

IPOD VIDEO

HOW TO MAKE YOUR VIDEO GO VIRAL



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INTRODUCTION

VIRAL VIDEOS, A DEFINITION

We hear a lot about viral marketing these days, and especially viral videos. This method of exposure is pretty easy to understand, actually; it's just word-of-mouth, but on the internet. "Viral" refers to the contagious nature of successful viral marketing. One person enjoys it and spreads it to two other people, those two spread it to two other people, and so on and so on. This is why someone can post a two minute video on Youtube, show it to a few friends, and within a week have hundreds of thousands of views.

This can make advertising or just making a video for fun and getting it to a wide audience a work-free endeavour. You put something out there, everyone likes it, and they start sharing it with one another, posting it on their blogs and MySpace pages, and, if you're really lucky, maybe it gets featured in a mainstream news outlet or even commented on in a late night talk show monologue.

That is... as long as people do like it. It's actually kind of tricky to stumble upon just the right idea, something that will hook the viewer and inspire them to tell all their friends "You gotta see this!" As such, we can't guarantee any video you make will go viral, since nobody, not even the people who regularly reach millions of hits on their videos, know exactly what that special ingredient is. But, we can send you in the right direction, and you may just get that lucky break into the so-called collective consciousness.

1

CONTENT: WHAT GOES INTO A VIRAL VIDEO?

The actual content of a viral video can be anything from a chimpanzee doing kung fu to a hilariously low-rent TV commercial to a really great guitar solo performed by some thirteen year old in his bedroom. With that in mind, go ahead and develop whatever idea you like. Whether you're marketing a product or service or you're making short movies for fun, just fill your video with whatever you find interesting because, here's the trick: If you find it interesting, someone else finds it interesting, too.

So that's the one thing that all viral videos have in common; they're interesting. There's something to them that leaves the viewer either impressed, or laughing, or, sometimes, even touched on an emotional level. It's not all cute kittens and silly commercials, there are also viral videos like Christian the Lion, where an adult lion is reunited with the humans who took care of him as a cub, and Where in the Hell is Matt?, where a man records himself dancing in beautiful locations around the planet. Actually shot on location in forty two different countries, the video serves as a portrait of some of the most beautiful places on Earth.

So whatever you have in mind, just go ahead and do it. Don't stop yourself and say "Well, who's gonna care about that?" because as long as you care, you can bet that there are thousands of people out there who will care, too. Great ideas always sound crazy until they catch on.

POPULAR CONTENT

Now... that said, we're not going to sit here and give you all this feel-good advice without also giving you some real, solid facts about what kind of viral videos do tend to garner a lot of hits. Even if this sort of video isn't what you set out to do, you can put a link to your website on the vid or just trust that the people who like it will click on your Youtube channel and see what else you got.

So, yes, there are some types of videos that tend to get more views than others. However, none of these are a guarantee. Because it can be so hard to predict whether or not a video will go viral, you really can't take any advice on viral video making as a one hundred percent sure fire, guaranteed, fool proof strategy. Likewise, it's always possible to ignore everything and still get your video going viral.

A lot of it comes down to luck. Really, all the advice we're giving here is meant to increase the chances of your video going viral. Nobody can outright promise that their tips will make you go viral, so we're not going to lie and say that we can.

Anyways, on with the popular content!

TUTORIALS

If you look on YouTube, some of the most popular videos on there are tutorials. The appeal of these videos is a lot like the appeal of How-To books, which always tend to sell very well; people like learning how to do cool things. Heck, that's why you're reading this e-Book, right? If you know some really cool magic tricks, if you can flip a pen around your finger or play a tricky song on the guitar, any skill you have that most people probably don't, you can make a video sharing that skill with the

world and it has a good chance at getting a lot of views, because who doesn't want to learn a new trick to impress their friends with in just a few minutes?

GET TOPICAL

Think of the opening monologues on the late night talk shows. They're always focused on the subjects that are on everyone's minds right now. It's not the only kind of comedy in the world, of course, but it is the kind of comedy that always seems to get a lot of views.

THE INTERNET'S FUNNIEST HOME VIDEOS

As you know, one of the most popular types of video on the internet is the whole funny-mishaps category. Again, this may or may not be the kind of video you're trying to make, but if you've got a hilarious clip of your dad falling into the pool at the last family reunion, you can use that to draw attention to your other videos.

ANIMALS, KIDS AND BABIES

This one's a no brainer, of course. People love cute kittens, cute puppies, cute kids and cute babies. Look at Star Wars According to a Three Year Old. It's just an adorable three year old girl describing the plot of Star Wars, and it's just about the cutest thing you've ever seen. It was posted in early 2009 and currently has quite a few million views, as well as a number of parody and tribute videos, and has been featured on television.

STAR WARS

And that's the other thing that people love on YouTube. Star Wars, Star Trek, Battlestar Galactica, Doctor Who, if it has a huge sci-fi fanbase, then you can dip into that fanbase for some fans of your own. As an example, you've probably heard of Chad Vader, a series about Darth Vader's less successful brother. He's the manager at a grocery store. The internet series chronicles Chad's feud with his rival manager (a regular plot point is their battle for the night and day manager positions). The guys who make those videos have made several other videos, but none that have received the kind of viewership as Chad Vader, which regularly gets a few million views per episode.

