized inbox. That doesn't mean it couldn't be the more valuable investment.

It works in the opposite direction as well. Suppose the same manufacturer replies promptly, delivers what it promises and has room in the schedule, but its ideal customers have never heard of it. Now visibility genuinely is the missing piece. A website that explains the work or a campaign aimed at the industries that need the equipment may make an important difference. The distinction isn't whether marketing is good or bad. It's whether the business has something useful for the attention to do when it arrives.

I care about that distinction because I know what a small investment costs in real terms. I've sat across from people weighing a project that will use money they might otherwise put toward another employee, a repair to the building or a week of breathing room. I want my own work to be seen, of course. I want people to enjoy it and remember it. I also want the person paying for it to have a good reason to be doing so. I've been the fellow who thought a successful publicity campaign was about to make the calendar very busy, and I know how that can turn out.

There are less obvious reasons for making something, and they deserve respect. An organization may want families to understand that help exists long before they need it. A business may need to explain a difficult service so staff aren't having the same conversation from the beginning every day. A company may want to celebrate people who have given it years of their lives. Those things can matter even when nobody calls to place an order on Monday morning. The question is still what the work is

supposed to do and who, specifically, will be better served because it exists.

I don't always get to that question as quickly as I should. I'm a filmmaker. I see a setting and begin thinking about the light, where the camera could move and what a voice might say. Sometimes I have a whole opening in my head while the other person is still telling me what the business does. Experience helps me recognize when I ought to stop doing that. We can talk about the opening shot after we've agreed what would happen if we didn't make anything at all.

CHAPTER 02

The Calendar Wasn't Impressed

I spent twenty-six years in the recording business, much of it building and running Vogville Recording. I worked with some remarkable musicians, made records I was proud of, and learned that having a well-equipped studio and knowing what to do with it were only part of running a successful business. You also needed people to book the place, which was a less romantic part of the music industry but one that tended to matter around the end of the month.

I wanted Vogville to be more than a studio where musicians arrived, made a record and went home. I liked being involved in their careers, helping them think about how they presented themselves and finding opportunities that could take them further. A band could make a terrific record and still have nobody interested in hearing it. I understood that problem as a producer, and it mattered to me because their success and mine were connected.

In 2011 I created the Vogville Day & Night Festival. We had twelve bands at the Vancouver Alpen Club, and the whole thing was a considerable undertaking. Organizing a music festival is one of those ideas that becomes less relaxing the closer you get to the day. There are musicians, schedules, equipment, people to coordinate and bills that don't disappear because you've had an interesting creative idea.

It was a success. The festival broke even in its first year. The Vancouver Sun and the Georgia Straight covered it, and my story about the festival ran across the country in the National Post. I appeared on television, in

magazines and on the front pages of newspapers. Vancouver Magazine later published a profile of me and the studio. These weren't a few nice mentions in the local community newsletter. We'd created something substantial, and people were paying attention.

I was pleased. Beyond the festival itself, I thought the attention would establish me as someone who knew what he was doing in the music industry. I wanted musicians to look at Vogville and see more than microphones and recording equipment. I wanted them to see someone connected to the industry, somebody who could help them make a good record and perhaps take their careers somewhere. If you become recognized as an authority in your field, people start coming to you with opportunities instead of requiring you to chase every one of them. That's what I hoped would happen.

Then I looked at the recording calendar.

There had been television appearances, newspaper articles, conversations with people congratulating me, and the general satisfaction of having pulled off something worthwhile. What hadn't appeared was the rush of new studio bookings I'd imagined. The calendar was considerably less impressed with my achievements than the people congratulating me.

I suppose I had confused being talked about with being hired.

By then I was also making Vogville Presents, a television series about musicians, their lives and what it took to pursue a career in music. The stranger part came when musicians began treating the festival and the show as things they were entitled to participate in. An artist might want to record an album at Vogville and then ask whether they could appear on the show. I'd explain that the artists had already been chosen for the

year. Sometimes the response amounted to, "Screw you. I'm not on your show, I'm not booking your studio."

Bands that hadn't been included in the festival could be furious as well. You could only include so many people, which seemed like a fairly obvious limitation when I was organizing the event. It was apparently less obvious when somebody believed their band deserved one of those places. I had tried to create opportunities for musicians and found myself offending musicians because I hadn't created enough opportunities for everyone.

There was still a lot that I loved about making the show. I was paying to produce it myself. I hired Gene Greenwood to film it, and part of our arrangement was that he would teach me how to film. Gene was still learning too. He was a little further along than I was, which at that point didn't require a tremendous amount of experience. I was discovering that hiring somebody who could operate a camera didn't automatically make me a director. Someone had to understand the story, work out what to ask, decide what mattered and make the whole thing come together.

I bought my first camera and began learning.

Around that time I was recording a band whose sound reminded me of Green Day. They were older than many of the musicians trying to get noticed, and they had decided to go to South by Southwest in Austin, Texas. They hoped someone there would discover them and give them an opportunity to take their careers beyond what I could offer.

I'd owned my camera for about two weeks when I suggested making a documentary of the trip.

I had very little idea what I was doing, which didn't seem like a good reason not to do it. I booked flights, took the camera and went along to document the experience.

Almost everything that could go wrong appeared interested in taking part.

One of the guitars didn't arrive at the airport. We were stuck waiting to find out what had happened to it until the call came that it had been found. At the border, one of the musicians discovered he'd lost his passport somewhere inside the van. Everything had to be pulled apart until we found it. Another member was in the process of leaving the band, which created its own difficulties. After one of the shows he disappeared and stopped answering his phone, even though there were more performances to play. He eventually turned up again.

I had gone to document musicians pursuing a career opportunity. For a while I would have been pleased to have everyone arrive in the same place with their instruments and identification.

Then there was the camera.

I found a setting that said black and white and thought it looked terrific. It made everything seem more dramatic, and I was pleased with myself for discovering it. What I hadn't worked out was that the setting stayed on. About half the documentary ended up in black and white, and by extraordinary luck it was the half containing much of the trouble.

Had I known what I was doing, I might have taken credit for making an artistic decision. In reality, I'd found a button and hadn't figured out how to reverse the consequences.

We released the documentary at a movie theatre in Vancouver. I turned it into an unusually long Vogville Presents episode, about an hour, and people loved it. It received press, and someone even recognized me while I was in a liquor store because I'd appeared in the film. At one point the camera had been turned toward me and I'd said I wasn't sure the band would make it. They were older, their sound was reminiscent of Green Day and the odds were against them. But they were trying, and I respected that.

I enjoyed making the documentary immensely. I was learning to direct, learning what a scene needed and discovering that the most interesting part of a story often wasn't what the person involved had expected to happen.

There was one persistent problem. Vogville Presents was still costing me money.

I had been self-funding the television show, and the recognition wasn't bringing enough recording work into Vogville to justify continuing indefinitely. My publicist and I developed sponsorship packages and approached people who might see value in helping fund it. Eventually I arranged a meeting with a lawyer.

I went to his office and sat down to explain the opportunity. The show had reached viewers across Canada, and I thought having his firm involved as a credited sponsor could be useful for everyone.

"What's it about again?" he asked.

That wasn't especially encouraging, considering the material had been sent beforehand. I explained that it was about the real stories behind musicians, their lives and what it took to build a career in an industry where talent was only part of the struggle.

"Oh, so it's about music. My brother was a musician. Then he grew up and got a real job."

I felt completely deflated.

I'd spent years in the music industry. I'd built a respected recording studio, worked with serious musicians, organized a nationally recognized festival and created a television program. Sitting there, I felt as though all of it had been reduced to a bunch of teenagers playing in a sandbox. That's nice. Good for you.

What really got to me was how easily he dismissed it. He hadn't needed to understand any of the work, the responsibility, the money or the people involved. He already had an opinion about musicians, and apparently that was enough.

I walked away feeling demeaned. It wasn't that he didn't want to sponsor the show. People turn down sponsorship proposals all the time. He had managed to make the entire career I'd built sound like something I ought to have grown out of.

By then I had already been wrestling with the bigger question of what Vogville Presents was accomplishing. There was genuine success in it. The artists had an audience, the show had reached people across Canada, and I had learned an enormous amount. Yet the commercial reason I'd originally created it wasn't working. The studio hadn't filled with bookings. Some artists had become resentful because they weren't featured. I was paying to continue making a show that wasn't producing the business benefit I'd expected.

It wasn't the lawyer's job to decide whether the show mattered. Unfortunately, he had made it painfully clear that I needed to make a decision about whether I was going to keep financing it.

I could have continued. I'd already invested years of my time, plenty of money and a great deal of myself in the whole undertaking. It would have been easy to tell myself that another season, another sponsor or another round of publicity might finally make everything fall into place.

