

Speaking louder than words: A lesson from Hollywood

By Rob Biesenbach

Several years ago, David Mamet, celebrated American playwright and then-executive producer of the television show “The Unit,” wrote a memo on the craft of screenwriting that caused a stir in Hollywood.

In a passionate (and typically profane) message to the show’s writing staff that surfaced last year, Mamet offered important lessons for all communicators. Chief among them: “Pretend the characters can’t speak, and write a silent movie.” Images, expressions and actions, he argued, are much more powerful storytelling tools than just words.

Another way of putting it, “Show, don’t tell.” This is a fundamental principle in performing arts and creative writing, but this advice often eludes businesspeople and professional communicators. There is a lot we can learn from Hollywood about how to connect with audiences.

“The Unit” is off the air now, but shows like “Mad Men” prove Mamet’s point by using spare dialogue and long silences to great effect. It’s amazing how much goes on, literally, between the lines.

The next time you watch TV, try muting the volume for a while. You’ll be surprised by how much meaning can be derived from the visuals alone: This guy’s feeling confident about his job interview. She’s unnaturally excited about her new haircut.

So when assessing your organization’s communications, keep a few tips in mind from the stage and screen that can give your websites, executive presentations and videos greater impact.

Make your point

There’s a book called “Story” (ReganBooks, 1997), which people widely consider the screenwriter’s bible. Its author, Robert McKee, advises, “Image is our first choice, dialogue the regretful second choice.”

How many of us have sat through one of those deadly PowerPoint presentations where the speaker essentially uses the slides as a script?

If this is happening in your organization, then it’s time to consider an alternative. For entertaining and compelling storytelling, use images.

These images should target your audience. Find the interesting and surprising ones, full of power and impact. Marketing expert and bestselling author Seth Godin wrote a sharp treatise called “Really Bad PowerPoint,” in which he gave this advice:

“Talking about pollution in Houston? Instead of giving me four bullet points of EPA data, why not read the stats but show me a photo of a bunch of dead birds, some smog and even a diseased lung?”

Your audience likely won’t remember your statistics, but they’ll remember your point.

Paint a picture

Don’t just show pictures — create them in the minds of your audience. This is especially important when it comes to conveying abstract concepts like big numbers, which can be meaningless without a vivid reference point.

The news is filled with mystifying quantities — 100,000 acres of forest burned, 5,000 square miles of farmland flooded. How do you put these numbers in context?

I saw an effective example in a recent season of TV’s “The Amazing Race” (apparently you can find good lessons anywhere, if you look hard enough). The competitors were in Dhaka, Bangladesh, which our host, Phil, said is an incredibly dense city with 100,000 people per square mile.

That sounds like a lot. But how can we get a real sense of what that is? Fortunately, Phil informs us that it’s like cramming the entire population of the United States and Mexico into a space the size of Los Angeles. That’s an image that will stay with you.

There’s a helpful tool called Dimensions (at howbigreally.com), which you can use to overlay major events on a map of your own neighborhood or other familiar geographic area. This way, you can express, for instance, how much Brazilian rainforest we lose every year. (It’s an area the size of Louisiana.)

Stop claiming that something would stretch “halfway to the moon.” How about bringing things down to Earth? Do the math and say that it’s five trips



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around the globe, or 20 round-trips from New York to San Francisco.

Help your audience picture what you’re talking about.

Let others talk

What is it about movies and TV that draws us in (besides the gratuitous car chases)? It’s about a great story with compelling characters. So try to find the characters in your own story, then get out of the way.

I worked on a project for a candy company that wanted to demonstrate its commitment to quality and food safety. They had all kinds of seemingly impressive measures in place. But nobody really cares about policies; they care about people.

So we let employees tell the story on video. One of the line workers pointed to a code on the bottom of the package of candy she makes. It showed exactly when and where it was produced.

When she and her family go to the store, the kids run to the candy aisle, turn over the packages and excitedly tell everyone around that their mom made this candy.

Now here’s a person — and a company — who you can count on for quality. You know the product is good enough for your family because she makes sure it’s good enough for hers. It’s a great story with a relatable character at its heart.

As a result, it connects you to the company and the product in a way that can’t be accomplished by the standard recitation of the facts.

Express yourself

The best actors can tap into a deep well of emotion and use it to connect meaningfully with their audience. Applied judiciously, a little forceful expression can go a long way.

I remember watching the coverage of the assassination attempt on President Reagan’s life. The facts were sketchy in the early moments. Newscaster Frank Reynolds was on the air for ABC. At one point he conveyed a dramatic bulletin: Press Secretary James Brady was dead.

When the report turned out to be false, Reynolds became visibly agitated and barked to those off camera, “Let’s get it nailed down . . . somebody . . . let’s find out! Let’s get it straight so we can report this thing accurately!”

It was a powerful moment, and it demonstrated that in the middle of the chaos, someone was there who was adamant about getting the facts straight. Reynolds was on our side and was working to get the real story.

Don’t be afraid to get fired up. Passion, conviction and enthusiasm will go further with your audience than words will.

Show what you mean

An acting instructor once said, “Actors express themselves through actions. That’s why they’re called actors, not talkers.”

Nobody talks more than lawyers. I was working with a law firm that wanted to attract new associate-level attorneys. The firm’s culture was a big selling point — it was more laid-back than that of your typical stuffy law firm.

But instead of announcing, “Hey, we’re the informal fun firm,” the attorneys put together a series of quirky Web videos that included everything from commercial parodies to hallway beanbag fights.

The videos were a hit and created a lot of industry buzz on blogs and message boards. Without ever having to say that this was a different kind of firm, we clearly demonstrated the message.

As the cliché goes, actions truly do speak louder than words. In fact, practically everything speaks louder than words. So take a cue from Hollywood and say more by showing, not telling. **T**



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