2

THE HOOK: GRABBING THE VIEWER'S ATTENTION

Okay we lied. There is one other thing that all successful viral videos have in common, and that is that they grab the viewer's attention within the first few ten seconds. A common saying regarding movies, "If nothing interesting happens in the first five minutes, nothing interesting will happen in the rest of the movie, either". Well, if your video's only two minutes long, then you've really only got about ten seconds to convince the viewer to keep watching.

Think of the whole internet video thing as MTV after a few energy drinks, the audience wants something short, fast and immediately gripping. There are millions and millions of videos out there, and the fact is that most people will just click on something else if they don't think the one they're watching will be worth the time.

There are a lot of ways of hooking the viewer right away, and it really does depend on what kind of video you're making, but essentially you just don't want to take the viewer's attention span for granted. In short, viral videos are the pop song of the iPod generation: Start with a something catchy and don't overstay your welcome.

THE FIRST TEN SECONDS

If you're doing comedy, make sure there's a laugh in those first ten seconds and then keep them laughing for the next two minutes. If you're

doing an advertisement, the viewer should know what you're selling right off the bat; show the product or service right up front and spend the rest of the video explaining what makes that product or service so great.

Not to say that there's no room for subtlety, but subtlety is a tricky thing to pull off in those first ten seconds. Start with a bang and spend the rest of the video getting a little more in-depth.

An excellent example would be The Angry Video Game Nerd, James Rolf. He makes a good living reviewing bad video games on Youtube, regularly getting over a million views per video. His videos are insightful, humorous and nostalgic, really getting into the whole philosophy of game design and why the one he's reviewing stinks, but before he gets into all that, he spends the first thirty odd seconds of the video using very imaginative curse words to describe the game in brief. Crude, sure, but it's turned out to be an incredibly catchy hook for his viewers.

We're not saying you need to start swearing like a sailor in all your vids, but within the first ten seconds, you should let the viewer know what you're all about, and then spend the rest of the video getting a little more in-depth about it.

TRIAL RUN

Now, before putting your video online, show it to some friends. Make a note of how they react. Tell them to be brutally honest with you and ask... was it funny? Did it make sense? Were there any boring parts?

The main thing is cutting out the parts that are boring or confusing. When you're just starting out, that may leave you with a pretty skimpy video, less than a minute in length, but you know what? That's a good thing. The shorter the better. If it's possible to get all the information across in five seconds, then go ahead and make a five second video.

People tend to share the shorter videos via social networking sites and iPod texting more often than they do the longer videos, so you really do have a better shot at going viral if you cut out everything that's not needed. So, in short, just trim it down to the best parts and leave everything else on the cutting room floor.

3

TARGETING YOUR TARGET AUDIENCE

We said before that, no matter what you're into, there's always going to be somebody else who's into it, too. Well, if you really want to capitalize on that, then you need to get to know your audience.

This doesn't mean selling out and just making whatever you think other people will like. Don't worry, you'll have plenty of time to sell out later when you're rich and famous. What this means is just bringing a sense of focus and purpose to your videos. Remember, the golden rule of making anything, be it a video or a sandwich, is to make what you like. That said, keep up with the communities that revolve around what you like.

Say you're doing a video blog about movie news. Obviously, you don't want to be reporting as fact something that was debunked as a rumor several weeks ago, nor do you want to be reporting "Breaking news!" a month after it was already reported by everyone else. So basically all we're saying here is; know your stuff and stay up to date.

The same goes with using viral videos for marketing. Looking at it from a business perspective, when high speed internet became more accessible to the common user, a lot of dial-up moguls went out of business because they didn't expect high speed to be as big as it wound up being, so they stuck to good old 56k and wound up losing a lot of customers that way. The same can happen to any business owner or marketer who doesn't keep up with their industry.

STAY INVOLVED

Join some online forums relevant to your subject. Besides being a great way to keep up on what's new, you've also got a guaranteed audience right there. Even if you're already making some news sites a regular part of your day, it's tough to keep up on all of it all by yourself, so reading the message boards can help fill you in on what you missed.

This would tend to apply to a lesser degree if you're doing videos just for entertainment, but, again, this is where your test audience comes in. If a joke is funny, you'll laugh whether you're a coin collector a video gamer or a movie fan, so there's no real news to keep up with if you're just trying to make people laugh, but showing it to your friends to get some test audience reactions can be immensely helpful. Once more, this comes down to the golden rule of making videos: If your friends like it, someone else will, too.

STAY TRUE TO YOUR STYLE

It's not about changing the content of your videos to please the masses.

It's just about getting focused and serious on what your videos are all about in the first place. Don't think that, because movie review videos are big, you need to make movie review videos, or that you need to make any major changes at all, really.

So if you want to target your target audience, the main thing is to just remember who your target audience is: Yourself.

This is true whether you're trying to entertain or market. What makes you laugh? What would get your attention and make you want to support the company? Start from there and then see how others react to the results.

If you don't like it, chances are, nobody else will, either.

4

FROM LIVEJOURNAL TO TWITTER: USING SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES TO GET YOUR VIDEO OUT THERE

Social networking is really the key ingredient to getting a regular audience for your videos. The whole phenomena of these sites has been around since before Livejournal, and has since gone through a gradual evolution... We'll start with MySpace.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF MYSPACE

Yeah, MySpace pages are kind of annoying. They autoplay a really bad song for you as soon as you load the page up, they're loaded with flashy graphics and they're mostly just a bunchy of photos people took of themselves at a party. But! It's still worth looking into, because that's actually not what the site was designed for.