But I had to assess it for what it was, not what I kept hoping it would become.

I eventually walked away from Vogville Presents. The festival and television show hadn't accomplished everything I'd originally wanted them to, and that was disappointing. They had also taken me somewhere I hadn't expected to go. I'd learned filmmaking, made a documentary, discovered how much I loved directing and opened the door to an entirely different career. Sound, timing and emotion didn't become irrelevant when I stopped running a recording studio. They simply found somewhere else to live.

If the studio had filled up with work exactly as I'd imagined, perhaps I would have stayed where I was. I might never have had a reason to pick up that camera.

Sometimes things don't work out the way you anticipated. That doesn't mean they didn't work out. Maybe they worked out in a different way.

I still think about what I wanted from Vogville and what actually happened. I made mistakes, including spending too long hoping the same publicity would eventually accomplish something it plainly wasn't accomplishing. But I also created things that mattered, met remarkable people and found a new direction for my life.

It's not a failure. It's only a failure if you didn't learn anything, and my God, did I learn a lot.

CHAPTER 03

Twenty-Two Chances to Get It Right

I've attended enough business awards ceremonies to have developed a fairly good idea of what happens when the videos go on too long. The finalists deserve recognition, the audience wants to celebrate them, and someone has usually worked very hard to put the evening together. Then a business owner appears on screen and spends three minutes explaining their company in much the same way they would at a networking event.

I've seen interviews where somebody asks a question along the lines of, "Do you like breakfast or dinner more?"

"I like breakfast, ha ha."

And there we are, another interesting human being reduced to the culinary preferences of someone who was probably hoping to win an award.

I don't mean to be unkind about it. Most people aren't accustomed to speaking into a camera, and that's not their fault. They've built companies, employed people and contributed to their communities. The problem is that the filming approach can make them seem less interesting than they actually are. Someone asks them to talk about their business, they start listing what they do, and the editor puts pictures of them walking into an office or typing on a keyboard over the top.

Everyone claps when the film ends, which is lovely. I'm not convinced everyone remembers very much of what they saw.

When I was asked to produce the twenty-two finalist films for the Delta Chamber of Commerce Business Excellence Awards, I decided I didn't want to do that.

The Chamber had already selected the finalists. My responsibility was to write their scripts and film their profiles. I wanted to give each business a short film with some thought behind it, something that would tell the audience who these people were, what they actually did and why any of it mattered to someone else.

I also wanted the films to be worth watching after the awards ceremony. A video that exists only to fill forty-five seconds between presentations is useful for one evening. I was hoping to do a little more than that.

So I began researching.

Before contacting each finalist about filming, I looked into the business. Who were these people? What did they offer? What made the company different from others doing similar work? Was there something in the work that changed somebody's life, even in a small way? I wasn't looking for grand claims. I wanted something that belonged to that particular business, something we could communicate without asking the owner to improvise an inspiring speech while a camera stared at them.

I wrote twenty-two individual scripts, each intended to run about thirty seconds, and treated them as miniature commercials. Every finalist was getting the same opportunity to be presented thoughtfully, even though the companies themselves were very different.

Some businesses were naturally easier to film than others. If someone makes beautiful objects, you've already got something attractive to point the camera at. A professional service may be doing work that's every bit as important but harder to photograph. The responsibility is the same.

You have to find out what matters before you decide what pictures to collect.

The budget was extremely modest compared with what I was setting out to do. I'd recently completed a major forestry filming project and had enough room in my schedule to take the Chamber assignment on as something of a personal challenge. I've run an agency long enough to spend plenty of time organizing other people to do the filming. This was going to put me back in the middle of it, which I thought would be good for me.

I was right about that, although perhaps not in the way I'd expected.

By the time I'd finished the research and scriptwriting, I'd already used up much of the budget. We hadn't filmed a single thing yet. There were still twenty-two businesses to visit, equipment to prepare, schedules to manage and footage to edit. At one point I realized my assistant would probably make more money from the project than I would.

It's not the first financial arrangement I would recommend to a young filmmaker hoping to build a sustainable business.

The filming itself was interesting because the finalists had different expectations. Some were excited and understood the effort we were putting into their stories. Others appeared to think someone would show up, ask a couple of questions and leave with enough material for the awards dinner.

Then my assistant and I arrived with approximately $60,000 worth of cameras, lenses and lighting equipment.

There is something slightly ridiculous about arriving at a small business with that much gear to make a thirty-second film. I understood why some

people were surprised. From my perspective, we were making professional films, and I intended to approach them that way. The amount of time on screen didn't make the preparation or the images any less important.

I didn't want people trapped in awkward interviews, trying to remember what their company did while someone stood behind the camera waiting for an interesting answer. We had scripts. They could read them, and we could concentrate on helping them sound like themselves.

My teleprompter arrangement used an iPhone positioned above the lens. The text followed the person's reading pace instead of forcing them to keep up with a machine. If they paused, it paused. They could look toward the camera without trying to memorize a paragraph, which made it much easier to get something natural.

Of course, a teleprompter doesn't turn someone into an actor. If a line sounded like it came from a company brochure, reading it more naturally wasn't going to rescue it. That was another reason to do the writing beforehand.

I also prepared short visual sequences for the businesses instead of relying on the familiar collection of people smiling, typing and walking through doors. There were usually only a handful of shots available to tell each story, so they needed a reason to be there. I wanted to show something about the actual work, not merely demonstrate that the company employed people who knew how to operate a computer.

One of the finalists was Trish Arato, a custom jeweller and gemmologist in Ladner.

Jewellery is a gift to a filmmaker. Put a gemstone under the right light and everybody looks talented, including the gemstone. It would have

been easy to spend thirty seconds admiring rings, watches and the lovely little details involved in making them.

What interested me was why someone would go to Trish in the first place.

An engagement ring or a family heirloom isn't just another product sitting on a shelf. People bring memories, relationships and an idea of what something is supposed to represent. Before a piece can be made, somebody has to listen. The customer needs to feel that the person making it understands what matters to them.

That's why the script and shot plan began with Trish greeting someone and listening. From there we could move through the consultation, sketches, work at the bench and the finished jewellery. The sparkle belonged in the film. I didn't want it to arrive before we'd given the viewer a reason to care about the person creating it. That gave Trish's film a progression the audience could follow: someone arrives with something meaningful, Trish listens, and her skill turns what she's heard into a piece of jewellery. The finished film could show not only what she made, but why somebody would trust her to make it.

That was one of twenty-two different decisions we had to make.

I was pleased with the films. People told me they were among the best finalist profiles they'd seen, which was gratifying after the amount of work we'd put into them. I wanted the businesses to be able to use the finished profiles on their websites and elsewhere, so we offered them the opportunity to obtain their videos afterward for around $500.

That wasn't going to turn the original budget into some tremendous commercial triumph. It helped recover some of the expense, and it gave the work another purpose beyond the awards ceremony.

More importantly for me, the project introduced me to a great many business owners in our community. Some of those relationships eventually became larger filmmaking projects. So there was a professional benefit, even though the original assignment itself made very little money.

I also came away having reminded myself of something I'd learned years earlier. Being responsible for the overall production isn't the same as being the person who has to make everything work on the day. When you're the one preparing the scripts, organizing the locations, keeping the crew moving and figuring out which images are going to tell the story, you quickly remember why all the planning matters.

The project had demanded more of me than its budget justified on paper. I knew that when I took it on, although I probably didn't understand quite how much more. I was proud of what we made and pleased that the experience had led to worthwhile relationships.

I wouldn't tell every business to take on work at a loss because it might lead to something better. Sometimes a bad deal remains a bad deal. This particular job was a decision I made for reasons beyond the immediate fee, and I was fortunate that some of those reasons proved worthwhile.

When I think about those twenty-two films, I don't remember the cameras first. I remember having to find twenty-two different ways to make thirty seconds count. The research took far longer than most people would imagine, and there were moments when I wondered how I'd manage the schedule. Then we'd get a person speaking naturally

about something they genuinely cared about, with pictures that belonged to their work, and I'd remember why I'd chosen to approach it that way.

Just because everybody does the same thing, and good enough is good enough, doesn't mean you can't make a bigger impact and offer more value.

CHAPTER 04

Finding the Story Before Writing the Script

When someone asks me to make a thirty-second commercial, there's a good chance they've already imagined part of it. They may have a favourite photograph, a list of services, a sentence they've been using for years and an idea for a drone shot over the building. Sometimes they've even written the script.

I don't object to people arriving with ideas. I like ideas. I've had thousands of them, and a fair number have seemed much better before I tried to make them work. The difficulty is that the person commissioning the commercial knows almost everything about the business. The viewer knows very little and has given us thirty seconds, assuming we manage to persuade them to watch in the first place.

