



## Take Your Brand from Commodity to **Community**

Ask(?)Away is a **candid conversation** between two people published on a blog. This transcript includes comments from the readers and space for your notes. Our second guest in this format at *Conversation Agent* is Tom Clifford of *Bringing Brands to Life!*

**Valeria Maltoni:** I don't know about you. I always thought that being in a movie would be fun. Many are in love with the idea of having their fifteen minutes of fame. So filming corporate videos should be a great experience, right?

Not quite. Many corporate videos do not bring your brand to life, says Director Tom. Your story is often not told in a clear and authentic way. Why is this important? So it can stick. You want your story to jump off the screen and into your customers' hearts.

Thomas R. Clifford, Director Tom, is passionate about **enlightened corporate film making**. He has been producing and directing corporate videos for over 22 years. Tom has won awards because his videos are energetic, engaging, compelling, meaningful, and authentic.

How does he do that? He sees himself as a documentary filmmaker who can capture corporate stories on video. He does that by sitting down with your best storytellers -- your employees -- your “heroes.” I’ve seen boring and staged corporate videos; Tom promises **short “PBS films on caffeine!”**

He has directed videos that tell the stories of Deloitte, Honeywell, the Epilepsy Foundation, The Hartford Financial Services Group and Loctite, as well as local non-profits. The results have been memorable experiences that have strengthened and extended the recognition of those brands by igniting conversations and connections.

**Customers** do not buy products -- they **buy stories about who you are and what you stand for**. Tom’s passion is to help

remarkable organizations tell their story and bring their brand to life. This is the transcript of a conversation I had with Tom by email. As we’ve done in the past, I look forward to including your take (pun intended) in Part Two.

**Valeria Maltoni:** Tom, despite the skepticism we’ve reached from most forms of advertising -- print, online banners, billboards -- and what some call internal propaganda -- newsletters, Intranets, memos -- there is one medium that continues to captivate us: video.

The success of YouTube is not accidental. It is anchored to the wonder we associate with film and the use of video narrative to tell a story. In 2003, BMW pioneered short films with its campaign The Hire (Fallon Worldwide) that saw the debut of British actor Clive Owen. The shorts were offered online only and managed to stir a lot of buzz.

The quest for talent is one of the challenges organizations face today. I receive at least two calls and three email inquiries a day from recruiters asking me to connect them with talent on behalf of companies -- I’m sure I’m



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not alone. To find and retain talent, companies need a new way, one that can convey messages that are energetic, engaging, compelling, meaningful and authentic. And you help them do that with film.

Tell me how you do it.

**Tom Clifford:** You are absolutely right about companies needing a new way to communicate their messages in an authentic and meaningful way!

Before I tell you how I help companies communicate messages that are energetic, emotional and meaningful through the short documentary format, let me first “set the stage” with some quick background on corporate videos in general.

Over the years, corporate videos has had a bad rap...and rightly so.

Many corporate videos have been poorly executed simply due to a lack of story; not budget. I’ve worked with the tightest and largest of budgets, and I can tell you this: story rules.

Think about this for a minute. Story. Film. In many corporate films, what happens when two of the most powerful and emotionally engaging mediums collide? What gets produced? A talking head. Boring pictures. Dispassionate narration. How can a company possibly inspire anyone this way? They can’t.

My films focus on people and their story. Sounds simple, but it’s rarely done. Here’s what I mean.

Pick a topic...let’s say, diversity. And let’s say, an organization is seeking a way to tell their story on diversity.

The classic corporate video approach is to write a script based on the marketing department’s talking points. Then you might interview some senior level executives to pontificate what the voice-over has already said. Film some footage that is clearly staged, perhaps with actors, and call it a day. There’s something terribly wrong with this picture...there is no story. No drama. No tension.

I actually had to produce and direct this film



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for Deloitte as part of their national kick-off campaign on embracing diversity. Here's a real-life example of what I did and how I typically craft a corporate film, no matter what the subject.

First, I spent time with my scriptwriter discovering four employees, or "heroes" as I call them in my films, who had very diverse backgrounds and who could really articulate their personal views on diversity. I pre-interviewed them over the phone to get a sense of their story. When it came time to film them, I interviewed them at length with no script; no questions were sent ahead of time for studying corporate speak; no one over my head second-guessing everything the heroes said. What was captured was real, personal and from the heart.

But I also went out on a limb: I wanted to film our heroes not only in the Deloitte offices but outside the office. I really wanted to capture our heroes engaged in their hobbies or passions to showcase their entire self; not just the "office worker." After a week of filming, we captured some absolutely remarkable and unexpected scenes...all totally spontaneous,

authentic, emotional and engaging.

In editing, the story told itself. I just enabled an invisible story to come to life.

