



A Life Flashing Before Your Eyes

Legacy Videos of Family Businesses Can Touch Future Audiences

By Christina P. O'Neill

Creating a family-business history on video can impact many different audiences. For family-owned businesses, their history is an essential part of their values, their brand and who they are today.

Think of the documentary craft as practiced by historian Ken Burns – an evocative story that interweaves a tapestry of vintage photos, books, music and on-camera reminiscences that have enduring value to today's audiences. That's the nature of the work done by Rob Cooper and Pam Pacelli Cooper, co-owners of Cambridge-based Verissima Productions Inc.

Verissima, established in 1999, has clients around the globe. Its broadcast clients include PBS and Boston's WBZ. Its corporate clients include Avid Technologies, Biogen Idec, Honeywell, Reebok and The Warren Group, publisher of *Massachusetts Family Business* magazine.

Many audiences need many voices

The benefits of creating a video of the family business history are relevant to both internal and external audiences. For current employees, it can be a motivational tool; for new hires, an orientation tool, and for potential employees, an efficient comple-

ment to the recruiting process. For external audiences such as current and potential customers, it can position the company's core strengths and character, and make current customers feel good about their choice. A video's message can show its strengths and reliability, and communicate family values while demonstrating how the company has continued to evolve to meet new challenges

Capturing and preserving the full essence of a family business requires a lot of voices outside the immediate family. With the advice and consent of the client, the co-producers tap interview subjects, including any or all internal or external family members, stakeholders, satisfied customers, charitable organizations, and more. "The more different faces and voices, and the less voice-over narration, the more credible it is – the more lively it is," says Rob. "You grasp the essence of who this business is, what they are, and what they've done."

A lot of the groundwork for shaping the themes is done by Pam, an experienced family systems therapist and oral historian. "We try to identify the theme in the family, the values and ethics as they apply to the business, and we use that as the hub around which all of these other elements circulate," she says. Rob, with

30 years of broadcast and corporate production experience, figures out how to shoot, pace, select any accompanying music, and edit the contents. Background research constitutes a majority of the time spent, second to editing the content. Only 20 percent of the production time is on-camera.

There are thematic elements, then the pragmatic and material components, such as B-roll (visual backgrounders of on-site company operations), family and business photos, and research on historic family photos and era-related photos, all of which give the film editors the structure to add to people's comments. They then pay attention to organization and pacing to divide the story into segments, and how to keep the narrative moving.

Whose story gets told?

There's always the question of how family business owners want to use history to position what the business is today, and the dynamic between their record of achievement over time, and their ability to evolve, Rob says. Stories of the founders come into play most often – those who may not be here anymore, who made the company possible.

Ultimately, while the client controls the story, Verissima inquires about the crucial background factors such as financial and legal events and the story behind them – and then, whom the client wants included and whom not, and how that might play out in the company. "That is covered in great depth ahead of time," Pam says.

Then, there's the question of which employees the client chooses to feature in the present-day segment of the company story. Rob notes that during his corporate video career, this was not an uncommon issue. A corporate client had him produce an employee orientation film. Within two years, three key employees featured in the video had left the company. Rob went back to do an update. "This was not a big deal," he says. "it was a one-day reshoot." Digital editing made it easy to freshen the video for the client.

To that end, digital video production can make it easier than ever to make different versions of the same film for different audiences, such as clients, prospective employees, community groups, or future generations. "Once the history's done,

you can customize it for different audiences," he says.

Is there anything else you want to add?

Often, the best moments in a family-history documentary are the spontaneous ones. Pam goes into her interviews well-prepared with questions carefully selected to unearth the key aspects of the story. But at the end of the interview she always asks if she's missed anything, and asks what else an interview subject might want to say. This question sometimes delivers the best and most memorable responses.

Pam recalls creating a business/personal history for a highly successful entrepreneur and philanthropist, who was regarded by associates and his children as an example of perfection. "When I asked if there is anything I missed that he might like to add, he said he wanted to tell his children that – as he put it – he was 'not a model child' and that he'd acted out in a number of ways. He came to realize that it was this same willingness to take risks that led to his success in creating new businesses, and without some personal experimenting, he wouldn't have become who he was."

When the next generation saw this, they were surprised, fascinated and re-

lieved, each of them having had some similar passage. Sometimes a legacy that is larger than life quashes the very real talents of the next generation, because they think they have to start out as accomplished as the parent was. But their father gave them a great gift in letting them see the man beneath the image, she says.

Such can be the unexpected dividends of creating a video of the history of a family business, and an example of the kind of residual value that the company and the family can derive from a family business history.

Rob cites a client from Verissima's early days as saying: "If our family is going to continue on in the business, we want them to know as much as they can about how we operated it, and where it came from. If they're not going to continue in the business, we want them to know the story of who and how we were. As for future generations, if they're going to choose not to continue, we want them to know the story of who and how we were as a family business. And if they're on the fence deciding, we hope that this video will encourage them to carry the tradition on." ■

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Rob Cooper and Pam Pacelli Cooper filming on location.

Photo courtesy of Verissima Productions Inc.