That changes the work.

Before writing anything, I want to know why we're making the commercial, who needs to see it and what we hope will be different afterward. Then I start looking for the story. Not the company's history, mission statement or entire collection of services. The part that gives somebody a reason to care.

Over the years I've developed my own approach through the Fluevog Framework, drawing on MUSE storytelling methods and combining them with what I've learned in music, filmmaking and business. A lot of the

thinking comes back to people, place and purpose, along with what happens in the story.

People are usually where I begin. Whose experience are we interested in? What does that person want? What is difficult, surprising or important about their situation? If the owner is the person speaking, why should somebody unfamiliar with the company be interested in what they're saying?

Then I look for a place where the story becomes visible. That may be an actual location, but it can also be something as small as an object being handled or a person doing a familiar task at a particular moment. The purpose tells me why we're showing it, and the movement of the story gives the viewer a reason to stay. Something needs to happen, even if it's only a small change in how someone understands a situation.

Those considerations guide the work, although they aren't a recipe for every commercial. I've never thought a film became interesting because somebody correctly filled out a storytelling worksheet.

One of the more useful places to see this process is in the scripts I wrote for the Delta Chamber Business Excellence Awards.

Say When Beverages was one of the featured companies. The assignment was a short profile, but I wanted it to feel like a little commercial that could stand on its own. In my initial research and planning, I concentrated on the company's chai. There were whole spices, brewing, the pouring of a drink and the possibility of showing people sharing it. I wrote about the ingredients and the way something as ordinary as a warm cup could bring people together.

That gave us a place, a product and a human reason to care about it. It also gave me some very practical things to film: ingredients being

handled, steam, a drink being poured, someone holding a cup, the packaging and the people enjoying it. Instead of showing the brewery because it was there, the pictures could build toward the moment when somebody actually received the drink.

Then the client came back with a correction.

They made two different product lines. The chai was important, but so were their culinary sodas. They wanted both represented.

That was a reasonable request. I'd been working from one part of the company because it offered a strong visual direction. They were reminding me that the business itself was broader than the part I'd chosen to tell.

We revised the script. The original line about brewing chai became a line about brewing beverages in Delta. The language around the ingredients was broadened, and we included the sodas alongside the chai. We kept the idea of a drink creating a moment of connection, rather than starting over with a list of products and manufacturing capabilities.

Here is the complete script in the form the client approved:

> *"At Say When, every blend starts with respect — for traditions, for craftsmanship, for people. We brew our beverages right here in Delta, using whole ingredients and purified mountain water because we believe the journey of flavor matters. It's not just about taste; it's about connection — that moment when a cup of chai brings strangers together or when our culinary sodas turn a moment into a memory. For us, South Delta isn't just where we brew—it's where our story steeps, and where every pour is shared with neighbours, friends, and families."*

The practical filming circumstances also mattered. Their soda canning line was scheduled to be running another company's product on the day we were there. We couldn't arrive, point the camera at the line and pretend it was producing the sodas featured in the commercial. Their chai brewing schedule offered other possibilities, and the plan included the test kitchen, ingredients, products and people.

That may not sound like a dramatic creative breakthrough. Most script development isn't. Sometimes it's a small correction that stops you from telling a story that's attractive but incomplete.

The agreed script kept the opening idea that every blend began with respect for traditions, craftsmanship and people. It described beverages brewed in Delta, then moved toward the experience of sharing chai or culinary sodas. We ended with the company's connection to South Delta and the people who enjoyed what it made.

It was still a thirty-second awards film. It couldn't explain two product lines in technical detail, demonstrate every manufacturing process and tell the complete history of the company. We had to choose which information helped the viewer understand the business and which information belonged somewhere else.

I didn't push back on including the sodas because the client had identified something genuinely missing from my first approach. There's a difference between defending a good idea and becoming so attached to it that you stop listening. I've done enough creative work to know how easy it is to confuse the two.

Where I do push back is when a script starts collecting messages because everybody involved wants their part included.

A client may want every service mentioned. I understand why. They've paid for the commercial, and leaving something out can feel as though they're failing to advertise that part of the company. But the viewer isn't keeping a tally of how many departments were acknowledged. They're trying to decide whether there's anything here that matters to them.

If someone wants six unrelated things included in thirty seconds, I'll ask which of those things is the reason the intended customer would choose them. The other five may still be important. They can live on the website, in a sales conversation or in a different film. I don't want to spend the entire commercial teaching someone how much the company does, only to have them remember none of it.

The drone shot is another familiar request. I like a good drone shot. I own equipment because I enjoy what it allows me to do, and I'm not immune to the temptation of getting a beautiful picture because I can.

But what does the aerial view tell us? If it shows the scale of an operation, where something is located or a relationship between places that matters to the story, it may earn its time. If it shows that the business has a roof, we can generally establish that with less effort.

And then there's the owner explaining how wonderful the business is.

I would never say an owner shouldn't appear in a commercial. Sometimes the person behind the company is the best reason to choose it. But I want to hear what they actually believe, what they've learned, what they do differently and what happens when the work becomes difficult. An owner looking into the camera and announcing that the company is passionate about excellence doesn't give me much to work with. I'd prefer to find something the person has done that lets the viewer reach that conclusion independently.

Artificial intelligence has added another complication. People arrive with a polished concept that looks and sounds finished. The sentences flow, the structure seems convincing and the closing line has the sort of confidence a machine can produce without having to stand behind any of it.

Then we begin asking questions.

Who is that person in the story? Does the business actually do what the script promises? Is the situation something we could film? Why would the intended audience care? Sometimes we discover that the most impressive part of the proposed idea is the writing, and even that has been assembled around assumptions nobody checked.

That can be a difficult conversation when somebody has already fallen in love with the concept. I'm quite familiar with falling in love with my own ideas, which makes me particularly well qualified to recognize the problem.

For a thirty-second commercial, I usually want one central thought that can be carried by a person, a moment, a change and something worth remembering. That doesn't mean every commercial has to feature an actor overcoming an obstacle. It means we have very little time to establish why something matters. We can spend those seconds creating that understanding or spend them introducing the company for the fifth time. Opening with a logo before giving anyone a reason to watch may use up the most valuable seconds we have.

A minute gives us room to learn more about someone, understand the circumstances and allow the story to develop. It doesn't automatically mean twice as many services or twice as much company history. Sometimes an extra thirty seconds allows a person to say something

quietly that would have been lost in a shorter piece. Sometimes it gives us enough time to see the work being done instead of having somebody explain it.

The length isn't the starting point. The idea is.

When I write, I read the words aloud and imagine what will actually be on screen. If the image already shows the person arriving at the workshop, we may not need a voice telling us that they've arrived at the workshop. If the sentence tells us the company is different, I want to know what picture would prove it. If we can't find one, we may not have discovered the difference yet.

Quite often, the writing becomes better when I remove things. A line can be beautifully written and still have no reason to be there. I can spend an afternoon getting something to sound right and remove it the following morning because it doesn't help the story. I don't enjoy that part quite as much as coming up with the idea, although I've learned not to argue with it for too long.

None of this requires a professional camera.

Before writing a website introduction, recording something on an iPhone or preparing a presentation, you can ask who you're speaking to, what's happening in their world, what you're hoping they'll understand, and what actual thing you can show or describe to make it believable.

You may discover that your first idea was the right one. You may also discover that you'd been writing about the company when the interesting story was sitting in front of you the whole time.

I like that part of the work. It's often where I find out that the film I imagined at the beginning isn't the one we're going to make.

CHAPTER 05

A Beautiful Film About the Wrong Thing

At the Capilano Story Centre, we were making a presentation in which Nancy Stibbard would appear as a hologram, with historical material on a second screen. The work involved a talented team, each contributing ideas and solving different problems. The presentation was expected to be seen by an enormous number of visitors over time, potentially millions. We wanted them to feel they were encountering a person who could bring the history alive, instead of standing in front of a complicated arrangement of screens and being impressed by the equipment.

The apparent simplicity was deceptive. The hologram effect involved a mirror. I knew that, and still managed to forget that the image needed to be reversed to appear correctly. The result was Nancy facing the wrong way. It was embarrassing to see, especially knowing that potentially millions of visitors would encounter the finished presentation. I had been so focused on making the illusion work that I'd overlooked the mirror's most basic consequence. That was my oversight, and we corrected it.

There was also a version of the introduction on the second screen that ran long enough for a viewer to see a presenter getting ready to speak. It was only a little extra lead-in, but the whole presentation was trying to create a sense of presence. Once the audience sees someone getting ready rather than being there, the illusion begins to announce how it was

made. We had to think about the timing from the visitor's point of view, not from the comfortable position of people who already knew the entire sequence.

