The Art of Making Law Library Videos

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Public Relations

The Art of Making Law Library Videos
Some tips for using video to market your law library

By L. Cindy Dabney

Videos can be an excellent marketing tool for any library. They can entertain your audience, market to them, and educate them. At the 2011 AALL Annual Meeting in Philadelphia, I attended a workshop called Producing Library Videos: A Hands-On Experience. The program, which focused on making good library videos, was given by Todd Shoemaker of Merge Films with Joy Shoemaker, head of research services at University of California, Irvine, and Ellen Augustiniak, web services librarian at University of California, Irvine. As “outreach served librarian,” marketing is something that I’m very interested in—as is education—so videos seemed to fit perfectly into my job.

Life got busy, as it always does, and it wasn’t until May of 2012 that I actually made my first video—an infomercial for the law library, which you can view at tinyurl.com/behyld6. It wasn’t meant to be educational, just something to make students laugh and remind them that the law library is a good option when they aren’t finding what they need easily online. My second video, “Indexes and You,” available at tinyurl.com/abfg23q, was a little more ambitious—I was actually trying to be educational. It was still very tongue in cheek; I tried to capture the feel of a 1950s propaganda film as I talked about how useful indexes can be, even in the modern world. I am now working on my third video, and it is a return to the technique of the first—nothing preachy, just something to make students giggle and come see a reference librarian when they need one.

I am still very much at the beginning of my video-making career, but I would like to share some of the things that I’ve learned along the way. I won’t delve too much into the technical aspect of movie making—just the artistic side. Some educational videos can be made with programs like Camtasia and Adobe Captivate, which capture a computer screen and an audio track, but for the purposes of this article I will look at filming live people and telling a story.

Think About Equipment

To make a movie, you will, of course, need a video camera. I used a Cisco Flip Ultra HD, the same type I used in the video-making workshop. You should also consider some form of lighting—it doesn’t have to actually be a light source, but a reflector of some sort can make a big difference in how a person looks on screen. I purchased two reflectors that had several options, including standard silver, gold reflection for a warmer feel, and just a white screen for softening light.

You will also require some sort of video-editing software. I used the simple Windows Movie Maker, which is available for free online. For the more ambitious, you may want sound equipment or a tripod. I asked the library for a tripod after my second video, but as I write this article, I have not yet used it.

Start with Writing a Script

I tend to try to be funny, so my tactic thus far has been to imitate other well-known forms of short movies—an infomercial, an old educational video, a public service announcement. Keep your audience in mind. Chances are that you want more than just talking heads in your video—talking heads or shots of computer screens or books convey a lot of information, but if you are making a video that people will choose to watch rather than having it assigned for a class, you want to make sure that your audience stays engaged.

Also bear in mind your capabilities when writing a script. When I wrote the script for the 1950s propaganda film, I pictured an old newsreel-type film quality . . . but I didn’t have the resources to follow through. I settled for black and white, but the occasional film flaw would have made the video come together in a way that it didn’t in the end. I was also picturing a perfect child actor of exactly the correct age with exactly the correct wardrobe, but this is not easy to come by. I am very fond of the boy who played Young Timmy, but it is unlikely that he will ever be a child star, and you should plan accordingly. When writing your script, you probably will want to keep special effects and guest appearances by Samuel L. Jackson to a minimum.

Next will be Casting

It’s always fun for your audience to see familiar faces, so using law students (or professors, if they are willing) will go over well. And there are your fellow librarians, of course. It’s often a good idea to use people in the roles they naturally serve—don’t cast a student as a librarian, for instance. If you are trying to get people to come talk to librarians, it would be good for them to actually see the person with whom they will be talking. Similarly, students should play students, and professors should play professors. I took part in a student-written musical last year, so I used that list of people to recruit actors for my video. Without a ready-made list of casting options, you might want to simply put out a call on your law student listserv. If you are making a more serious video or one for internal use, it is entirely possible that your library staff will be sufficient.

