

50 Things to Know About Producing Mobile Video Content

With the increase in sales of mobile video players, including video iPods and video-enabled cell phones, there is an emerging market for content specifically designed for viewing on these devices. Porting television shows and movies to these devices may be considered acceptable for now, but as time goes on, consumers will demand content that is tailored to the devices they are viewing it on. Here are fifty things you need to know about producing mobile video content.

Distribution

- 1. Have a rough understanding of the technical side.** The technical limitations of the medium will affect both what you can and cannot accomplish with your content.
- 2. On demand content should not exceed five minutes.** Beyond about five minutes, content intended for on-demand distribution – also referred to as unicast – will not make money. The cost to deliver it will outweigh what consumers are willing to pay for such content.
- 3. Multicast can support longer content in an on-demand environment.** Multicast would be used for events like Wrestlemania or a championship boxing match, where users pay a certain fee to get the content at a specified time. By sending to multiple users at once, you only have to pay one deliver fee, but all of the viewers pay to watch.
- 4. Broadcast allows content to be delivered over the air.** Broadcast mobile TV will allow content to be distributed over the airwaves like traditional TV, thus greatly reducing the distribution costs. This content will be viewable exclusively on subscription services.
- 5. Broadcast will be the real money maker.** While unicast makes the most money now, the lower distribution costs associated with broadcast combined with the variety of programming it will be able to offer will lead it to eventually become the most lucrative method of distribution.
- 6. The internet is an independent content producer's best friend.** With the rise of internet video sites like YouTube.com and Google Video as well as video podcasting, independently produced content can still find its audience. More and more phones feature USB connectivity to computers, making the internet a viable distribution means even for content intended for cell phones.
- 7. Everything can be packaged together.** Mobile TV allows for great cross-promotional opportunities. While watching your show, it is possible for the viewer to purchase wallpapers and ringtones themed to your show at the touch of a button.

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8. Screen size will be 3 inches diagonally. According to research done by Strategic Analysts¹, the sweet spot for mobile screens is three inches on the diagonal. It is expected that phone screens will reach this size by 2010.

9. Cell phones are poised to be the dominant mobile video device. At the 2006 CTIA Wireless conference, Phil Alveda, chairman and CEO of MobiTV, has already reached 1 million paying subscribers for their broadcast mobile TV service.

10. Digital Rights Management is already being worked on. Jason Rubinstein, Senior Product Director of Global Product Marketing-Entertainment at Motorola, says, “[O]ur role in the ecosystem is to support the most viable Digital Rights Management standards and ensure that everyone else in the food chain is doing the same.”

Pre-Production

11. Niche markets are a focus on this medium. The nice part about the unicast world is the ability to concentrate programming to niche markets and smaller markets. This is less advantageous on other mediums, which tend to go for a broader demographic.

12. Pre-Production for this medium is no different than any other. The same amount of preparation and scheduling goes into this medium as traditional film and television. While time, locations, and monetary factors may fluctuate, the methodology of it all remains the same.

13. Three to five minute unicast content can be shot in bulk like any other production. This will allow you to maximize profits and minimize time and money spent on producing the content.

14. Anticipate and research changing technology. New features available on video-enabled cell phones will mean new ways for viewers to interact with the shows they are watching. Be aware of these changes, and use them to your advantage whenever possible.

15. Keep character interactions intimate, with one or two characters. Trying to introduce too many characters in a short time span will lead to the viewer not really knowing any of your characters.

16. Have dynamic characters. Characters are what drive viewership, not what happens to those characters. If the characters aren’t interesting, the show will not be interesting.

17. Keep microsodes simple; design around viral videos. Viral videos found on sites such as YouTube.com and Google Video are becoming increasingly popular. Designing content with the same simple structure is important for providing short, entertaining

¹ ElectronicsTalk, “Screen size is key to mobile TV take up”,
<http://www.electronicstalk.com/news/sgy/sgy130.html>, February 6, 2006

content.

18. Keep microsodes fast paced in the writing phase. To keep viewers interested in characters they are only spending a short amount of time with, the beats must be very quick.

19. Gradually introduce more emotionally demanding content. As your mobile series catches on, more emotionally demanding content can be introduced. Once viewers know the characters, they will be more willing to accept and identify with what is happening to them.

20. Work with interactive firms to develop interactive add-on content. Taking advantage of interactive capabilities of this format is going to be key to success. Just think of how popular voting on which contestants should stay and go on *American Idol* is.

21. Keep it simple. This translates across the board. It is sometimes tempting to add too much, especially what this medium does not require.