The sound required its own decisions. Nancy's voice and Marc Luc's narration had to be understandable, while instrumental music contributed atmosphere without taking over. I spent years making judgments about music, and I enjoy the effect it can create when it's used well. I also know that music doesn't become more meaningful because somebody turns it up. We had to give the story the space it needed, even when an individual piece of music sounded lovely on its own.

Visitors only experience the result. They don't know how many hours went into a presentation, who suggested which image or how many versions were tried. At the Story Centre, every choice either helped visitors feel they were meeting Nancy or interrupted that feeling. The mirror had to face her the right way. The lead-in couldn't show someone getting ready behind the illusion. The music had to support her voice and Marc Luc's narration, not compete with them. A visitor wouldn't be sorting out our intentions. They would see and hear what we'd actually made.

The same is true of a beautiful website or trade-show display that leaves somebody admiring the presentation while struggling to understand the business behind it.

Beauty earns attention. It doesn't necessarily earn a decision. The tools for making something look polished are widely available. Slow-motion footage and impressive music can make an ordinary business seem grand, but those things belong to the equipment and the production process, not to that particular company. I like to imagine removing the name from a commercial and replacing it with a competitor's. If nothing

feels out of place, the film may have left out the very reason the customer was supposed to care.

There is a place for emotion in all of this. I've seen what music can do when it arrives at exactly the right moment, and I wouldn't spend my life making films if I didn't believe in that power. But a nonprofit can leave someone deeply moved without helping them understand who needs support, what has changed or what they could reasonably do next. The feeling was real. The missing information doesn't arrive afterward by magic. You can go too far the other way and make a film that lists everything the organization does, leaving a person with plenty of information and no desire to watch another second. Neither problem is solved by making the voiceover louder.

For the Story Centre, the challenge was never to make Nancy look as though she'd been recorded by a camera. The challenge was to help a visitor feel connected to the history she was telling. That meant knowing when an image belonged, when it would distract, when the music should give way and how quickly the presentation ought to move. Those are decisions about the experience, not just the quality of the pictures.

I still enjoy a beautiful shot. I know how attached I can become to it, which is a good reason to ask what it contributes before insisting it stays in the edit.

CHAPTER 06

Expensive? Absolutely.

Someone once came to me about a film for a fundraising initiative. They explained what they were hoping to accomplish, and I started thinking through how we could tell the story. We discussed the approach, what would be involved and what it was likely to cost.

When they heard the number, they said it was really expensive.

"Expensive? Absolutely, if it's not going to accomplish anything for you. Cheap if it accomplishes something and gets in front of the people who need to see it."

I wasn't trying to persuade them that professional filmmaking was cheap. It isn't. There's research, planning, writing, filming, editing, equipment, people and all the work that happens before anyone sees a finished image. I wanted us to understand what the investment was intended to do.

The organization went ahead because the film had a specific purpose. It was used at a gala and in subsequent marketing. That was important because the film wasn't being commissioned to have something beautiful to show at a meeting. There was an occasion, an audience and a reason for telling the story.

I think about that conversation whenever someone describes creative work as expensive.

If the thing you're making serves no useful purpose, fifty dollars can be too much. Grab an iPhone. If you need a record of an event or a quick

update for people who already know what's happening, a simple approach may be all that's required.

If you're trying to help someone understand a difficult situation, decide whether to trust an organization or support a major fundraising effort, the thinking and preparation become important. You may need experienced people to find the story, understand the audience and make the material work in the place where it will actually be seen.

There's nothing inherently sensible about spending a fortune, and there's nothing inherently clever about doing something cheaply. I want to understand what we're trying to accomplish before deciding what it should cost.

I've spent a good part of my life in creative businesses, so I know how easy it is to confuse a quote with a judgment about your worth. Someone says a price is too high, and suddenly you're having a conversation about your experience, your equipment and all the hours you intend to put into the job.

I've had those conversations. They aren't especially productive.

The more useful discussion is about the purpose of the work, the available resources and whether we're talking about the right solution. Sometimes a smaller project can do everything that's needed. Sometimes the idea is worthwhile but the money isn't there. And sometimes the proposed investment makes very little sense, regardless of how attractive the finished result might be.

I've turned down work because I didn't believe the proposed direction would accomplish much. That has cost me money. There have been projects that went ahead with somebody else, and later I saw versions receiving ten views, or twenty or thirty, and not even the right views.

I wasn't sitting there hoping the other filmmaker had failed. I'd looked at the work and thought about why I'd declined it. There wasn't much satisfaction in being reminded of the same concern.

I'm a storyteller. I don't want to take money for a piece of work I don't believe I can make useful. That doesn't mean every creative disagreement requires a grand moral stand. Sometimes I suggest a different approach and the client agrees. Sometimes they don't, and that's their decision.

I can live with that. I also enjoy being paid, which makes turning work away a less glamorous decision than it probably sounds.

You can't make everybody happy. You're not a taco.

There are occasions when what the client wants and what I believe I can do well don't line up. It's better to recognize that before everybody has spent time and money discovering it afterward.

The same question comes up outside filmmaking. Consider a company looking at a training program for its staff. The price may seem high until someone works out what repeated mistakes, delays or lost customers are costing the business. Another course could be a waste of money if the real problem has nothing to do with training. The price tag alone doesn't resolve either question. You have to know what you're hoping to change.

Nonprofit organizations make these decisions especially difficult because the work itself may be genuinely important.

I receive inquiries from people who care deeply about what they're doing. They've seen our films, they like the approach, and they're hoping we can somehow help make their cause our cause. April and I already support organizations that matter to us, and we make deliberate choices

about where we contribute our time and money. Caring about somebody else's cause doesn't automatically mean we can take on its production costs.

Sometimes a nonprofit has a promising idea and almost no budget to carry it out. That's not necessarily the end of the conversation.

Instead of treating it as something that must happen immediately, I've suggested developing a proper project that can be used in a grant application or included in the following year's budget. We can work out what the organization needs, what the proposed film would accomplish and what a funder would actually be paying for.

I've done that with organizations, and it has worked very well. The projects have had a chance to be properly funded, we've been paid for our professional work, and the organizations have received films they can actually use.

That's a very different arrangement from asking someone to donate a large amount of labour because the cause is worthwhile. It also gives the organization time to think about what it needs instead of rushing to find someone willing to do the work for free.

I like the way some older advertising approached its audience. A commercial might begin with a useful household suggestion and then reveal who was sponsoring it. Some of the claims made in advertising during the 1950s and 1960s wouldn't survive much scrutiny today, so I'm not proposing we return to that particular standard of truth.

What interests me is the order of the conversation.

The advertiser gave the viewer a reason to pay attention before asking them to buy anything.

I think about that when I watch contemporary commercials that spend their entire running time announcing how wonderful the company is. Sometimes the same advertisement appears several times in one break. I'm a commercial filmmaker, and even I can get tired of commercials. Unless they're mine, naturally. Then repeated exposure is a sign of excellent judgment.

The fundraising film that prompted the original conversation was worth making because there was a real reason for it to exist and somewhere meaningful for it to be used. That didn't make the work inexpensive. It made the expense something the organization could consider in relation to what it hoped to accomplish.

I still enjoy the creative decisions, the filming and the satisfaction of seeing a finished piece. I wouldn't have spent so many years doing this if I didn't.

But when someone asks me whether a proposed film is expensive, I want them to know that I'm asking a question of my own. What will this allow you to do that you couldn't do without it?

Sometimes the answer tells us to make the film. Sometimes it tells us to make something simpler. And occasionally the answer is that we shouldn't be spending the money at all.

CHAPTER 07

The Person on the Other Side

I once made a LinkedIn post about nonprofit storytelling using a picture of nine carved pumpkins.

It was Halloween. Each pumpkin represented a different kind of story an organization could tell. One was about where the organization came from, another about the people it helped, and another about the difference its work had made. There were pumpkins for volunteers, fundraising, events, thanking supporters, monthly giving and leaving a legacy.

The heading was If Nonprofit Films Were Pumpkins.

I liked the idea because I've spent a lot of time speaking with people in nonprofit organizations who want to tell their story but haven't necessarily considered how many different stories they actually have.

Sometimes the conversation begins with someone saying they need a fundraising video. That may be exactly right. What I want to understand is who they're hoping will watch it. Someone who has never heard of the organization? A person who gave fifty dollars last year? Someone who has been supporting the work for a decade? Or somebody considering a major gift?

Those people aren't all having the same conversation with the organization.

I've explained it to nonprofit leaders by imagining somebody entering a swimming pool. At first they dip a toe in. Then perhaps a leg. They wade

in, become more comfortable with the water, and eventually some decide to jump.