The site was actually created for the purpose of letting musicians promote themselves, with or without a talent agent. On that level, it's been an incredible success. Many musicians who might never have had a shot at getting signed before MySpace have gone on to have incredibly lucrative careers by selling their own CDs over the site, and in fact, most of today's record producers are constantly sifting through MySpace with a fine tooth comb to find the next big thing.

It just so happens that it was also a great way for people to meet others with similar interests. If you look at the fact that many on MySpace have thousands of "friends" listed, then it also becomes obvious that a side effect is that a lot of people simply collect friends almost as a form of points...

MAKING CONNECTIONS

The whole idea of "friends" on MySpace is a little weird. When you look and see that someone has over one thousand friends... well, nobody has more than one thousand real friends, but a friend on MySpace is just someone who regularly looks at your site to see what's new. For an artist, a musician, a video maker, this is great. This means that you're getting a bigger audience than most independent filmmakers get.

MySpace is still around, but it seems that their glory days have passed. Today, everyone has moved on to Facebook and Twitter, and what's more, YouTube has adopted the social networking of MySpace to allow video makers to skip that process.

You can now "friend" people on YouTube and similar sites, and there's actually something of a community on the site now. More than just a place to dump your videos and forget about them, the site's focus has shifted to connecting video makers to one another.

And here's the thing... if you want your videos to go viral, you really want to get involved in that social aspect.

The video channels with the most subscribers on YouTube usually have a lot of subscriptions and friends, as well. So the trick to getting a lot of YouTube viewers is to watch a lot of YouTube. Leave a lot of comments on popular videos, because people will often follow those comments back to your channel. Subscribe to any video channels you like, send a friend

request to the ones who cover similar subject matter.

GET TO KNOW YOUR FELLOW VIDEO MAKER

If you ask any of the most popular YouTubers, they'll tell you that being an active member of the community is a bigger part of getting views than anything you actually put in your videos themselves (of course, a bad video won't get many views no matter what, but you get the idea).

Using Twitter and Facebook is another great way to get your stuff recognized. These are basically blogging sites have character limits, so you can't post more than 150 words on Twitter, for example. Back in the Livejournal days, somebody might have, say, twenty or thirty friends, since their posts were longer so, any more than thirty and you'd be spending all day catching up on the posts.

Now, since the posts on Facebook and Twitter are always pretty short, most people on those sites have hundreds of friends who they actually do make a point of keeping up with. On Twitter, it's actually quite easy to read a list of several hundred friends posts. While the character limit is set at 150 characters, most posts are actually shorter, usually being less than ten words in length, and it's actually quite easy to breeze right through, say, three hundred friend updates in an hour. That's fewer than three thousand words.

So the point is that you can easily get on these sites and start exploring. Friend every user you like, and then start posting your videos. If you friend, say, ten people a day for a week, that's seventy people. For two weeks, that's one hundred forty people. That may not seem like much, because what's a mere one hundred forty regular views? But... that brings us to our next chapter.

5

WORD OF MOUTH: HOW VIDEOS GO VIRAL

Question: If you could take a piece of paper, 0.05 millimeters in thickness, and fold it in half fifty times, how big would it be?

Answer: It would be so big it would pass the moon and keep on going for several hundred thousand miles.

If you think we're making that up, grab a sheet of printer paper and see how many times you can fold it. Now, after the seventh time, it's about a half an inch thick, and it's pretty much impossible to fold anymore.

If you could fold it again, it would be an inch thick, then two inches, then four, eight, sixteen inches thick. Fold it again and it's thirty two inches thick, then sixty four inches thick. Fold it one more time and it's a little over ten feet thick. At this point we've only folded it fifteen times. Fold it five more times and it's hundreds of feet thick. By our thirtieth fold, it's in the area of two miles thick. By the fiftieth fold, we've got hundreds of thousands of miles of paper to deal with.

This is the same idea behind word of mouth and social networking. One person tells two people, two people tell four people, four people tell eight people and so on and so on. Only this happens on a much larger scale because of these social networking sites.

FACEBOOKIN'

Say you have just twenty friends on Facebook. You post a video, and ten of your friends like it enough to post it on their own pages. They each have ten friends who like it enough to post it as well. Each of those ten friends has ten friends, and each of those ten friends have ten friends, and so on and so on. You're multiplying your viewers by ten every time your video makes the rounds this way. For an example of what that can do for you, check out a video on Youtube called Powers of Ten, showing that, by multiplying and dividing our distance from a man in a park by ten a few times, we can zoom right into the cells in his body, or zoom all the way out for a wide angle shot of the entire cosmos.

Of course, you might not be multiplying by ten. Maybe you're only multiplying by two, but as we've already seen with the paper exercise, the power of two isn't to be trifled with.

So what can you do to encourage this to happen?

Hopefully, it's out of your hands as soon as you debut your video to your Facebook pals, and they've already got it making the rounds. However, that doesn't always work. Sometimes a video just plain doesn't catch on at first.

When that happens, just post a link to it wherever you can, on relevant message boards, in your signature on those forums, or even in your "away" message on Gmail chat, and see what happens. Sometimes all you need is one person with a popular blog to like your video, post a link to it for their readers (and again, their reader's readers might like it, and their reader's readers might like it, and so on and so on), and before you know it, all your self-promotion has been done for you.

The main thing is to just keep posting it until you get tired of posting it, and then post it a few more times. Your video won't go viral unless

thousands of other people on the internet like it enough to share it, but how can they share it in the first place if they don't even know it exists?

