

Motion Media and Communications

Excerpt

Creativity May Not Equal Communication

The Alchemical Elixir

Our goal must be to design and produce successful motion media shows, but few of us ever do it, certainly not on a continuing basis. Our shows are often less successful and acclaimed than we've intended because we've deduced erroneously that a great show is a natural result of our application of creativity. To many of us in the communication profession, "creativity" has become a magical potion that ensures a "sockeroo" show. It's a panacea that solves all communication problems. All too often, I've heard folks in our profession discuss creativity with a reverence that approaches idol worship—it's the alchemical elixir that cures all communication problems. We seem to be enraptured with the ever-expanding palette of advanced technology that enables us to produce shows with a dazzling degree of sophistication. Such sophistication makes a "great" show," I've heard. Such sophistry seduces us. I'm convinced that creativity becomes the *raison d'être* of many of our shows—communication fades to a secondary purpose. Our clients and audiences are disappointed because their communication goals are not realized. The reason is that we do not understand what creativity is and we misconstrue its worth in the motion media process.

One example of this pervasive and misconstrued attitude that infects our profession was in our federal government's audiovisual (motion-media) standards, as published a few years ago. To qualify to bid on government motion-media (audiovisual) contracts, prospective producers had to submit a sample of their shows for evaluation by a panel of "experts." On several occasions, I served as one of the experts on such review panels. The shows we reviewed, overall, were inept—void, or nearly so, of communication values and technical prowess. Significantly, many of the "experts" on these panels did not know the difference between a sprocket hole and an f stop. One was a secretary with no motion-media training or experience. Trying times, indeed!

Out of a total possible score of 100 (70 is the qualifying score), a show could earn up to 20 points for "creativity." And creativity is divided into two subcategories:

1. "Was the show fresh and innovative? (0 to 15 points)"
2. "Was the manner of presentation appropriate? (0 to 5 points)."

Our federal bureaucrats did not define "creativity." Nor did they state why creativity ought to be included in the scoring. Rather, the bureaucrats had concentrated on the format of the product rather than on its intrinsic communication power. This example pinpoints exactly the way we've distorted this concept of creativity. Twenty percent of the qualifying score is for something we can't define and don't understand—an inordinate weight to assign to such a nebulous concept.

Is Creativity Essential?

Many people earnestly believe that creativity is essential to communication, but again they fail to define their concept of creativity. Most dictionary definitions of creativity are truly elusive. Creativity is uniformly defined as "the quality of being creative," which doesn't tell us much. Let's hear what two professionals contend. Ed Gray, a scriptwriter, discussed creativity in terms of art: "The very nature of the audiovisual [motion-media] business is art. . . . By utilizing the artistic skills inherent in an audiovisual production house, we are attempting to transfer information in the most effective way." But we're not sure what he means by "artistic skills," and note the word "attempting."

David MacLeod, a motion-media producer, said, "In communications, creativity is the essence

of packaging ideas and conveying them most effectively. It is not an add on; it is not a peripheral. It's a foundation of our business, and it shines brightly through the lens . . . of projectors." His assertion seems to echo McLuhan's maxim, "the medium is the message."

Accordingly, far too many designers and producers tend to define creativity in terms of production value—a dramatic storyline replete with actors speaking well rehearsed lines on elaborate sets and exotic locations, "clever" scenarios, digital effects, and lots of other "neat" stuff. Wonderful! Hope you have a great time. To these folks, they expend resources on the razzle dazzle, and cleverness (i.e., creativity) becomes the critical element that makes a "great" show. Did the show accomplish the communication goals set for it? What audience feedback do you have? Were the show's goals fitting, realistic, and worthwhile? Was the show worth the client's money, time, and other resources?

Here's a contrary opinion. My long time friend, (now deceased) Charles "Cap" Palmer, pioneer in information films, avers that "creativity is a vastly misunderstood and misused value, whose effectiveness in forwarding the sponsor's objective often is in inverse ratio to its noticeability. True creativity (effectiveness) is seldom tricky, bizarre, spectacular, or obviously 'clever'—in fact, **it is more often basic and deliberately concealed**" (emphasis added). Palmer's philosophy established the basic tenet of just what creativity is in our information motion media profession. If our shows are to be successful, we must embrace this philosophy and integrate it into our shows.

Communication Fundamentals Often Ignored

What frequently warps the perspective of script designers and producers in the information motion media profession is a hidden agenda that clouds their reasoning and jumbles their priorities. In essence, they've been bitten by the Hollywood bug and want to produce "movies," to create, and to be recognized and accepted by the film industry. They're "wannabes."

To illustrate how inane this mind-set can become, I'll cite one classic example. Some years ago, the U.S. Air Force produced a training film on the C 10 aircraft for Strategic Air Command crews. To grab the audience's attention, the opening scene shows the amply proportioned actress Bo Derek in a scene from the film *10* (released in 1979), wearing a form fitting swimsuit and with her cornrow hairstyle, ambling along a beach. The scene fades into the outline of a C 10 aircraft. Such a scene may well grab the audience's attention, but I'm not sure where. I spoke with an air force official who was responsible for this show. He told me that the justification for this opening sequence was, "We try to make it interesting . . . you can't just throw schlock at them." Do you mean to say, sir, that a Bo 10 begets a C 10?