Not everyone jumps, which is fine. The point is that people's relationships with an organization develop over time, and the information they need changes as that relationship develops.

Someone standing at the edge of the pool may not understand what the organization does or why it exists. Asking that person to make a substantial financial commitment immediately can be like inviting somebody into deep water before they've discovered whether they can swim.

This is where the first two pumpkins come in.

The Origin Story explains why the organization exists. What happened that made somebody recognize a need? Who decided to do something about it? The story doesn't have to begin with the date of incorporation and the original board of directors. There is usually a human reason the work began, and that's what I want to understand.

The Human Story is about who the work matters to. It could follow one person whose circumstances have changed through the organization's help. Sometimes that tells a newcomer more than a list of programs and annual statistics ever could.

That doesn't mean finding the most heartbreaking person available and putting a camera in their face. I've worked around enough difficult circumstances to know that somebody's hardship isn't automatically ours to use because it would make a compelling film. The person involved matters more than the effect we're hoping to create.

Once somebody has become interested, other stories begin to make sense.

The Volunteer Story shows where a person could fit into the work. Rather than announcing that volunteers are needed, we can see what volunteering actually involves and why someone chooses to give their time. An organization may also need The Event Film, something that brings people together, explains the occasion or helps them feel part of a community effort.

Neither of those has to ask for money. Sometimes participation or understanding is the next step, and that can be just as important.

A person who has already contributed may be interested in something else entirely. They know why the organization exists. They've made a decision to support it. What they want now is to understand what happened because people like them helped.

That's where The Impact Film becomes useful. Not another emotional appeal explaining that the need is great, but an account of what actually changed. It can follow a person, show how a service was delivered or describe progress toward something the organization has been trying to accomplish.

An honest update can also acknowledge what didn't work. I think people are capable of understanding that worthwhile work can be difficult. If a project encountered problems, explaining what happened and what the organization learned can be more respectful than pretending everything went wonderfully.

Then there's The Thank-You.

I particularly like that one because it doesn't need to ask for anything. It can be a genuine acknowledgment of what supporters made possible. We've become so accustomed to every message leading toward another request that simply thanking somebody can feel almost unusual.

Another pumpkin was The Monthly Giving Film, about why consistent support matters. Someone considering a regular contribution may want to understand what dependable funding allows the organization to plan, provide or maintain. That is a different conversation from an appeal asking people to help with an immediate need.

For an organization preparing a specific fundraising initiative, The Fundraising Appeal has its own job. It needs to explain why help is needed now and what the contribution is intended to make possible. The strongest version isn't necessarily the saddest story. It is the one that gives a person enough understanding to make a meaningful decision.

And for supporters thinking about what their contributions might accomplish beyond their own lifetime, there is The Legacy Film. Its question is different again: what do we leave behind? That may involve a long-term project, a continuing service or a change the organization hopes will endure.

Those were the nine pumpkins in the picture. I've also talked about other possibilities, such as a donor explaining why they give or a behind-the-scenes account of how an organization actually carries out its work. Sometimes seeing the people doing difficult, ordinary tasks explains more than another polished statement about the mission.

I have discussed this approach with nonprofit leaders who told me they'd never thought about their storytelling in those terms. They were accustomed to thinking of a video as a single thing the organization

needed. Once we began considering different audiences at different stages of their relationship with the work, the possibilities became more useful.

The pool isn't a rigid fundraising system. I wouldn't want an organization treating everyone who gets involved as somebody who must eventually be persuaded into making a larger donation. People volunteer, share information, contribute what they can or appreciate the work. Those are meaningful relationships too.

The useful part is recognizing that somebody who is new to the organization shouldn't have to work through the same information as someone who already knows it intimately. And a longtime supporter shouldn't be treated as a stranger every time the organization sends an email.

I've seen this distinction in the work we've done for REACH Child and Youth Development Society, including films prepared in Punjabi-language versions. We've also produced Port of Vancouver material in different languages. Making something available in a language people can readily understand is another way of recognizing who's actually receiving the message.

The organization may know exactly what it wants to say. The person listening still needs a way into the conversation.

There's also the question of which medium makes sense. A film can introduce a person and their circumstances beautifully. A written progress report may be better for explaining a project in detail. An email can thank supporters without asking them to watch another video. Someone considering a substantial commitment may appreciate a personal conversation in which they can ask difficult questions.

I like filmmaking, and I enjoy helping organizations tell stories about work that matters. That doesn't mean I want to prescribe a film every time somebody needs to communicate something.

Sometimes the story is already there and needs to be told differently. Sometimes the organization is telling the right story to the wrong people. And sometimes people have been supporting an organization for years without ever being properly told what their support has made possible.

I thought the pumpkin picture was a reasonably amusing way to get that conversation started. The response reminded me how useful it can be to look at the same organization through the eyes of the people encountering it at different stages.

Nine pumpkins turned out to be a fairly effective way of making me think about nine different conversations. I hadn't expected vegetables to be quite so useful to my filmmaking career.

CHAPTER 08

The Things We Say About Ourselves

At networking events, I hear a familiar little conversation. Someone asks what you do, somebody else tells you how long they've been in business, and before long the two of you have agreed that you should connect. I've been part of that conversation more times than I can count. I work with stories for a living, and even I can get through five minutes with another person without learning anything that would make the exchange worth remembering. Perhaps I should get a refund on some of the books I've read about communication.

The same language appears on business websites. Passionate. Innovative. Committed to excellence. A company can write those words for nothing, and so can its competitors. I've never seen a business describe itself as generally well intentioned but sometimes difficult to reach after lunch. I'd remember it, though. The problem isn't that people don't care about their work. It's that a declaration doesn't give somebody much evidence of how the company behaves when a decision becomes inconvenient.

If a stranger introduced himself by explaining that he was honest, I wouldn't immediately decide he was lying. I would wonder why he'd chosen that as the first fact I ought to know. Most of us prefer to discover honesty by watching what somebody does. Businesses work the same way. When a company says it puts people first, I want to know what happened on the occasion when putting somebody first cost it time or money. A sentence can be written in an afternoon. Keeping a promise when things go wrong is more demanding.

I developed a phrase for a habit that bothered me: Virtue Alibi. It's what happens when a declaration of goodness is used as though it settles the question of what someone actually did. A business says it cares deeply about the community. Someone asks about a decision that affected the community. The answer is that the business cares deeply about the community. We've heard the word community twice and haven't learned very much about the decision. It isn't proof that the business is bad. It's an excellent way of avoiding the information anybody was asking for.

I submitted Virtue Alibi to Urban Dictionary, and it was accepted under my name in May 2026. The English language probably wasn't lying awake waiting for my contribution, but I was pleased. You can find the entry online. Naming a habit doesn't prevent you from falling into it yourself. I have made decisions with good intentions that didn't produce the results I wanted, and I'm quite capable of explaining why I meant well. Sometimes it's more useful to look at what actually happened before beginning the defence.

What bothers me most is when somebody else's difficulty becomes the background for a company's photograph of itself being generous. A business took thin branded socks down to Main and Hastings in Vancouver and handed them out to people living on the street while taking photographs for its social media. I won't name the business. The whole thing struck me as shallow and fake. 'Look at my good deeds.' People living through hardship were being used as the scenery for somebody else's marketing. That's the difference I keep coming back to: looking good versus doing good. One produces a picture of compassion. The other starts by asking what people actually need.

I have much more admiration for the person who supports a cause because it matters to them and doesn't need to stand beside an enormous

novelty cheque afterward. Doing good doesn't have to be your marketing campaign. You can contribute because somebody needs help without making their circumstances the setting for your next publicity photograph. The question is what remains for the person being helped when the photographer has gone home.

I've seen the issue in much smaller forms of business communication too. An About Us page says the company values its staff, while the actual working arrangements make it difficult for people to ask for a day off. A sales proposal promises exceptional responsiveness, but the organization hasn't decided who's supposed to answer the customer's question when the original salesperson is away. A business can commission wonderful language about values and still leave the uncomfortable decisions for someone else to deal with. I've been asked to make films that say very large things about companies. I prefer finding the small, specific act that proves the thing is true.

For REACH, the decision to create Punjabi-language versions was an example of an organization doing something rather than simply announcing a virtue. It required additional work so information could be shared in another language. That doesn't mean an entire organization can be judged by one communication project. It means there's something concrete to discuss. The same principle applies to an ordinary employer who promises to train new staff and can show what training actually involves, or a trades company that explains how it deals with problems rather than insisting that customer satisfaction is its highest priority.