Luckily, all it takes is one lucky bit of exposure to get the ball rolling in your favor. If you can break the million viewer mark once, you're bound to get some regular viewers as a result, and they'll likely keep your view count multiplying for all your future videos.

6

FLEAMARKET MONTGOMERY: USING VIRAL VIDEOS AS A POWERFUL MARKETING TOOL

The reason viral videos are such a favorite in marketing should be easy enough to understand: A viral video is free exposure to millions of people.

Before broadband internet made these videos possible, a company would have to spend millions of dollars for a Superbowl ad if they wanted that kind of an audience.

Regarding the title of this chapter, Fleamarket Montgomery is actually a furniture store slash mini-mall slash flea market located in Montgomery, Alabama. The store is owned by Sammy Stephens, a businessman from the area, and while it had already been providing him a comfortable living, there was really no hope of him ever being able to afford nationwide advertising.

WHAT MAKES SAMMY STEPHENS SO GREAT?

Stephens produced a TV commercial, initially intended only to air locally, featuring himself dancing and singing an upbeat rap song about his store. Well, you've probably seen it by now, but if you haven't, do yourself a favor, go on Youtube, and look up Fleamarket Montgomery.

Somebody from the Montgomery area saw the video, thought "Man this is hilarious! I think the whole world deserves to see this!" So they put it online, and even though they gave it the misnomer "Worst local commercial ever!" it now has more than ten million views. A second, longer version has about five million, and various "clones", copies that have been uploaded by fans of the original video, similarly have millions of views.

A number of "remix" videos have been put up online as well. Stephens recorded the video against a bluescreen, and then released the bluescreen version to the public, so fans have taken that footage and put new backdrops behind him, putting him into other music videos, inside haunted houses, you name it, and these videos often have millions of views as well.

The song has been featured on national TV shows, such as The Ellen DeGeneres Show, and even an episode of The Office, and the catchy hook of the song, "It's just like a mini-mall!" quickly became something of a national catchphrase, the "Where's the Beef?" of the '00s.

As a result, Stephens has seen a lot of opportunity opening up for him. He's been invited to perform with various musical artists like Family Force Five, and, ever the wise entrepreneur, has begun selling merchandise along the lines of T-shirts bearing the Flea Market Montgomery logo.

The point of the story is that you don't need to be rich to advertise anymore. All you need is a good idea and a camcorder.

A LEVEL PLAYING FIELD

A lot of big companies have made attempts to get in on this, but to be honest, they haven't all succeeded. This is not because a big company is

somehow unable to get a video to go viral, but rather, because they don't have a better shot than any of us do at producing a successful viral video. Money is always helpful, sure, but for the first time, having less money is no longer a disadvantage in the realm of advertising.

Simply put, high speed internet and inexpensive digital video cameras even the playing field. We all have the same opportunities now when it comes to getting our stuff out there to the world. Nobody is impressed by how much money you spend making a video, all that matters is that it's funny, entertaining or interesting. The viewer really doesn't care about anything else.

This goes for anyone just making entertainment videos, too. Forget all that stuff you've heard about getting your foot in the door. The door is wide open. You're already part of the industry just by putting your stuff online in the first place.

7

AN ART, NOT A SCIENCE: WHY VIRAL VIDEOS ARE A TRICKY BUSINESS

Viral videos really are a tricky, tricky thing. There's no one, sure fire trick to getting a lot of views. You can take all the right steps and still wind up with fewer than one hundred views. Other times, you might make some silly little video you think is kinda stupid, but it's worth a chuckle or two, so you put it online and it gets a thousand views less than an hour later. You just never really know how the viewers are going to receive your video.

Think of your viral video audience like a ten month old baby. They can be kind of finicky about what they find entertaining. What makes them giggle and squeal with delight one day may only annoy them the next.

It's all about putting your videos up in the right place at the right time, so there really is a lot of luck involved. You can dramatically improve your chances of breaking through to the right audience by way of the information in this e-Book, but if someone tells you there's any such thing as a one hundred percent effective way to guarantee a ton of views, they're telling an outright lie.

THE LUCK OF THE DRAW

It's a little like playing the lottery. You can never guarantee a win, but... you can improve your chances by buying a lot of tickets.

Now the good news is that the tickets to this proverbial lottery are free. It doesn't cost a cent to put your videos online, so just go ahead and post your videos wherever you see fit, as many times as possible.

What's more, make a lot of videos. Not only will making a lot of videos increase your chances of one of them breaking out, but with every video you make, you get better at the art and craft of making videos and learning to intuit what might and might not work for garnering views.

That's another point we've been meaning to make here. Don't spend all your time worrying about this one video that's going to be your magnum opus. Make a bunch of videos. They won't all be great, but it's the only way to practice. It's like if you learn to paint. The first painting you create isn't going to be the Mona Lisa... it's going to stink, to be honest. However, you have to make those early pieces for practice or you'll never make a good video at all.

KEEPING AT IT

There was a story of a Chinese painter. The Emperor came to him and requested a painting of a bird in flight. He gave him one year to produce the painting, and if he failed in this task, he would have him executed (you know how those Chinese Emperors were, always threatening to execute people).

A year later, the Emperor visited the painter in his studio. He looked around and saw thousands and thousands of sketches and paintings of birds. Some were kind of rough looking, most were average, and a few were beautiful.