Production

22. Keep it Professional. People will only pay for something they feel they couldn't have done themselves. They will not pay for a home video or something that is sloppy. Keep the production tight. Make a lot at one time and then put out one a week or so.

23. Remember Interactivity. The medium you are using is inherently interactive. Take advantage of that fact to reach the viewer in decidedly unique ways. Such as packaged goods—one-click theming and games—or data transfer—the baseball info.

24. Don't be afraid to try different genres. Successful content for the mobile screen is by no means limited to the comic genre. Drama, artistic and even action pieces are all possible within the 3-5 minute limitation. Stories with a clear antagonist/protagonist and simple (not stupid) plots will be most successful.

25. Make content interruptable. These shows must be interruptible. If the story or event is so complex that a glance up will lose the thread of the show, then it is too much. Loud noises, jostling and distraction should not be feared.

26. Subtlety is not always a virtue. Sometimes subtlety is confused with vague. Err on the side of plain and simple show and tell.

27. Clutter Kills. Nothing can kill a good show on the micro screen like a cluttered frame. The frame real estate is too small to clutter it with non-priority items. Details are good, but too many on the small screen will distract and hinder the story.

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28. Remember the aspect ratio. Due to the ever-growing size of television, you can use letterboxed programming, but since a hand held screen can only get so big, the full screen must be employed to convey every bit of detail possible.

29. Don't get too far away. Distance conveys a lack of importance. Instead of looking for the special details and the beauty of a panoramic shot, the viewer sees a lo-res picture of something and loses interest. Keeping it close shows the viewer that every shot is important. Start close and base your shot progression around that starting point.

30. Don't forget the lo-tech. The video is going to a bunch of devices of different capabilities. It has to work on the lowest of lo-tech that can handle it as well as the best of the best.

31. Fast cuts may be difficult to follow. Because there may be many other things in the viewers line of sight, fast cuts may be difficult to follow and confusing.

32. Actors on-screen should not take up less than three quarters of the screen. Once they are smaller than that on screen, they begin to get lost in the frame and can no longer be distinguished from the rest of the action.

33. Bold san-serif fonts work best for text. Because there is a downgrade in resolution fonts can become difficult to read, keeping them large, bold, and avoiding flourishes ensures the most legible text.

34. Use slower camera movement. Elements of a scene are harder to discern on the micro screen. Keeping camera movement slow avoids confusion by allowing viewers to understand more information by viewing scenes longer.

Animation

35. Use high contrast to identify and separate your characters in long shots. Long shots only work with very high color contrast, such as an orange fox running through white snow.

36. Test your video quality on the mobile screen before you go too far into production. Because of the smaller aspect ratio, sometimes animations will not look the same on a mobile device as they do on a computer screen.

37. Improvised skits are an excellent match to the mobile screen. Improvised skits allow for the rapid creation of low-cost content.

38. Viral advertisement is a benefit of creating media for the mobile screen. Because people tend to share short videos with their friends, your show can become its own advertisement.

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39. Be careful of using thin lines in an animation. When thin lines are downgraded for the mobile screen they can become pixilated and decrease the overall quality of the image.

40. Be less subtle with animating movement. When viewed on a micro screen the characters will appear much smaller and subtle animated movements will be hard to identify.

Audio

41. Listen to audio using the final compression. Compressing the audio can change the overall sound a lot, so checking your progress with the final compression is important.

42. Ultra low frequency sounds are not useful. These types of sounds – generally associated with subwoofers – cannot be very accurately reproduced by headphones and are generally felt, not heard, anyway.

43. Audio can add to the picture things that may be difficult to show. With limited screen space, audio can play a key role in making viewers notice actions that may be hard to see.

44. Headphones are less forgiving than TV speakers. Because the sound is being piped directly into the viewers' ears, there is less room for error.

45. Mono isn't bad. If it doesn't take away from the story you are telling, mono will help keep file sizes down for quicker and cheaper transmission.

46. Pan sounds sparingly. Because the screen is so small, panning sounds too much can get confusing to the viewer. Think carefully about what the sound means in relation to the picture.

47. Be sure that dialog is ultra clear. Excessive compression can add artifacts to the sound, so it is especially important to make sure all dialog is crystal clear.

48. Some content may lend itself to the visuals being less important. In these instances, the audio will have to carry the story. Make sure that it tells a story as effectively as possible.

49. Simple can be better. With watching on the go, the viewer may still hear a lot of environmental noises. As a result, too rich a soundtrack may cause confusion.

50. Make everything obvious. Soft sounds may get lost, so make sure they're not important to understanding the story if they are used at all.