On my own website I explain why I make particular creative choices. For the Port of Vancouver's Delta Community Office, I chose to follow a grandfather and grandchild exploring the port, giving families a way into a place that could otherwise seem like nothing but infrastructure. For

Southpointe Academy, we approached the school's future through a child's eyes instead of leading with a list of facilities. Neither choice came from needing more content. They came from thinking about the people who would watch and what might matter to them. I'd encourage organizations to approach their work with that kind of intention before they start pumping out the next campaign.

When someone wants to describe their business as different, I would start by asking where the difference can be found on an ordinary day. It may not be glamorous. It may be in the way a worried customer is answered, a promise is kept or someone chooses not to exploit an opportunity because it would be wrong for the client. That is a much stronger story than an adjective. And if nobody can think of an example, the problem may not be the writing. We haven't found a better sentence to write. We've found something the business needs to do.

CHAPTER 09

The Business of Looking Busy

When I started making records, recording was expensive enough that musicians usually had a reason to be in the studio. They booked time, prepared what they wanted to play and watched the clock while they worked. None of that guaranteed the result was good. I heard some very expensive records that were difficult to get through. I also heard recordings made with modest equipment that had something special. The cost put a limit on how many attempts a person could afford. The music still depended on the performances and the choices we made together.

Over the years, the tools became cheaper and recording more accessible. I liked seeing musicians who couldn't afford a studio find ways of making their work. I was less delighted by what happened to the value people placed on the finished recording. The ability to put a song into the world became ordinary. The difficult part was giving someone a reason to choose it from everything else now available. We could spend a remarkable amount of time choosing between several very good takes in the studio. We weren't short of sound. We were deciding which performance belonged to the song.

I'm seeing something similar in business communication. It's easier to produce a video, write a post, generate an image and fill a newsletter than it was even a few years ago. I use technology myself. I spent years playing with audio equipment and software, so I'm not about to announce that machines are inherently wicked. The part that hasn't become inexpensive is the attention of the person on the other end. A business can now produce ten pieces in the time it once took to write

one. That doesn't mean its customers have acquired ten times as much interest in hearing from it.

I have posts on LinkedIn that have reached hundreds of thousands of impressions, some around 800,000. That's a substantial number, and I enjoy seeing conversations develop around something I've said. The odd part is that a thought about business, a joke or an ordinary observation from my day can travel further than a film that took weeks to make. People may know my opinions about all sorts of things without knowing what I do for a living. Sometimes the internet appears to be suggesting I should give up filmmaking and take the dog for longer walks. Unfortunately, the dog hasn't shown much interest in assuming the mortgage.

Those conversations have value. I've met people, kept friendships and reconsidered things because of them. I don't want to turn every exchange into a calculation of whether somebody might eventually become a customer. The problem comes when attention gets mistaken for useful business progress. An impression is a number a platform can give you immediately. The decision somebody makes later happens somewhere else, after a recommendation, a quotation or a discussion with someone they trust. You can get a report about the attention while knowing very little about what the decision involved.

I think of the loudest person at a gathering. He can spend an entire evening telling people about his successful year without the inconvenience of asking much about theirs. Everybody remembers him. Whether anybody would hire him is a separate question. I try not to be too superior about it, since I publish opinions for strangers on the internet and then check how many people noticed. I may have found a more efficient way of occupying the room.

I look at some local companies' social media and think, holy desperation. It's post after post after post, apparently because they've been told the algorithm demands it. Throwing more spaghetti at the wall doesn't mean it's sticking with the right people. After a while it all becomes noise, because everybody is following the same few formulas and everybody is doing it at once. Last year's AI video craze was full of monkeys running around smoking spliffs and gorillas throwing people out of Starbucks windows because their orders were absurd. Some of it was funny. Then the novelty moved on. How do you argue that more content beats authentic content? You don't need a bazillion of the wrong customers. You need the right people. One good video can live on your website, at the bottom of your emails, on LinkedIn and Instagram, and be something you show when you're speaking at a conference. It doesn't need to reach the whole internet. It needs to mean something to the people your work is actually for.

Then I accepted a connection request on LinkedIn and received a pleasant message offering to reduce my corporate taxes, improve my investment returns and make my retirement income more efficient. Apparently I only needed to agree to a thirty-minute call. The sender was considerate enough to acknowledge that I probably already had an accountant or financial adviser. A nice touch. Nothing about the message suggested any knowledge of my businesses. It may have been written by a person. For all I know, one computer decided I was a suitable prospect and another wrote the invitation. At some point they'll probably have the meeting without involving me, which would save everyone a bit of time. I was being asked to invest thirty minutes of my day by someone promising better returns on my investments, without any reason to believe the thirty minutes would be well spent.

The danger isn't confined to AI. The same thing happens when people produce newsletters because the newsletter is due, or fill a blog with interchangeable observations because the business has heard it should publish regularly. Eventually the recipient learns what to expect and stops noticing. They may never unsubscribe. They leave the message unopened. The cost of producing one more piece may have gone down, but the cost of teaching the audience to ignore the next one hasn't disappeared.

There are businesses for which frequent communication genuinely matters. A restaurant offering daily specials has useful news for someone deciding where to eat. An event venue with changing performances needs to keep people informed. A service that changes with weather or the season may be doing customers a favour by communicating often. The distinction is whether there's information the audience would have wanted if it arrived as plain text without an attractive graphic. If the only reason to send it is that the schedule says so, I'm not sure the schedule is the best person to be making the decision.

I understand why keeping busy is appealing. Writing the post, approving the photograph and marking the calendar complete produce evidence of a productive day. Asking why customers have trouble understanding an offer or why people aren't coming back after the first purchase is less pleasant and may not produce a single thing you can show at the next meeting. Publishing can become a comfortable place to hide from those questions, especially now that making the material is so easy.

The choice of a good take in the recording studio used to matter because there were several ways a song could go and only one finished record. I don't think that responsibility disappeared because we can generate the next version almost instantly. If anything, the need to choose is greater.

The fact that I can publish again tomorrow isn't much of a reason to publish today. I would like the people who receive something from me to have a reason to be glad they opened it.

CHAPTER 10

The Day After Delivery

Near the end of a film project, I can become remarkably interested in changes almost nobody else will notice. I adjust the colour, listen to a transition, check the end title and look at the same seconds again until I decide they are finished. Then I organize the files and send the client a link. It's a satisfying moment. The work that was an idea a few weeks earlier exists, and somebody else can finally use it. I enjoy that part of the job enough that I can almost forget how much remains to be decided.

Producing something usually has a deadline, a budget and a person responsible for finishing it. Using the thing afterward often has none of those. The film is approved, the designer has sent the files or the launch announcement goes out. Everybody is pleased for a few days, and then the material is left waiting for somebody to decide where it belongs. Producing the film was somebody's job. Using it seems to have been left to the atmosphere.

I was reminded of that when the Truck Loggers Association needed six existing videos turned into a loop for its January convention. Jennifer Kramer explained that there would be an eighteen-foot screen in the foyer and another screen toward the back of the trade show floor. The screens required different formats and the videos would play without sound. The films themselves had already been made. The problem was what a person walking past could possibly take from them without stopping to listen to narration that wasn't playing.

My inclination was to remove the words and let the pictures do the work. Jennifer wanted the text retained so a person passing the screen could understand something about what they were seeing. We discussed the logo placement as well, keeping it toward the end rather than over the picture. I prepared both formats and sent the revised files on January 12. None of those decisions involved filming another beautiful shot. They involved imagining what the work would look like when somebody encountered it for a few seconds in the middle of something else.

That is an entirely different setting from a person sitting down to watch a television commercial with sound. The visitor in the foyer hasn't agreed to start at the beginning. They may look up halfway through, notice a picture and continue walking. A picture that makes perfect sense with narration could be almost meaningless on its own. The film isn't becoming worse because the screen is bigger. It's being asked to do a different job, and the choices about words, timing and placement have to follow that job.

The same problem appears in work that doesn't involve a camera. A clinic spends time writing clear instructions to help patients prepare for appointments, but the reception team isn't told when to send them. A community organization produces an orientation guide for new members, then leaves it in a drawer because nobody has taken responsibility for welcoming them. A restaurant designs an insert for a seasonal menu, only to find it in the office after the season has passed. In each case the material could have been useful. The responsibility for getting it to the person who needed it was never settled.

I like asking what happens in the first week after something is delivered. Who is going to show it to whom? In what situation will they need it? Is somebody expected to send it after a customer asks a particular

question? Does it belong in a meeting, at an event, in a welcome email or somewhere a family can find it when they have a difficult decision to make? And who has actually agreed to put it there? Those sound like administrative questions. They're also the difference between a useful piece of work and a nicely organized folder of finished files.