Figure 5. Ms. Bo Derek in the beach scene from Blake Edwards' 1979 film *10*.

Photograph courtesy of
Larry Emunds.



Figure 6. USAF McDonnell Douglas C-10 transport aircraft. Photograph courtesy of the US Air Force.

Though this example may be at the extreme fringe of creativity gone awry, it's not atypical. I've seen all too many of this kind of gratuitous scene in shows over the years. It's the high tech equivalent of third grade refrigerator art. What's "interesting" is a show that motivates the target audience to action. It communicates.

Perhaps the most profound statement on creativity in motion-media comes for Jean O'Neal, producer/designer of multi image shows. She has earned widespread recognition from her peers, winning a number of Best of Show and other topnotch awards. In a letter to me, she stated, "I still feel that it's much more difficult to do a one projector show well than it is to do a 12 projector razzle dazzle number. **You simply cannot cheat on a one projector show and pull it off**" (emphasis added).

Interesting = Communication

No matter how uninteresting the information is to us it will be interesting to the target audience if it is important to them and if they can realize benefit from the information—it's empathic.

John Grierson, the acclaimed documentary film pioneer, commented on these points more than fifty years ago when discussing the great influence his documentary films have had on a host of audiences throughout the British Empire (and on the rest of the world). He said that "it is not the technical perfection of the film that matters, nor even the vanity of its maker, but what happens to the public mind."

Information motion media shows should have an inherent dignity with a clear cut purpose. Usually a simple, straightforward presentation with voice over narration, keeping the message in plain view, is appropriate for most situations. We use fundamentals of persuasion to lead the audience to a conclusion or decision that we've made obvious or inevitable. Extraneous gimmicks simply introduce noise into the communication process and should be avoided.

Creativity Defined

We can consider creativity to be a function of two primary factors for which we can establish criteria for evaluation: communication value and technical achievement. Even though communication value and technical achievement are closely interrelated, each has distinct characteristics that set the tone and style of the motion media show. I've listed below some of the more important factors of communication value and technical achievement. There are many more. It's their totality that defines the grammar and syntax of the motion-media show.

Communication value is a measure of the effectiveness of the motion-media show. To what extent are the stated objectives accomplished? The evaluation criteria are:

Appropriateness. Considering the target audience and subject matter, the motion media show is the appropriate communication tool to achieve the show's goals—goals that are fitting, realistic, and worthwhile.

Information. The essential elements of information are developed logically, clearly, and succinctly, and are in the proper tone. The bulk of the information is encoded in the kinetic visuals. Audio elements reinforce the visuals, thus enhancing communication to full measure.

Empathy. The show gains and holds the target audience's attention and involvement. It generates peak empathy. Communication is engendered to maximum effectiveness.

Approach. The messages are couched in a tone and form that facilitates information flow and engenders empathy in our audience.

Cinematography. It's technically excellent and aesthetically pleasing. Composition facilitates communication by highlighting key points of the essential elements of information. Lighting sets an appropriate mood and has continuity throughout individual scenes.

Sound. It is crisp and clear; words are pronounced for proper emphasis and spoken at the appropriate pace and style. Music and sound effects help set mood and pace. All sound elements are blended to achieve a harmonious whole.

Editing. Relevant visuals are sequenced to achieve optimum communication. The pace is appropriate, moving easily from one point to the next, using smooth transitions that reinforce audience interest and commitment. Screen direction is used effectively to create filmic continuity (harmony) or dissonance. Plasticity of the medium, the manipulation of time and space, is optimized to maintain orientation and to accomplish audience interest. This plasticity of motion media is one of its most important elements.

Art. The art is pleasing and appropriate. Its style fits with the tenor of the show. Art elements use spatial relationships to accentuate important points. Perspective is true. Shading and highlighting are used to create depth and emphasis. Form, mass, and color are arranged in compositions that heighten communication.

Thus, I define a creative motion media show that fulfills to the maximum the criteria that comprise communication value and meets an acceptable threshold of technical achievement commensurate with the communication task at hand—and not much more.

We're professionals in this motion media communication business. We achieve success not with the technology but with the creative use of our communication and technical skills. Such creative prowess is basic and deliberately concealed. We need to understand to the depth of our souls that "the message is the message." Creativity, then, may well equal communication.

I want to conclude this chapter with quotes from two educational giants in our profession.

Charles F. Hoban Jr., communication theorist, pioneer in communication research, and former Emeritus Professor of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, casts creativity in its true perspective when discussing sophistication in the technology of filmmaking. He maintains: "Hedonism is transparently triumphant. The gimmickry is great, but the message is lost or, worse, the wrong lesson is taught."

Robert Davis, professor of communications at Florida State University and a visual scholar, notes that "Although technology is a wonderful thing, it is all too easy to become seduced by the hardware in audio visual [motion-media] production, and forget the true goal of getting ideas across to the audience. True, you can dazzle them with special effects, but did anyone get the message?"