

Lights / Camera / Mission

Why using video is essential for mobilising Generation-Y



Author: James Clarke is a church youth pastor and mission mobiliser, and runs [RedArke Productions](#), a company seeking to develop the video production capabilities and approach of UK mission organisations.

I asked one of the girls in my youth group recently when she was born. I'm terrible with ages, especially when it comes to teenagers. Something of a blind spot for a youth pastor, I know. But even I was shocked when she said '1993'. Ninety-three?! Now I've always considered myself young, and I'm still the better side of my mid-twenties, but *I remember that year!* I remember where I was that year, what I was interested in, who my friends were and what I got for Christmas. And yet here is one of millions born in 1993, who are sixteen going-on-seventeen. She is choosing her University preferences and has a car sitting on the drive waiting for the moment in a couple of months when she passes her test and becomes a driver. Scary, when 1993 seems like only yesterday. If we subscribe to the current fashion of 'generation-ology' – we find that she was born right on the cusp of 'Generation-Z'. Where we go beyond that, who knows? But worryingly, I'm becoming old hat now, way back in Generation-Y.

I saw a video a few months ago which fascinated me. It was put together nearly ten years ago to attempt to point out the life experience of Generation-Y, those born since 1980. Alongside painting a picture of the type of world I have lived in, the video tells of the technological advances that have formed the landmarks in our timeline. All of them which have in turn revolutionised the way we communicate, the way we receive information and the way we connect with what is going on across the world. But don't take my word for it, the video is here:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2_CgM2btWzM

Watched it? Good. Perhaps if you're my age then watching that will be like stepping out in front of a bus. Your whole life flashing in front of your eyes, from the recent realities of on-the-go information and connectivity, to the ancient histories of Ronald Reagan – or BBC computers. Of course the entertainment value of the section prefixed by 'what will the future hold for them?' is endless. With our glorious gift of hindsight, we look down our noses at the travelling gentleman's monolithic handheld computer and PDA, as we watch the video with crystal clarity on our iPhones. While the Star Trek architecture of the concept bridge may not have materialised quite yet, the telecommunications advances have far outrun the imagination; in just nine years.

And they've outrun the Christian mission sector too. Perhaps I am speaking out of turn, or perhaps I've been consistently in the wrong place at the wrong time; but ever since I stepped foot in the 'mission game' in my late teens, I have had concerns over the ability – or rather, inability – of mission organisations to effectively communicate to my generation.

Perhaps it is wholly inevitable. Just a quick search through the articles and videos on the internet brings up hundreds of pages devoted to the problems the business world face as they begin to integrate Generation-Y employees into a 'Baby Boomer' (post-war) run organisation. Communication and technology seem to be the biggest disconnect as a generation who have 'got by' technologically meet a generation who have learnt everything they know of the world through digital communication and are more than capable of moving as fast as the trends do. If those are the issues the business world are struggling with, is it any wonder that the same is true of mission agencies – who have always been great at jumping onto the bandwagon a good five or ten years after the corporate world? As the video admits, 'it's not easy to react to a revolution, when you are standing in the middle of it.'

A quick look at <http://www.alexa.com/topsites> gives you a quick idea of just where things are at the moment. The list of the top five daily visited websites consists of three search engines (unsurprisingly), Facebook and YouTube. This, I'd suggest, accurately reflects the division of time spent by my generation on the internet. Which begs the question – why aren't mission agencies and mission workers using these media to more effectively communicate with my generation? Sure, slowly but surely many of the bigger organisations are dabbling. Facebook pages are being used to update followers on this initiative and that prayer need, and a few have even ventured into Twitter to do the same. And yet there is next to nothing on YouTube that effectively tells the story of what God is doing through mission organisations and mission workers; how he's moving and how lives are being transformed across the world. Surely the website with the fourth-highest number of daily visitors is the prime platform for telling these stories? Of course platforms come and go, with fads and phases. But it's not YouTube that I'm worried about. Video in general seems to be something of an afterthought across the UK mission sector.

Video is in no way new. Remember, video killed the radio star way back in 1979, after all. If a picture paints a thousand words, video quite literally paints one thousand five hundred pictures every minute, and does it with more detail, depth, and directness than any ambiguously rendered paragraph can do. It's the *film* of planes hitting the Twin Towers; the *film* of the Berlin wall being breached; the *film* of Mandela being freed and the *film* of Princess Diana's wrecked Mercedes that lodge indelibly in our minds. These images allow us to feel connected to the events, no matter how far from the scene we are. Perhaps this is true for my generation more than any other. We have known no different. First the television and then the internet have kept us informed of the outside world. The majority of the information we've taken in and processed has been visual. We are a generation au fait with sound bites, status updates and video clips; but many of us will never have written a letter to a friend. The way we communicate and the way we receive information is different. Why then, has the ancient art of writing the 'prayer letter' endured as the only way mission agencies deliver news from mission workers to their supporters?

I am not waging war on the prayer letter. My parents and grandparents simply love the prayer letter. It was and is the way they best receive information. But at time of going to print, my Bible is loaded with four lengthy updates from missionaries who are *personal friends*, and each of them remains unread. Why? Not because I'm uninterested in their content or God's work; but because I find letters more difficult to connect with and receive information from.

A few months ago I sent a questionnaire out to seventy-five UK sending mission agencies, with the aim of looking at how they are seeking to inform and communicate with Generation-Y. I was amazed by some of the results. Shockingly, over eighty-five percent of the responses admitted that they have zero budget for video production. In other words, it's not even on their radar. A few responses even dared to suggest that they could see no good reason for video whatsoever, and were almost offended that I'd even suggested such a preposterous thing. Needless to say, when I asked the age of the bulk of their supporters, there were precious few below 65 years of age.

The question that mission agencies must ask is: do they want to share their experiences with Generation-Y? If the answer is 'no', then they are signing their own death certificate. But if the answer is 'yes', and they want to communicate to Generation-Y, then they have got to commit to speaking the same language. Paul himself recognized in 1 Corinthians 14 that no matter how wonderful the words are, if those listening can't understand them, they are useless. For Generation-Y, video is essential, not just desirable. And it needs to be essential for mission agencies too if they are going to transfer their vision and work to this generation. It's how we receive the bulk of our information, how we engage with issues across time zones, and how you're going to captivate us by showing us what God is doing. It's our language.

Generation-X (b. 1960-1980) have been called the 'Missing Generation' – a whole generation that the church failed to communicate effectively to, and consequently a whole generation largely absent from church services. Could Generation-Y be mission's equivalent? I for one hope not. But it will take a few brave mission leaders to recognise that we are not the next generation or the new generation. We are *this* generation. And that means we are *today's* doctors, teachers, nurses, lawyers, architects, administrators, social workers and engineers. And we love Jesus as much as the next guy. *Today's* potential missionaries. But so far, you're just not reaching us. And you're in danger of losing us. No, video is not some miracle drug that will instantly bring droves of Generation-Y would-be missionaries to your door. But this is the language we understand, and if we can engage with mission work visually, we stand a chance of being able to engage with it spiritually, financially, and personally.

In only five years time, that girl who is now in my youth group will have just finished University. She will have qualified with skills that could be transformative and Kingdom building throughout the mission world. By then, in 2015, will mission organisations be ready for Generation-Z?

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