Including Video on Your Website

High-end web designer shares his thoughts on where the Web is going.

BY DON KRESKI

Higher-end video techniques, such as the use of greenscreens, can improve the quality of a web video, but that doesn't mean simpler videos don't have their places. The story is the most important aspect.

The popularity of YouTube has been a bit of a shock to many videographers, who have worked hard throughout their careers to uphold the highest production values. But perhaps it just indicates what's really important in visual media, suggests Gary Ricke, founder and owner of Orbis Web Designs, which creates higher-end Adobe Flash and database-driven websites for mid- to large-sized organizations.

"One of my customers suggested that the lower production values that are acceptable on YouTube do not change the need for a good idea and a good story," Ricke says. "'You can use a cheap camera,' he said, 'but if what you're saying is a bunch of junk, then it's going to come off as a bunch of junk, whereas a well-thought-out story will work.'"

Ricke says there's still a need for high-quality images and sound on a corporate website, though there's a place for YouTube-quality work as well. Either way, the story you have to tell is fundamental, although the way you tell it is changing with the changing technology of the Web.

THE WEB AS A MULTIMEDIA FORMAT

Ricke says that most websites today function a lot like printed brochures or catalogs. You have a certain amount of text and a photo or two, and hopefully everything is well-written and well-designed. Sites like this are less expensive to produce and may offer much more detail than printed materials, but the basic model is print.

As you start to add video or animations to your site, however, the possibilities

open up. "We have one client, the Falkor Group, [that] offers IT consulting and services. Some of [its] competitors are doing really heavy animations to explain what they do," Ricke says. "Consulting services can be hard to digest in text form; you need pages and pages of content. Our idea was to hire a really sharp actor and create a really well-written script so we could get our points across quickly and visually." You can see the result at *www.falkorgroup. com*, and it's worth taking a look.

If you go to the Falkor home page, you'll see an actor walk onto the screen and ask if this is the first time you've visited the website. If it is, he'll tell you a little about the company, then a panel drops down with four options for other pages you can visit to learn more. The programmers at Orbis included code that can tell if it is your first visit or not. If it isn't, the site skips the speech and moves you directly into the menu options.

"A web experience is not a single-page experience," Ricke says. "As people go through a site, they hit this page and go to this page and then this page, and it's the combination of those pages that will

A well-written script and a good actor can help communicate what your business does quickly and in a visual manner.

tell the story. When we created the Falkor site, we tried to anticipate how people would move through the pages, but we also built code to track where they were actually coming from. In a future phase, some pages may have as many as three different videos, and what the actor says will depend on what the viewer has already seen and heard."

FLASH FOR RICH MEDIA

If you look at the Falkor site carefully, you'll notice several types of media in use. There is a great deal of text, any number of photos and diagrams, and a fairly traditional menu system. The site is not 100 percent video for a number of reasons. One was budget. Another was to meet the needs of various potential clients, some who prefer to get their information from video and others who prefer to read. An important consideration was to serve the needs of the search engines. You have to include text and HTML-compatible coding to be indexed by a search engine.

In creating the video segments for the site, Ricke hired a producer who shot the actor against a large greenscreen. "That allowed us to drop out the background and put all of the video on one layer," he says. The backgrounds and the panels with menu options are on additional layers. "I showed this site to another producer I know and he just didn't understand what we were up to. 'Why do you need to do this in Flash, rather than doing all the effects in a video editor?'

"The point of it is that we can change the Flash layers at will or even change them dynamically, depending on the path the viewer is taking through the website. I had another client we did a video for who said, about a year later, 'I wish we could change the background on that segment.' Well we could. It's Flash. What do you want to change it to?"

Of course, most video-based websites are not built with this level of care, nor are most online videos. "I think you can and should use different production levels for different projects," Ricke says. "Every company has a core website that should be really well-done. That's your anchor. But you need to get your message out in a lot of different ways, and some of them can be a little rough around the edges."

Video can help you tell your story at every level, but you do need to realize that a multimedia website or a multimedia promotion is definitely more expensive than a static one.

How expensive? Years ago the rule of thumb for high-end industrial video production (not broadcast) was $10,000 per minute, and that included planning, scriptwriting, talent, shooting, and postproduction. Today, we're probably talking roughly $4,000 per minute or $16,000 for a 3- or 4-minute production. If you're able to find a young or hungry videographer, you can do better. Ricke is putting together a package that includes writing, acting, studio greenscreen production, and editing for about $3,500 per minute. I've started offering productions showing AV integration work for lower prices through my company, Kreski Marketing Consultants, as well.

Whatever the production type or the budget, Ricke argues for planning and scriptwriting as the key to success, and I agree. "I'm a big fan of movies," he says, "and I always watch the behind-the-scenes stuff on any DVD. I watched Pixar's *Up* recently and was intrigued to hear the director say that they spent five years making that movie, with three and a half spent just on the story. I don't know how many people realize how much goes into what to say and how to say it." **SVC**