The Emperor was impressed, and asked the painter "Which one is mine?" The painter said "Give me a minute." and he sat down and painted a new piece for the Emperor, more beautiful than any of the others in the studio.

The Emperor asked him why he waited until now to paint it when he had a whole year to get it just right. The painter replied "I spent the whole year painting nothing but birds. Each painting was better than the last. I wanted you to have the most beautiful one, so I waited until now, to ensure that this is the best painting of a bird I could possibly create."

Or, long story short: Learn by doing. You may not be Francis Ford Coppola just yet, but you may just get there if you keep practicing. The more videos you make, the more practice you get, and the more chances you have at getting that breakout video that goes viral.

8

TALKING REALLY FAST AND OTHER TRICKS TO FIT ALL THE RELEVANT INFORMATION INTO A TWO MINUTE VIDEO

We've already talked about playing to the short attention spans inherent to the internet video world, but it can be tricky to actually fit everything you want into a short video.

Even professional screenwriters often say that it's very hard to get what they want into a movie, and those guys have an hour and a half to work with. There are, however, some invaluable tricks of the trade to slimming everything down.

WHAT REALLY IS RELEVANT?

First of all, what information do you need to get across? If you're hoping to get it all out in a single viral video, then you should be able to write it all down on a single index card. From there, it's just a matter of figuring out how to say it convincingly.

This applies to comedy videos, too. The perfect joke has just enough words, and not one extra. It is a process of transmitting information. For example...

Q: What has four legs and a pair of wings?

A: A dog. I lied about the wings.

The information you need to get across here is that, firstly, there's an animal with four legs and wings, and secondly, that it's a dog, and you were lying about the wings. The joke is told quickly because all you really need to do is get that information across. It doesn't matter if the dog is black, if he has a spot around one eye, it doesn't matter what breed he is. All that matters is that it's a dog.

The same goes not only for jokes, but storytelling, as well. For example, if two characters are talking at a party, there's no reason for them to chat about the host, or even mention the host by name, unless the host is also an important character in the story.

Basically, just write down what's relevant, and build the script around that, without one scene extra.

TRIMMING THE SCRIPT

To trim things down with writing, you really just want to use as few words as possible to say what you need to say. Obviously, you don't want to completely sacrifice eloquence and wind up with an advertisement video that just says "This product good! You buy!" (then again, that could be a hot viral video idea right there), but if you can say something in one sentence, then don't use a full paragraph to say it.

Cut out any repetitive dialog. If you have any repetitive dialog, go ahead and cut it out. When people keep saying the same thing over and over again in different ways, you want to go ahead and delete that. Er, we

mean to say that you should really try not to repeat yourself.

TRIMMING THE VIDEO

Robert Rodriguez, director of Sin City and Spy Kids is well known for the fast pace of his movies. He always seems to be able to trim what should be a three hour film into an hour and a half. The way he does it is kind of a cheap trick, but it makes perfect sense: He just keeps shaving every shot down. You'd be surprised how much time you can cut off a video by scratch off a second here, two seconds there and half a second over here. Say the average shot length for your five minute video is five seconds long. If you can shave one second off of each shot, you can trim it down to four minutes.

Then you can just go ahead and cut out any useless shots, any shots that don't really help get your point across. Cut any of the jokes that aren't funny, any shots that just plain seem weird and out of place. You really do have to be merciless here. Making a great video is more about cutting stuff out than it is about putting stuff in.

SHOW, DON'T TELL

As they say, a picture is worth a thousand words. Anything you can show, show it, don't just talk about it.

If you want a great example, look up some Billy Mays videos and look at how he pitches products. When advertising Mend-It, a product that works like a sort of super-super-glue, he doesn't just talk about how strong it is, he goes up in an airplane and patches a skydiver's parachute with it. It's a great visual aid and it saves him a lot of time. He doesn't have to sit there explaining that it could, theoretically, safely patch a parachute. Instead,

he proves it.

You might not be able to go rent an airplane and get a skydiver to trust you with his life like that, but the point remains, it's quicker and more effective to show rather than to tell.

9

INSIDE JOKES: UNDERSTANDING THE VIRAL CULTURE OF INTERNET COMMUNITIES

The word meme comes to us from Richard Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene*. The book itself is a study on evolution, while the idea of memetics comes into play in applying concepts of evolution to human culture.

In essence, there's a process of competition and natural selection at play on every level of human existence. From two candidates competing for the same job, to a number of suitors competing for the love of a beautiful woman to, yes, online videos competing for viewer attention.

Successful memes are basically those things that enter the public consciousness. For example, we all know who Super Mario is, even if we haven't played a video game in years. A recent poll of children around the world found Mario to be an even more recognizable figure than Mickey Mouse.

He wasn't the only video game character around at the time Donkey Kong came out. We also had Pitfall Harry, Pac Man, and those Space Invaders, but when we think of video games, we think of Mario. Explaining that through Dawkins' theories, we see that Mario's creator Shigeru Miyamoto won a kind of competition in creating such an iconic character.

Pac Man has his qualities, but Mario's recognizability is instantaneous and distinctive. Shigeru Miyamoto had set out to create a character who would have a lot of personality on visuals alone, but he only had four colors and less than one hundred pixels to work with. He gave the character a moustache because it was hard to make mouths on the old arcade hardware. He gave the character red overalls because they clearly separated the arms from the chest while giving the character a unique, colorful look, and the hat was given just because hair always looked really weird on video game characters in those days.