Choose a Setting

You want to make sure that wherever you end up filming has good light. Sound requirements are also an issue. Most of my infomercial video was done in voice over, so it was fairly simple to film wherever the books were and then separately record the sound and add it in later. For the ’50s propaganda film, however, I had the narrator interacting with the actor on film. I considered trying to separately record the narrator and add in the recording, but the logistics were difficult—either I had to have Young Timmy sit still for the perfect amount of time and pretend he was listening or I had to have a great many camera
cuts. The latter would have been particularly difficult because I didn’t yet have a tripod, so I would have needed to make sure that the camera was consistent in each shot. I elected instead to have my narrator stand just behind me off screen, with the two talking to one another in real time.

This led to other difficulties, though. I could no longer film in the stacks because I didn’t want loud talking in the quiet areas of the law library. It also meant that the areas I was limited to tended to have lots of students passing through, talking loudly themselves. I ended up moving the set of books I was having Young Timmy show to the reference section of the library—a place where people are allowed to talk but rarely do.

Bear in Mind What Exactly You are Showing on the Screen
I may edit “Indexes and You” in the future because even though there are funny parts, it is still largely a talking head film. When I first wrote it, I made sure that everything talked about in the film made sense—the pages that Timmy flips to in each volume have the information mentioned on them. I had originally planned on zooming in to show each page as he turned it, but the timing and capabilities of my camera just weren’t enough. I may edit it to include some PowerPoint-type slides of the information Timmy is looking at, with the correct parts highlighted at the correct times. Don’t be afraid to mix mediums when it is called for, but know how the two will work together. How easy will it be to use the sound of one video while using the images from another source? Check your equipment to find out!

Look at Other Resources
Finally, though most of this is advice for shooting your own original film, take a look at what is available to you elsewhere.

For the infomercial, I needed a picture of a good-looking bunny rabbit, so I headed over to Creative Commons to see what images would be available for free. Sound bites can be had for free as well, for possible use as background music.

Make Sure the Film Flows
With all the footage, it’s just a question of clipping and matching all the pieces of film you want together. For voiceovers, make sure that you make the video running time match the audio—silence is really noticeable when you have been listening to sound. Similarly, if you are using still shots amid moving ones, make sure you don’t focus too long on a still shot. It’s jarring to see something go still when the rest of the movie is in motion.

Last but Not Least, Disseminate Your Film
Our law library has a Twitter account, Facebook page, and blog, so the video goes up in all those places. Better yet, if you have student actors, see whether you can get them to post the video on their Facebook pages, where a large number of law students will see it and be encouraged to watch it to see their friends. I was lucky enough to have my first two videos picked up by the Law Librarian Blog, so word has spread that way as well.

Try it Out
There are lots of things to consider when making a law library video, but it can be a fun and interesting process. With a little finesse you can entertain, inform, and market to your patrons all at the same time. I. Cindy Dabney (cdabney@indiana.edu) is assistant librarian for outreach services at Indiana University Maurer School of Law in Bloomington.

announcement

Riccio, Warren, Cadmus, and Hirsh Elected to Executive Board

The votes are in, and AALL welcomes four members elected to its Executive Board in the 2012 Association elections. AALL Headquarters received 1,373 ballots (29.85 percent of total dues-paying members) by the election deadline of November 30, 2012.

Holly M. Riccio
Holly M. Riccio, library/calendar manager for Northern California at O’Melveny & Myers LLP in San Francisco, was elected vice president/president-elect for 2013-2014. She will assume the presidency at the conclusion of the 2014 Annual Meeting in San Antonio.

Gail Warren
Gail Warren, state law librarian at Virginia State Law Library in Richmond, was elected treasurer for 2013-2016.

Femi Cadmus
Femi Cadmus, Edward Cornell law librarian and associate dean for library services at Cornell University Law Library in Ithaca, New York, was elected to a three-year term as Executive Board member. She will serve from 2013-2016.

Kenneth J. Hirsh
Kenneth J. Hirsh, director of law library and information technology and professor of practice at University of Cincinnati College of Law Robert S. Marx Law Library, was elected to a three-year term as Executive Board member. He will serve from 2013-2016.