There are occasions when being found is exactly the purpose. An explainer available on request may be intended for the small group of people who arrive with one specific question. An archive film may need to remain accessible for years without being actively promoted every week. That can be a perfectly good use of money. The organization needs to know what situation would lead someone to look for it and whether the person can find it when they do. A folder of finished material is a place to keep it. It isn't a plan for getting someone to use it.

At other times a piece needs active distribution. A campaign intended to introduce something unfamiliar may require paid media, events, relationships with partners or deliberate outreach. A salesperson who spends years explaining the same complicated process might use one short film with a handful of interested customers instead of showing it to thousands of strangers. Neither approach is inherently better. The choice depends on the job, and that job needs to be clear long before the final files arrive.

I also think about how quickly information can become inaccurate. If a phone number is about to change, or the title of the person in the film will be different in six months, it may be worth keeping that detail separate. A film can remain useful much longer when you aren't forced to replace the whole thing because one sentence aged badly. These aren't

the sort of decisions that make a production glamorous. They're the sort that make the money spent on it last.

I can't decide for an organization which person should open a folder on a particular Tuesday. I can ask about that before we make the work, prepare suitable versions and explain what each is for. The people using it need to take responsibility for what happens next. I still enjoy sending a finished film. I enjoy it even more when I know why somebody will open it and what they hope will happen afterward.

CHAPTER 11

When Opportunity Knocks

One of the things I enjoyed about producing music was being able to hear where a song could go before the people playing it could quite hear it themselves. Sometimes a band had a good idea and lacked the experience to bring it together. Sometimes a musician could play beautifully but had trouble deciding what belonged on the record. Working through those decisions with people was a large part of what kept me interested. I liked the process, and I liked being able to help somebody make something they'd imagined for years.

The trouble was that I could become interested in an artist's future as well as their record. I'd think about what they could do after the sessions ended, who might hear the music and which opportunity might help them move forward. It's a pleasant feeling to spot possibility in another person's work. You start imagining what could happen, and after a while you can be more invested in the imaginary future than the person who's supposed to live it.

I remember one female artist who had an opportunity involving a show in front of roughly ten thousand people and a week of touring. The prospect was substantial. There aren't many circumstances in which an artist trying to build a career can perform for that many people without the opportunity at least being worth serious consideration. I'd been involved in helping line things up, and I was thinking about what a week like that could lead to. Then I learned that she was going to Las Vegas with her boyfriend's family instead. The show would be missed and the touring week dropped.

I was frustrated. I had been looking at the opportunity as something we had worked to create and something she ought to be excited about pursuing. She was making a different decision. I didn't have to like it, and I certainly wasn't in a position to make it for her. What I remember most clearly now isn't the vacation. It's realizing how much of the ambition I had been carrying on somebody else's behalf. I had assumed that because an opportunity looked important to me, it would have the same importance to the person it was for.

The artist was entitled to her priorities. A record can be worth making without becoming the centre of somebody's life. There are musicians who are perfectly happy to make an album, play some shows and carry on with other things. I enjoyed working with people like that too. My mistake was in confusing the career I could imagine for somebody with the one they were actually willing to pursue. I couldn't supply their ambition by being enthusiastic enough. If I tried, I would only make both of us miserable.

That difference between my priorities and someone else's has also changed how I hear the words 'can't afford it.' People have different reasons for saying it. Sometimes it's arithmetic. The money isn't there, or spending it would put something more important at risk. I respect that answer, especially from someone managing a small company. Other times the money is available but the person doesn't see enough value in the thing being proposed. I used to treat that as an objection I ought to overcome. I've become less interested in winning an argument about somebody else's priorities. If they don't believe an investment matters to them, a more persuasive pitch may not be doing them a service.

There is a difficult distinction between sensible caution and avoidance. I've known people who needed a little encouragement to pursue an

opportunity they were genuinely ready for. I've also known people who would always find another condition that had to be satisfied before they could begin. I can't tell which is which by deciding that I know what's best for them. I can ask what, specifically, is holding them back, what it would take to address it and whether they are prepared to make a decision when that condition has been met. The answer usually tells us more than a motivational speech would.

I can't promise fame to a musician. I can't promise a business that every person who sees a commercial will become a customer. I can help make good work, find the real story and give it a clear opportunity to reach people. The song, the product, the service, the people delivering it and the willingness to follow through have to exist independently. Marketing can help make those things visible and understandable. It cannot manufacture them after the fact.

I still like helping people recognize what's possible. I'd miss a great deal of what I enjoy in my working life if I stopped doing that. What I try to remember is that possibility comes with a person attached to it, and that person gets to decide. I had imagined a much larger career. The artist was allowed to enjoy the record, and possibly Las Vegas, without consulting me about either.

CHAPTER 12

The Customer You Might Be Better Off Without

My surname has introduced me to a great many people who know something about my father's shoes and nothing about the work I do. That's understandable. Fluevog isn't the sort of name you hear everywhere, and my father has built a genuinely creative, recognizable business. The trouble comes when somebody also assumes the name means I have access to money, investors, introductions or the ability to hand out favours. Apparently the name comes with a cheque book. I have yet to receive mine.

A friendly message arrives with a reference to the shoes. Sometimes somebody simply wants to say hello or has a genuine interest in what I do. Other times the message eventually becomes a request for an introduction, an investment or free professional advice. I've received enough of them over the years to recognize the pattern, though I wouldn't claim to know a stranger's motives before they've actually made the request. I don't want to become suspicious of everybody who knows my surname. I would also prefer that the people asking me for help understood which part of the family business they're talking to.

The strange thing about attention is that it has a cost even when you haven't paid for it. Somebody has to read the message, figure out what is being asked and decide whether the conversation belongs in their working day. The more important issue for a company is that the promises it makes determine who comes through the door, often long

before anybody has had the chance to explain what the service really involves. A broad promise creates room for the customer to imagine the version they would most like to receive. The business then gets to spend time explaining what it actually meant.

April sees a version of that every week in the estate-clearing business. Simply Estate Services helps families deal with homes after someone has passed away or moved into care. Many companies in the industry compete on the promise that they'll sell the possessions and get as much money for the family as possible. I understand why that sounds attractive. The person responsible for clearing a house may be looking at rooms full of furniture and wondering whether the contents could pay for the work that needs to be done.

There's a cost to selling things that people rarely see. Someone has to photograph an item, identify it, research the price, prepare a listing, answer messages, negotiate with prospective buyers, collect payment and arrange pickup. An item that sells for twenty dollars can easily require more than twenty dollars' worth of professional time. And what something cost years ago has little bearing on what a stranger is willing to pay for it now. A sofa bought in 1974 may have been a substantial family purchase. Parents may have paid $2,000 for a Robert Bateman print, while comparable prints now sell for around $50. Those memories and the original expense are real. The resale market isn't obliged to preserve either of them.

Over the years, April tried doing things differently. Items with genuine resale value went to our network of qualified buyers. Everything else was redistributed to people who could use it. She talked publicly about the approach, and it worked. Instead of spending hours trying to sell belongings nobody wanted to buy, the work could focus on clearing the

property responsibly, getting useful things to people and doing the professional work the family had actually hired the company to manage. We still charged properly for that work. There is no practical way to run the operation by pretending staff time, transport and disposal don't cost money.

Then a few clients would object. They were convinced there must be more value in the house, and we didn't want to disappoint them. So we found ourselves drifting back to the original approach, trying to sell everything. The same clients who expected the contents to pay for the entire job sometimes became the clients who didn't pay the bill. They had understood the promise in a way that didn't account for the work, and we'd allowed that expectation to shape the service.

One of the arguments came down to a familiar complaint: “Surely there was more than enough value in that house to cover your whole bill.” April had to explain that nobody wanted the 1975 tube television. Nobody was going to pay for it, and taking it away for disposal cost money. The television had presumably provided years of entertainment to somebody. Its contributions to family life didn't make it a particularly attractive purchase to someone with a modern television and the ability to lift it.

The annoying part is that we kept doing it. We knew which approach made sense, and still allowed the insistence of a few clients to pull us back toward the one causing the problem. It felt like accommodation. In practice we were arranging the work around the expectations of people who didn't understand what they were buying and sometimes didn't intend to pay properly for it.

While I was developing television commercials for Simply for 2027, I wrote a scene with a distinguished English gentleman receiving a cheque

for the sale of his late sister's possessions. He is delighted. Then the representative hands him an administration invoice larger than the cheque. He picks up a broom and chases her out of the house. It's an entirely ridiculous little scene. I enjoyed imagining the distinguished gentleman suddenly deciding that the correct response to a professional invoice was to become a danger to the furniture.

Writing the commercial forced me to confront what we were actually promising. The joke worked because the cost of selling everything could defeat the money recovered from selling it. We'd been trying to satisfy people who heard the promise and assumed every item was worth more than the work required to sell it. The commercial was supposed to help explain the business, and it had ended up explaining a problem with how we were running it. We've stopped returning to the old approach.