Documentaries by their very nature are personal in their approach. The viewer cares a lot more about a personal story than a corporate story. So capturing several personal stories helps shape and tell the corporate story in a way that a narrator just cannot do.

**Valeria Maltoni:** So if I understand correctly, you are viewing the story unfold from behind a lens -- unfiltered and personal. Is that always the case?

How do you insert the view from the top, what the management and leadership teams in a company are? Are managers willing to go the unscripted route? And if so, why have a communications department, what is \*their\* role?

**Tom Clifford:** Most of my films do feature corporate employees as "heroes," so the story unfolds right in front of your eyes...that's part of the appeal and quite frankly, the authenticity of the short documentary format.



If people speak honestly from the heart about ideas that are important to them and we capture that footage in “real time,” it creates a “reality” the audience can identify with; there’s a level of honesty and emotion that a marketing department has a hard time re-creating (IMHO.)

Is this always the case? In my experience, most times, yes. But, of course, there are times I need to break outside that “hero” framework. There are situations where the information in a film may be more technical in nature. Having employees or executives deliver that information would not be the best choice. I rarely work with actors, but sometimes that is the best and most natural choice.

Inserting the view from “the top” can be fairly easy. If upper management insists on having a presence on screen, fine. I’ll just make sure the “heroes” get as much screen time as possible. The “C Suite” can be captured and edited in a way that does not interfere with the stories from the employees.

Managers are willing to go the unscripted route and here’s why: they realize the role

of trust. It’s unspoken. It’s implied. My experience has seen managers implicitly trusting their people to tell their story that is unique to them. After all, it’s their story, their experience. It cannot be duplicated anywhere and that’s exactly what an audience wants to see and hear...a story that is different, take them on a journey of sorts and resolves itself.

What’s the role of a communications department? Great question. When it comes to video, 99% of the people I work with do not have any working knowledge or experience producing a film; it’s not part of their everyday work-world so it often gets done poorly or not at all. I worked as a producer and director inside a Corporate Communications Department for almost 10 years for a Fortune 500. Their role is critical in areas outside of video; annual reports, promoting events, etc. I do think their greatest role in promoting video is to discover their own “heroes” and start collecting remarkable stories about them and the organization in general. Then, when it comes time to produce a video, a story bank is available to tap into.

**Valeria Maltoni:** So you view communicators



as facilitators of conversations, in the same way that I would. Their role is broader than just crafting messages and producing them. How do you propose they transmit some of the great stories you craft to external audiences as well?

**Tom Clifford:** Before I answer, picture this...

Imagine hearing an amazing story from your best friend. It's a story that immediately touches your soul; it's grabs you and makes you think. Imagine that story changing how you see your world; even how you see your best friend.

In a moment, your current frame of reference shifts; now your point of view is different. You feel like telling the world about your friend's story.

But there's a problem.

You can't. You can only share it with a few people...that's it. Only a select few will benefit from the story and experience. Would you feel disappointed? Sure you would. That's exactly what it's like when a company produces what I call an authentic story on film from their

corporate storytellers--their employees--and they choose not to share that story to an audience outside their corporate brick and mortar. Disappointing? Again, I think so.

With the ultra-fast emergence of new social media tools and You Tube "look-a-likes," companies now need to think beyond their DVD as the end of the story. In fact, just the opposite is true: the DVD they are holding in their hands is the beginning of a new story. A new story where the video can instantly be published for all to see.

The thinking needs to go from: "commodity to community." A DVD is seen as a commodity by many. But that same DVD can create a community in an instant. Acquiring your corporate story on DVD should now be seen as the beginning of telling your corporate story.

Of course, I realize not every video is suitable for wide distribution. But for the most part, almost every film I have ever produced over the past 23 years could have played on YouTube with tremendous benefits to many.

If one of the goals of communicators



(marketing/PR/sales) in corporations is to facilitate conversations and strengthen brand recognition, then why not embrace social media?

Now imagine the role of communicators as “creators of conversations;” “conversation architects.” A role where discovering, creating and publishing meaningful personal stories from organizations is now designed from the ground up with the --intention-- to help others learn, grow and benefit. Just imagine...

Thanks so much for thinking of me and inviting me into your “conversational world!” I love your site and ideas...keep it rockin’!



**Tim Johnson:** Having met Tom in person at SOBCon, the passion shows through in every interaction and conversation he has, so it’s no surprise that he’s a huge success in his life’s calling.

**Steve Roesler:** Tom’s take on corporate videos as documentaries is right on the money. I became enthused just listening to him.

Since I do a lot of presentations coaching and have a media background, I work with a number of clients who are on TV/Video. Trying to convince them to just relax and go with their stories is often a tough sell.

Tom’s documentary model would serve executives well regardless of what they had in mind to begin with. The day of the talking head is long gone. It’s the Age of Conversation and storytelling.



Watch a selection of Tom’s films [here](#).



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