Miyamoto's ideas worked. Mario was a unique, distinctive character, loaded with personality, instantly recognizable, and because of that, he beat out all the other characters vying for the role of "Most iconic video game character".

MEMES, MEMES EVERYWHERE

This exact same concept of "memes" is at play not only in internet communities, but everywhere. This is how all concepts spread. From religion to the sciences to urban legends, there's competition for the right to survive, in a sense, in a prominent place in the public consciousness. With religion and science, while certain religious leaders may hold dearly to their particular beliefs, the ideas that spread will always be the ones that appeal most to the public. The story of Jesus, for example, is a great story whether you're Christian or not, and so, it earns its place in the public consciousness.

When it comes to securing your own place in the public consciousness with your viral videos, the silver bullet we're all looking for is to generate something like a great catch phrase, a "Make my day" or "Dude, where's my car?" kind of thing, or a memorable moment, like Indiana Jones pulling his gun out and shooting that guy who was swinging the sword

around.

The fact is that many of these catch phrases and great moments tend to happen by accident, and they're kind of hard to arrange on purpose. The Indiana Jones moment, for example. Steven Spielberg had been planning a big, elaborate sword fight for that scene, but on the day of shooting, Harrison Ford was actually feeling ill and was in kind of a bad mood, and he really didn't want to do the sword fight. He suggested "Wouldn't Indy just shoot the guy? I mean, I've got a gun, right?" and film history was made.

Catch phrases, likewise, tend to develop naturally. They rely on repetition, the things we hear a person or character say all the time.

This isn't to say you can't try and come up with a great catch phrase or an iconic moment or character on purpose, but you'll never be able to force it. If people don't think your main character's catch phrase is funny, no amount of repetition will ever get them to like it.

WHAT'S SO FUNNY ABOUT NATURAL SELECTION?

It really is all about natural selection (exemplified clearly in the title of the video sharing website "Funny or DIE!"), and this is why we're putting so much emphasis on making a lot of videos, not just one or two. You simply improve your chances of nailing that iconic appeal you're going for by trying more than once. You may get lucky and wind up with thousands of views on your first shot, but the online community is just as prepared to watch your video as they are to gladly ignore it.

In short, ideas catch on because there's something to them that just plain works right away. They're immediately understandable, and people enjoy holding onto them as an inside joke of sorts. That's exactly what you

want, to be quoted as a sort of nerd-reference, like dialog from Star Wars. There's no better way to get people talking about your video than having people wanting to get in on the joke.

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FINE PRINT: WHAT YOU ABSOLUTELY NEED TO KNOW TO KEEP FROM BEING SUED

Be forewarned, this is kind of a long chapter. Essentially, you can do and say anything you want in a video, but there are certain laws regarding things like copyrights, libel and slander that provide some hidden landmines that many viral video makers trip over. What really stinks is that you usually won't get in trouble until your video's a hit, so you finally get a million views, but now you have to take it down because one of those million views was someone who works at Sony BGM, and they're going to sue you if you don't remove a song they hold the rights to from the soundtrack.

The line between what you can and cannot do is a little blurry, but we'll try to explain it in plain English, and not Legalese.

COPYRIGHT LAWS

When it comes to copyright laws, there's actually quite a lot you can get away with. Even stuff that's technically not legal, copyright laws only come into effect if the copyright holder wishes to press charges. However, it's usually best to play it safe.

ESSENTIALLY, HERE'S WHAT YOU CANNOT DO...

You cannot use copyright protected songs on the soundtrack without permission from the copyright holder. Millions of youtubers get away with this every day and nobody seems to mind, but if you're not so lucky, most video sharing sites will either mute the audio, forcing you to remix the sound of the video with a new song, or they'll just remove the video altogether.

You cannot use unedited clips from a movie. Technically, you shouldn't be able to use any footage at all, but most movie companies don't seem to mind when people make fake trailers for their movies or cut different scenes together to make Robocop vs. Terminator. It works as publicity for films that are often forgotten by now, piquing public interest and earning them a few DVD sales. However, if you just put your favorite scene from Kill Bill on the internet without Quentin Tarantino's permission, you can fully expect it to be taken off the site pronto.

AND NOW, WHAT YOU CAN DO...

You can use anything you want in the context of a review, but only up to ten percent or thirty seconds of a song, and only ten percent or three minutes of a movie, whichever is shorter.

Thanks to the Fair Use laws, you can literally use any fictional character or public figure, you can steal any plotline from any movie, you can mock any politician, actor or musician, you can do your own cover of any song... just so long as what you're doing falls under parody. For example, everything Weird Al Yankovic does is completely legal. He still asks permission from the original artists, but he does so only as a courtesy.

DEFAMATION

Defamation is defined as being any statement made, in print, speech or broadcast (and this includes viral videos) with the sole intention of giving a negative impression of a person or a group of people.

It is generally required that, first, the statement must be false, and second, it must be made to somebody besides the defamed. So if you called someone a jerk to his face, that wouldn't count. In fact, just calling someone a jerk wouldn't count in the first place, since that's a matter of opinion, as opposed to something that could be construed as a "false fact". Rather, defamation involves stating something that could be theoretically proven or disproven, so you can't make a video saying that President Obama is a Muslim extremist or something ridiculous like that.

However, again, you can say whatever you want about whoever you want in the context of parody. If you want to make a video where you dress up like some celebrity and do something ridiculous, that's completely covered as parody. You just can't make a video where you make things up about someone and pass them off as fact.

