



Jack Myers: Engaging Content Transforms Brand Perceptions

PUBLISHED
January 2014

THE RUNDOWN

What if a brand wants to have a positive dialogue with consumers, but people tune out at the mention of its name? When General Electric wanted to talk about innovation and invention, MyersBizNet Chairman Jack Myers introduced the company to documentary maker Morgan Spurlock. The director and his friends helped spur a larger discussion. As part of the Engagement Project, Myers shares how initial resistance sparked an award-winning content campaign.

“Change is not a strong enough word,” Jack Myers wrote recently, describing the shifts in media and marketing. “We are an industry that is shedding its skin and preparing to give birth to a completely new and different form of life. Metamorphosis. We can only imagine the future.” The one-time TV executive is now a media ecologist, analyzing and advising companies on the changes he sees in technology, revenue models and industry trends. Myers began studying engagement and emotional connections in the 1990s and recently, as co-producer of GE’s Focus Forward film series, he got to put some of his ideas to the test.

Where did the idea for Focus Forward come from?

I'd been meeting with senior GE marketing executives and they had research showing when you mention GE, or promote GE, there's a resistance to the messaging. They were looking at ways to associate with relevant content that embodied their core brand values.

Separately, I'm lucky enough to be a partner in Morgan Spurlock's Cinelan group. Morgan had relationships with hundreds of film directors, trying to fund three-minute films around their passion projects. So I brought Morgan and his team together with GE. It was a clear synergy, which made it a very quick process — only three meetings from start to finish.

We invited leading documentary filmmakers to submit ideas for films focused on innovation and invention, which were the brand values GE wanted to reinforce. A brief was written collaboratively by GE, Cinelan and me. Additionally, we launched a filmmaker challenge that was promoted at film festivals around the world, and we received more than 600 three-minute films. Of those, 90 were approved and distributed through Focus Forward Films.

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How did you establish a connection between the brand and the content?

There wasn't any oversight on whether the films went down a path that was not completely consistent with GE's marketing goals and strategies. One of the competition winners was about ways to identify landmines in Afghanistan, which has little to do with GE. Another one is called “Meet Mr Toilet.” It's a wonderful film that has won all sorts of awards. I'm also particularly fond of “Heart Stops Beating” and “The Invisible Bike Helmet.” They're terrific.

Frankly, there was some surprise at GE and at Cinelan about how closely consumers and viewers did make the connection between the content and the brand. I think the reason why the films themselves are so engaging is because people are watching the content because they're passionate about the subject matter to begin with. Whether you watch it on YouTube, or by going to Focus Forward Films, the GE presence is clearly there. For those who make the connection, they're making an extremely strong connection. It's very clear the only reason that film exists, or that story is being told, is because of GE.

How did you help the films find the right audience?

The goal was to shift GE's brand perception within the documentary film community — they tend to be hardcore communicators with strongly held opinions — so we premiered at film festivals in key cities around the world.

Three of the films were selected for the competition at Sundance and the Tribeca Disruption awards. At that point, in March 2013, they had received over 16 million views. That's major scale for what is a mostly business-to-business brand marketing, selling and distributing million dollar machines.

GE also targeted decision makers. The films have been shown at the UN, on college campuses, corporations, and at associations and conventions on different topics.

How did the documentary community react?

At the beginning of the program, the public was upset with Morgan Spurlock. They'd come out to events where he was doing appearances and yell, "How dare you be involved with GE?!"

Once the films started screening, though, people saw that the only brand association is the GE logo at the beginning and the end. The positive feedback was extraordinary. On a pre/post basis, there was this huge shift in perception from negative to positive using traditional pre/post studies of both Focus Forward Films and GE.

An intercept study* of 2,500 people, with a baseline of 28% positive perceptions of GE, found that after viewing a Focus Forward film, 68% "agreed" or "strongly agreed" with the statement "GE is a company at work making the world a better place." Research showed perceptions and awareness of the GE brand overall was extraordinarily high among those who'd seen any of the Focus Forward films.

*JUN Group Post View Study of Focus Forward Films viewers exposed to two films