

Building a Sandcastle . . . in Five Languages

A hypothetical case history of how one story would look and sound on TV and in various online formats. Viva la difference!

by Jerry Lazar

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Video assignment: Profile a professional sandcastle builder. Yes, they exist. For fun, they enter crazy contests and create larger-than-life-sized Disney sand characters on the beach. For money, they build gigantic sand fortresses for festive celebrations ranging from kids' birthday parties to beach weddings. And somehow live with the fact that a day's worth of hard labor will be washed away by the evening tide. But the construction process is fascinating, visually sensational, and a natural story with a beginning, middle, and end. Because of the ephemeral nature of their handiwork, they should be all the more delighted that you want to immortalize it on video!

Let's look at several ways this story could be told, and what it would look like, as a means of showing why videojournalism would be the favored medium – provided it's done right.



Structure a story that enables us to see the sandcastle growing and taking shape – and teaches us fascinating details about the castlebuilder and his craft. All good stories evoke “change” – and nothing illustrates this better than a big ornamental edifice materializing from beach sand.

1) TV NEWS featurette

Every TV reporter and shooter knows the drill so well, they've got the story finished in their heads before they even leave the station. First, we should mention that it would never occur to a TV news reporter to even pursue this story unless they received a press release in advance about a specific scheduled event, such as a sandcastle contest. So they'd go out and shoot a few minutes of b-roll of the castlebuilders in action, with natural sound – shoveling, digging, sculpting. Some close-ups of sandcastle details, perhaps, but mostly medium shots that can be stitched together easily. They'd grab a few "cute kids" reaction shots. Then they'd get a few short sound bites, by (off-camera) asking a castlebuilder to say, in

full sentences, who he is and what he does. Any follow-up questions would be rare – jaded TV reporters know that a piece whose length will be measured in seconds cannot contain more than a snippet of a talking head. Why waste extra time or effort? It'll only make the editing process more time-consuming. And we should add that the talking head will be shot close up, looking just off-camera (at the unseen reporter).

The final piece will consist of the station's anchor introducing the story in a chirpy sentence or two, and tossing it to the field reporter. We'll see the field reporter on the beach, looking directly into the camera and offering her own snappy quasi-informational intro. Then we'll see the edited one-minute package, which will consist of unsynched, unstructured b-roll under the reporter's voiceover narration, interrupted by that talking-head sound bite, which might continue as audio over more b-roll. Perhaps we'll get some natural sound – the builder gently disabusing the tykes from prematurely knocking down his masterwork. Then the reporter merrily ID'ing herself and her location, and tossing back to the anchor, who will make a clever quip ... and move on to the next story.

2) ONLINE SLIDESHOW with captions

Instead of shooting one picture that tells the story (e.g., a shot of the sandcastle builder in front of his winning castle, or a close-up of him shaping a turret), newspapers initially dipped into multimedia by taking advantage of their newfound technological ability to put together a gallery of thematically-linked images that could be viewed sequentially in a relatively small online space. The smart way to execute this would be to sequence the images so that they tell a narrative story, in

conjunction with the text captions, so that we can watch the castle being built, beginning to end, while we read about each of the steps. Unfortunately, what we usually get is just a scrapbook of shots, arranged in no particular order, often with the same caption: "Joe Shmo wins the 9th annual Sandcastle Festival."

The perceived advantage of this format is that viewers can be easily lured into endlessly clicking on a large number of pages, especially if their preview thumbnails suggest bikini shots. This can generate a lot of "hits," which in turn creates metrics that look good for advertisers – who, alas, are no longer fooled by this trick.

3) ONLINE SLIDESHOW with audio

Now let's take it one step further. An online slideshow with text is really a glamorous version of a print newspaper photo gallery – using less space (and paper!). You can pack an infinite number of images into the space of one. But there are better ways of taking advantage of the medium, starting with sound. On the Web, you can hear the person talking. Which person? Sometimes the reporter, sometimes the subject, sometimes both. You're not constrained by the protocols or time limits of TV news, so except for those instances when newspapers feel they have to emulate TV (perhaps it's because it's the only model they know), the VO narration tends to be folksier, more conversational, more relaxed.

So what we'd be likely to see and hear, in this instance, is one long audio track of the sandman blathering about his beach expeditions -- and the importance of wearing sunscreen and a wide-brimmed hat and drinking lots of water so you don't get

sunstroke -- accompanied by an unsynched batch of shots of him doing his sand thing. More than a sound bite – a sound chomp!

In any case, this is where newspapers started approximating video. Though it all started with still images, they were uploaded into a player that would automatically display them at a pre-set pace with pre-recorded audio. You no longer had to click to see the next image (and hear the accompanying voice) – everything was on autopilot.

The first truly great story created in this format was the *Los Angeles Times*' iconic "Marlboro Marine," by Luis Sinco, in which the voices of the photographer and his subject fueled the unfolding narrative. This piece served as the impetus for creating KobreGuide.com. We had such a difficult time locating multimedia of that caliber – the newspapers themselves hid it so well on their own Web sites that even their own creators couldn't find it! – we figured like-minded souls would appreciate our efforts to find it for them and gather it under one Web roof for mass enjoyment.