THE FACT OF THE MATTER

The truth is that, often times, the laws on the books don't really matter. Very rarely, works of clear satire have been sued out of existence by the copyright holders of the ridiculed characters.

More than a few Mickey Mouse spoofs have brought their creators troubles. It is technically one hundred percent legal to spoof Mickey Mouse, but Disney has some of the best lawyers in the world, so just know you're treading dangerous waters if you want to do anything with their characters, even if it's one hundred percent satire.

What it comes down to is that it is up to the judge in a given case. You're depending on his knowledge of copyright and defamation law as well as his fair judgment. Defamation cases have actually been won by the plaintiff for things that are entirely true, and lost on things that are entirely false.

This is why we suggest playing it safe. Satire whatever you like, since the cases where clear satire is punished are rare, but be cautious and know the line between spoof and defamation.

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DOING IT YOURSELF: A CRASH COURSE FOR THE BEGINNING VIDEO MAKER

Consider this one a bonus chapter for those of you out there who have never made a video, or who are still learning the ropes. Normally you'd have to buy a whole other book to learn the craft of making videos; how to write the script, how to light the set, how to record clean sound, all those nuts and bolts details of getting the job done.

But honestly, the bare essentials of what you need to know before you pick up the camera, well, you can easily learn all of that in just a few pages. We can't guarantee that your videos will be entertaining or fascinating, that part is up to you, but if you follow the advice in this chapter, your video will at least make sense, so whatever great ideas you do have, they'll be easier to communicate to the viewer.

So without any further ado, we present what we'll call the five minute film school...

PRE-PRODUCTION

WRITING

Writing is easier than it seems. A lot of people tend to assume that, since they've never done much writing before, it's too late to start. The truth is that anybody can write. It's only a matter of getting a great idea and letting your enthusiasm for that idea carry you through from the first page to the last.

If you look online, you can find some screenplay websites to get an idea of formatting. The general rule is that one page will usually make up one minute of screen time. Remember that you're writing a short video, not a feature film, so it's usually best to keep it under five pages.

Before moving on, it's a good idea to read your script to some friends and see how they react. The story or the message of the video makes perfect sense to you, the writer, since it was your idea, but there's no telling if it makes sense to everyone else until you've shown it to someone else.

If your friends come up with some great suggestions, you can work those in. Likewise, if there's a joke in the script that nobody laughs at, go ahead and cut it out. Remember, keep it coherent, keep it short, grab the viewer's attention right at the start, and just have some fun with it.

FINDING ACTORS

This can actually be one of the trickiest parts. First of all, forget finding actors. Just get your buddies together and see if they want to help out. Sure they didn't go to Julliard, but if you coach them through it, you can get a good performance out of just about anyone

If they all turn you down, that's not a dead end, just get creative. Buy a tripod and play all the characters yourself. Just make sure each one has a distinct hat or mustache or something to set that character apart from the others. Or you could do some stop motion animation. Get some Legos and have them act out the scene frame by frame. Try your hand at Flash animation or even CGI. There are really a million ways to make movies without actors, so if you find yourself in that position, just use your imagination to solve the problem.

SHOOTING

A lot of people spend too much time worrying about what camera they should use for shooting. Just get whatever camera you can get your hands on. As long as you can export the captured video to your computer for editing, it doesn't really matter what kind of camera you use.

Remember, people are going to be watching the video on their iPod or in a tiny little Youtube screen. All they care about is if it's entertaining, not how good of a camera you were using. You can grab a great consumer grade mini-DV camcorder for just two hundred dollars, or maybe even less on eBay, so if you want to start making videos, you've got no excuse to wait any longer.

THE THREE LIGHT SETUP

You don't need to buy special lights or get one of those light-reflector boards you see on movie sets, just grab three spare lamps from around the house. The three light setup is the foundation of all indoor film lighting, whether you're doing two minute Youtube videos or a big budget Hollywood movie.

- **Main Light**- This is, of course, your main light, and should be your strongest light. This is the one you use to illuminate the scene and

make sure you can see what's going on, simple as that. Put it off screen, just to one side of and behind the camera.

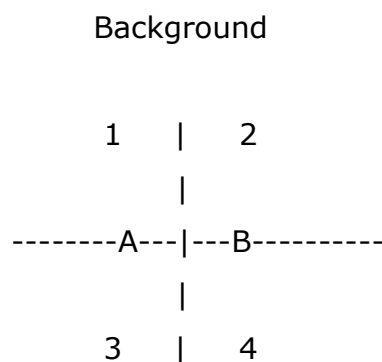
- **Hi-light**- The main light should illuminate everything, but it will also cast shadows. The hi-light is used to fill those shadows in. Put it on the opposite side of the camera from the main light.
- **Backlight**- This light goes behind your actors, somewhere in the background and hidden just off screen. It casts a thin halo of light around your actors so as to separate them from the background.

You can play around with these if you want. Use the backlight only and you get some eerie silouhetes, or use just the main light and the backlight and you get a moody film noir look. Experiment and have fun with it.

THE AXIS

The Axis is one of the core rules of setting up camera angles. You can do whatever crazy stuff you want with the camera, you can flip it upside down, shoot it all handheld, and zoom in and out until the zoom button falls off, just so long as you follow the rule of the axis.

Unfortunately, it is kind of hard to explain in words alone, so we'll have to provide a diagram...



Camera

A and B represent your actors, 1, 2, 3 and 4 are the four sections of your set.