That doesn't mean difficult customers are automatically bad customers. A family dealing with a complicated estate may ask a great many questions and require careful explanations. An executor may need us to be meticulous because other family members will question every decision. Those can be excellent clients. They're asking for professional work and understand that professional work has a cost. It's a different arrangement from someone who expects the business to make money appear from objects that have no practical resale market, then resents the invoice for clearing them.

A similar misunderstanding can begin with an event planner who promises 'everything taken care of' without explaining what's included. A customer may hear that every late change and additional request is covered by the original fee. The planner may do excellent work, but the promise has invited someone to expect a different service. It can take an enormous amount of time to manage that misunderstanding afterward.

It's usually more useful to be clear about what the company is actually equipped to provide.

When I look at the people a business most enjoys serving and the ones it finds draining, I want to understand what each group expected when they first got in touch. Did the suitable clients understand the work and its value? Did the difficult ones arrive because a broad promise let them imagine something the company doesn't provide? You can't solve every customer problem by changing a sentence on a website, and some people simply won't be happy whatever you do. But if the same expectation keeps bringing the same difficulty to the door, it's worth asking where that expectation began.

I also recognize the danger of becoming too selective for reasons that have more to do with my convenience than the customer's needs. Some of the most worthwhile work I've done has involved people with unusual requests or demanding circumstances. Being clear about what you're good at shouldn't become an excuse to stop listening. It should make it easier to recognize the people whose problem you can genuinely solve, and to be honest with the people whose problem belongs somewhere else.

I don't need the surname to do anything more for my business than be the name I use. I don't need everybody who loves the shoes to be interested in filmmaking, or everybody who needs a film to be interested in the shoes. A conversation goes better once we know which one we're having.

The bigger change for April's business has been deciding what the work is really about. We still sell things that have genuine value, and our network of buyers helps with that. But redistribution is the business model. Useful belongings go to people who need them instead of sitting

through weeks of listings and negotiations that cost the estate more than the objects can bring in. There's less administration time, the family can move forward, and the work is more satisfying for everyone involved. There are no losers. Everybody wins.

CHAPTER 13

Enough to Matter

The easiest part of a community event to measure is usually the part everybody sees. People arrive, enjoy themselves, bring their children and go home with a pleasant memory. If you're on the committee that organized it, you also know about the evenings spent making arrangements, finding volunteers, setting things up and trying to work out who was going to do the last five jobs nobody had agreed to do. The families attending don't need to think about that. They should be able to enjoy themselves. The organization responsible for putting it on has to think about it, because somebody will be there doing it again next year.

I spent five years on the board of the Ladner Business Association, and for much of that time I kept asking a question I imagine people were tired of hearing. Were we a business association or an events organization? The events were good. The holiday celebrations and parades brought families together, local companies supported them and volunteers worked very hard. If the measure of success was how many people came and how much they enjoyed themselves, the events could make an excellent case for themselves.

The difficulty was that we represented businesses whose interests didn't always lie in the village where most of those events happened. Some had storefronts on the main street. Others were contractors, home-based businesses, professional services and companies whose customers weren't likely to wander in from a parade. They were members too. I couldn't help wondering how the association was serving them when so much attention and volunteer effort went into public celebrations. It's

not a comfortable thing to ask at a meeting where everybody is pleased about a popular event. No one wants to appear to be arguing against children having a good afternoon. I certainly didn't. I wanted to understand what the organization was there to do.

At one meeting after another I found myself coming back to that question. I was frustrated, though I don't blame the people who were doing their best with the responsibilities in front of them. The events were familiar and the community expected them. If you want to change something people like, you also have to deal with what they'll miss. I had joined a volunteer board and was discovering, not for the first time in my life, that noticing a problem is considerably easier than persuading a group of people to do something different about it.

There was another question underneath it. When a group of volunteers begins to burn out, do we have a volunteer recruitment problem or an organizational problem? Finding another ten enthusiastic people can get you through the next event, but if the workload shouldn't belong to the organization in the first place, you've only postponed the same difficulty. Eventually the association began stepping away from several major public events. Some could continue through other arrangements, while the association put more attention toward its members. That didn't make the celebrations unimportant. It meant the responsibility for running them deserved examination.

Eventually I stepped away from the board. I had stepped away from the responsibility, although apparently not from having opinions about it. April is now the president, and she has been remarkably patient with that arrangement. I've remained interested in how the association can recognize the people behind its member businesses, often in ways that cost very little.

One small suggestion was to change how people from the association are introduced. Instead of identifying someone only by the position they hold, say their name, the business they represent and their role in the association. Name. Business. Role. If the president is speaking, people should also know the company that person runs. It costs nothing, takes a few extra seconds and reminds everybody that the association is made up of people with businesses, not just titles printed on a meeting agenda. I don't know whether the change will produce a measurable result. It seems a sensible way to begin treating the members as the centre of the organization.

I understand the appeal of things that can be counted. Attendance figures, followers, impressions, new locations and revenue are all evidence of something. The problem begins when the easiest number to collect becomes the thing we organize ourselves around, even if the original purpose was different. A very successful event can consume resources intended for member services. A widely shared post can reach people who will never need the organization. A business can grow to a size that its owner spends every day managing problems they never wanted to have. None of those outcomes is inevitable. They're easier to notice after the achievement than before it.

I sometimes ask owners to describe an ordinary Tuesday a year after their plans succeed. Not the ribbon cutting or the photograph in the newspaper. A Tuesday. Who are they working with? What are they doing from morning until the end of the day? How much time is spent with customers and how much managing schedules, people and problems? Are they doing the work they enjoy, or have they successfully built a job they would never have applied for? I have met people who love running large operations and people who would be miserable doing it. Neither is more serious about business because one wants more employees.

That question comes from watching the difference between the public version of success and the private one for most of my life. My father built a famous shoe business. My mother had a public life of her own. Both could look very different from the outside than family life felt to the people involved. I grew up largely with my grandparents, and I learned early that recognition doesn't tell you everything about a person's circumstances. In 2012, Vancouver Magazine ran a profile with the headline 'Jonathan Fluevog Jr. and the Façade of Fame.' It was a title that made more sense to me the longer I lived with the difference between public attention and private reality. The shoes and the photographs and the interesting people were all real. So were the ordinary complications of family life, which don't disappear because a name becomes recognizable. I've written about that more fully in my personal memoir, and I don't need to turn this book into an account of my childhood to explain what it taught me about appearances.

I certainly enjoy recognition. I liked seeing articles about the festival, I was proud of the television show, and I like it when a film I've made receives a good response. It would be dishonest to pretend those things mean nothing to me. What changed over time was how interested I became in what happened beyond the public moment. Did the work do somebody some good? Was a person treated well? Could somebody use what we'd made? Did the business become the kind of place its owner wanted to spend a life working in? Those questions don't fit as neatly into a report, and they aren't always answered immediately.

There's a personal cost to working on things you don't believe in. I've turned away projects because the idea would have meant making something I thought was ineffective, and I've spent too much time on projects that paid very little because I believed they were worth doing. Neither choice makes me especially virtuous. Sometimes I get the

balance wrong, and I'm no more immune to a flattering opportunity than anybody else. But after a long time working for myself, I want to know the reason for taking on the next project beyond the fact that someone asked.

I don't know a neat way of measuring significance. It's possible to make a difference to somebody and never find out. It's also possible to receive a room full of applause for something that left very little behind. Public recognition can help people discover worthwhile work, and large businesses can make positive contributions on a scale small ones cannot. I don't want to make an argument that modest things are automatically better. I want the person making the decision to know what sort of success they're pursuing and what they would be willing to trade for it.

If twenty-five people read this book and change something in their businesses that genuinely helps them, I'll consider the work a success. It won't make me a bestselling author. That's fine. I haven't spent the last few months thinking about these stories because I'm planning to become someone who makes a living telling people how to market themselves. I wanted to put down some things it took me a long time to understand, in case somebody else can use them without paying quite as much for the experience.

April's vehicles are still unwrapped. Every day those trucks could carry a very effective advertisement, and every day she chooses not to use them that way. I doubt anybody has ever thanked her for declining a good rolling billboard. A family can get the help it needs without advertising its circumstances to the neighbourhood. That seems to me like a useful thing to accomplish, even when nobody notices.

About the Author

Jonathan Fluevog spent twenty-six years working in music production, much of it at Vogville Recording. He created the Vogville Day & Night Festival and Vogville Presents before moving into filmmaking. Through FlueVog Films, he develops and produces concept-led commercials, brand stories and films for organizations. He lives in Ladner, British Columbia, with his wife April.

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