While there are instances in which audio slideshows are preferred -- for one thing, they're far faster and easier to shoot and assemble than video -- ultimately the increasing simplicity of using video hardware and software will ultimately lead to the prevalence of moving images over still images. We naturally gravitate toward video because it most closely proximates the way we see and experience real life.

4) MEDIOCRE VIDEOJOURNALISM

Because of the way videojournalism evolved, with no established guidelines or rules or protocols, there seems to be an infinite number of ways for it to go wrong. After spending several years searching the Web daily for excellent videojournalism, we can attest to the seemingly limitless permutations and combinations of deficiencies. Often a video story will impress us enormously, and then leave us with that sinking feeling when we get to the end and realize there's a gaping hole – questions unanswered, perspectives missing, crucial information lacking. It looked good but didn't tell the whole story in a satisfying way.

So here's how that sandcastle video would look on many newspaper Web sites. The most common mistake would be to make it look like a TV story, which falls short for two reasons – first, because it's *not* TV; second, because it *is* the Web. There's usually no need for the reporter to narrate the entire story; they often do simply because they're imitating TV or they're a print reporter who's more comfortable writing the words themselves rather than letting the subject (and visuals) tell the tale. Worse, they'll use chyroned text to fill holes in the story, forcing us to read about it rather than see it. (That's what an accompanying article is for!)

The other problem newspapers have is escaping the "inverted pyramid" story structure – top-loading the story with the essential elements and tapering off into the less important details. That form is a byproduct of a more space-conscious era when stories needed to be constructed so that they could be lopped off from the bottom without doing too much harm. Video producers need not cleave to that formula, though many do for the simple reason that they're afraid they'll lose the viewer quickly unless they pack all the good stuff up front. (The

solution, of course, is to trust in a dramatic arc that will hook viewers and lure them into following compelling characters and plot points to the conclusion.)

So we'd start with footage of our sandcastle builder at work, with natural sound. Then the reporter's VO, describing who this guy is and what he's doing. Then those TV-style sound bites of the castle guy telling about his accomplishments, and who his clients are. Then more b-roll as the reporter narrates a newspaper-style story, with interesting facts picked up during an off-camera interview. And then our sand hero again, with some conclusive-sounding statement: "It relaxes me, and makes me feel like Frank Lloyd Wright." And then an artsy (translation: cliché) shot of the sun setting over his "beach house" as we fade out.

5) GOOD VIDEOJOURNALISM

Process stories -- getting from point A to point Z -- are naturals for newspaper video, and it would be a crying shame not to take advantage of the natural dramatic arc of the castle-building venture. Here's one way to create stellar videojournalism.

Preparation is key. First, map out the steps in advance with our sand magician, so you can get a sense of where the story is going and what shots to look for. Then, instead of creating a wallpaper of random footage interrupted by (and overlaid with) sound bites, you should strive to shoot each step of the process while the subject (who is well miked) is explaining what he is doing. Embrace details. Grab natural casual interaction between the subject and beachgoers and passersby. Shoot a variety of wide, medium, and close-up

shots. These will be used to create discrete scenes (e.g., "carving doors and windows"). These scenes, in turn, will be strung together, like pearls on a necklace, to create sequences (e.g., digging the hole; laying the foundation; building the steps).

You should be inquisitive enough to ask good questions as he's working – about his tools and techniques, his greatest hits and worst disasters -- so that his responses can be woven together to fuel the narrative, leaving less VO work for you. In short, structure a story that enables us to see the castle growing and taking shape – and teaches us fascinating details about the castlebuilder and his craft. All good stories evoke "change" – and nothing illustrates this better than a 6-foot-tall ornamental edifice materializing from beach sand. This approach is cinematic and keeps viewers hooked, offering compelling information and entertainment while they stick around to see the end result.

Want to take it to the next level – *great* videojournalism? Then do your homework and put the story in context by providing a little background and history of sandcastle building – and find (and procure permission to use) archival stills or video that can augment the piece. Add perspectives from other people: not just reactions from clients, party guests, awe-struck kids and rubbernecking beachgoers, but also on-camera interviews with the reigning sandcastle-building world champ or head of the local chapter of Sandcastle Builders Anonymous. But never lose sight of the fact that, at its core, this piece is an inside look at a man and his passion, and the more details you can provide – visually and informationally – that support that theme, the more intellectually and emotionally engaging your video story will be.

Jerry Lazar is a Los Angeles-based journalist who has three decades of editorial management experience in print, broadcast, and the Internet. In the early '90s he created the first professionally produced arts-and-entertainment Webzine, *The Gigaplex*. He subsequently helped reconfigure and manage journalism Web sites for such media outlets as *The Hollywood Reporter* and CBS. Lazar was a staff writer for *TV Guide*, and the West Coast Bureau Chief of *US Magazine*. He has written for many major periodicals, including *Esquire*, *Premiere*, *Playboy*, and *The New York Times Magazine*, and edited custom publications for Time Inc. He has served as a contributing editor to *California* magazine and *Hollywood* magazine, and was Lifestyle Editor of the *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*. In the TV arena, Lazar hosted and produced "Extreme Close-Up," a celebrity talk show for E! Entertainment Television. Lazar received his master's degree from Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism.

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