Don't worry, it's really simple. If you're shooting actor A only, keep the camera in section 4. If you're shooting actor B only, keep your camera in section 3. If you're shooting both, you can use either of those two sections. Never put your camera in sections 1 and 2.

This is done so that the two actors look like they're talking to one another, and so that you can always see their faces. If you shoot actor A from section 4, he'll always be facing right, and if you shoot actor B from section 3, he'll always be facing left. If you shoot them both facing left, it winds up looking like they're not having a conversation with each other, but instead, talking to someone standing just off screen. Simple, right?

One more thing: Don't just film the actors talking, film them listening, too. These shots will come in handy later.

SOUND

Sound is one of the trickiest things to get right when you're on a budget. If you can afford a boom mic, get one, it's worth the money. If not, you can still record okay sound with the mic built into the camera.

It's pretty much a matter of just eliminating all outside noise. Turn off your air conditioning, unplug the fridge, and make sure nobody's watching TV in the next room. Make sure your actors speak clearly (but avoid having them shout all their dialog to make sure the mic picks it up!) and you should be fine.

If you just can't get good sound while shooting live, your other option is looping. This is where you record dialog separately and put it over the video in editing. If you don't do it just right, it can wind up looking like a

Kung Fu movie, but sometimes it's your only option.

If you have to loop, play the video back to your actors while they speak their lines again into a microphone. When editing, if it doesn't always match up, take one of those shots you recorded earlier of the other actors listening, and cut that in. The audience will be none the wiser.

POST PRODUCTION

Depending on what kind of movie you're making, post production may well be the most important part of the job.

It's always the most exciting, though. When you're writing, you're just imagining what you'd like to do. When shooting, you're really only watching bits and pieces at a time. In editing, though, you finally see everything come together into a coherent story.

EDITING

When it comes to editing, you'll find your own style, but you'll find that the best thing you can do with editing is to cover up your mistakes! Like if you didn't notice that you bumped the camera while one of your actors was talking, you can cut to the other actor's reaction shot. If two shots don't fit together very well, you can put a "pillow shot" between them (a pillow shot is a shot simply used for pacing, usually of some random detail in the room or a long shot of the location).

Beyond that, you can really do whatever you like so long as you string all your little shots together in a way that makes sense. You can go for a fast paced, staccato kind of feel, with a cut every second or so, you can edit it so that the cuts are in time with the beat of the song on the soundtrack, or you can let one long, unbroken take go on for a full minute. It's up to

you and there's no wrong way to do it.

FINE TUNING

Once your video is edited, watch it several times and see how it plays. Show it to your friends and see what they think. George Lucas once said that movies are never finished, they're only abandoned. What that means is that you really never end the editing process. Rather, you make one cut, show it to your friends, make some improvements, show it to your friends again, and so on and so on until you're as satisfied as you're ever going to be.

Some videos take less fine tuning than others, but chances are you'll always spot at least one thing you want to change before putting it online, so you never want to just throw a video up on the internet without watching it yourself first.

Remember, as long as it makes sense and has something interesting to it, that's really all that matters. People won't really care if the acting is kind of stiff or the lighting is a little weak. If it makes them laugh, if it turns them on to a great product, or if they just think it's kind of cool, that's all they're going to remember in the end, and that's the only thing that will ever get them to start sending it from iPod to iPod.

PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE

Look, let's be honest, your first video probably won't be all that great, but that's okay. Nobody's first anything comes out great. Even Stephen King admits he wrote some really terrible stories before he broke into the mainstream with Carrie.

In fact, when you first get started, don't even start worrying about your

view count too much. Instead, just focus on getting the craft down. Learn the ropes and keep working at it. If you get a lot of views, that'll be a nice bonus, but if you're just starting out, your real goal is simply learning how to make great videos in the first place, the internet fame can come later.

What really counts is that you enjoy doing it. Whether you're creating comedy sketches to make you and your friends laugh, advertising for a small business or pushing the medium by trying to create avant-garde films a few minutes in length, nobody's forcing you to make these videos, so why do it if you don't enjoy it?

So essentially, don't stress out about how many views your first videos get. Create the kind of videos that you'd want to see and know that you always have at least one fan.

CONCLUSION

As much as we'd like to, we can't guarantee that all of the advice we've given will grant you those millions of views you're after. The truth is that it takes some imagination and skill on your part and it takes a bit of good luck.

The good news is that there are no dead ends when it comes to making videos. Just because one video doesn't do so hot doesn't mean your next one won't, either. Plenty of video makers have created a dozen or so videos that received fewer than ten views, only to have the next one strike just the right chord and grab a million views over the course of a single week. Other videos might linger around a hundred views for months, only to suddenly jump up to a few hundred thousand overnight. You never really know for sure how well your videos will do in the long run until it happens.

Anyways, if you're just putting videos online for fun, then our advice is to not worry about it too much. Even if you never hit the million dollar mark, you never get Coca Cola calling you to see if you'll direct a commercial for them, you never get Steven Spielberg to see your video and fly you out to Hollywood so he can produce your debut feature film, the fact remains that you're doing what you love.

If you truly love making your videos, telling your jokes and stories, then that enthusiasm will come through in the videos themselves, and chances are you'll find your audience sooner or later. If not, then at least you've found your passion in life, and that's worth more than having your latest hit featured on national television could ever be... not to say it wouldn't be nice to have your work featured on national television, but the real reward is in simply doing what you love.