

Coming Attractions:

Selling and Producing 'Save the Date' Videos

*H*ave you ever dreamed of doing a wedding shoot in which the guests and wedding party already knew, loved, and had been featured in your work, and so they showered you with compliments throughout the day and gave you the kind of respect too often reserved for the photographer? Or what about a shoot in which you got the most candid, natural shots of even a camera-shy couple? If only there were a way to befriend the bride and groom before the big day, to get them relaxed around your equipment, and to go into a venue where every preconceived prejudice of wedding videography had already been banished ...

Enter the Save the Date video. You've probably heard of this fairly new genre of wedding videos, which are exactly what they sound like:



Serendipity Studios' Travis Cossel

short clips produced far in advance of the wedding and distributed via your blog, Facebook fan page, Twitter, Vimeo, or—less commonly—on DVD, in lieu of the traditional Save the Date cards.

In a way, the Save the Date is a bit like the same-day edit in that it gets your name and style out in front of all the guests, but much earlier and in front of many more eyes (assuming not all invitees attend a wedding). It also has the added advantage of allowing for more creative control over your product because you can plan and take your time editing (shooting and editing together take about 2 days). Plus, it cements your relationship with the bride and groom early on. By their wedding day, you're all good friends, and cameras are no longer intimidating, even to the most camera-shy.



We talked to four studios that produce Save the Dates as a nice upsell and marketing opportunity. They share some common ground, but each studio has a distinguishing mark that sets it apart from the pack. It turns out that there's more than one way to create a great Save the Date video.

- Ian Salim and Elvira Kusno of Indonesia-based Wedding Clip (www.weddingclip.net)
- Sylvia and Aaron Yang of SODE Video in New Zealand (www.sode.co.nz)
- John and Jennifer Moon of Indianapolis-based Northernlight

Filmworks (www.northernlightfilmworks.com)

- Travis Cossel of Serendipity Studios in Boise, Idaho (www.beyondordinary.net)

Travis Cossel on Serendipity Studios' 'Andrew & Sabrina'

www.vimeo.com/1356111



For Andrew and Sabrina I wanted to involve water somehow, since Andrew had proposed on the beach in San Diego. So I started out by coming up with some ideas on how we could have them interacting in a mini-story that would lead up to their date reveal.

Sabrina is always directing Andrew on how to do things, so it seemed like a great idea to put them into a situation where they had to work together. I'm also a believer in keeping things as real and authentic as possible to achieve the most genuine chemistry with the couple. I really try to avoid staging shots as much as possible.

So after developing some rough ideas I pitched them to the couple, and they really loved one particular idea. The concept was to have them driving out to a nearby lake, where they would then set up an easel with a canvas and paint "Take the plunge with us!" and their date on the canvas. This wouldn't actually be revealed until the final shot, which climaxed with them jumping off of the dock (taking the plunge) into the lake.

The actual shoot involved some staging, but most of it was very lightly staged. The longer we shot, the more the couple felt comfortable to throw out some of their own ideas, a few of which I included in the final video. Shooting on the dock was a bit of a challenge due to space constraints and the fact that the dock was right at a boat launch, but with careful shooting we were able to make it work.

The couple was thrilled with the end result and started forwarding the online link to family and friends as soon as it was done. They couldn't wait for the invitations to be printed. The online link was to a page that was part of our website, so when people came to see the video, they got introduced to our website as well.

SERENDIPITY STUDIOS: KEEP 'EM SEPARATED?

Productionwise, a Save the Date shoot is indistinguishable from an Engagement Shoot or a Love Story shoot. That's the prevailing perspective among the folks we interviewed, anyway, with the exception of Serendipity Studios, which we'll discuss momentarily.

In Jakarta, Indonesia, where Ian Salim's Wedding Clip is based, there is a boilerplate product that photographers offer called the "prewedding shoot." Salim took this idea and gave it a video twist; he now sells prewedding video shoots. "Different terms for the same product," he calls the various incarnations of the prewedding shoot. "You can make the prewedding video into any form, be it music video, Love Story, or Save the Date."

Salim creates two videos: One he makes into a 60-second "teaser," as he calls it, or a Save the Date. The other is a longer-form video (if you can say that about a 3-minute clip), which is screened as a Love Story at the couple's reception.

It's a practical and elegant medley, says SODE's Sylvia Yang, who capitalizes on the videos' similarities by bundling Save the Dates, Love Journeys, and Thank You videos in a combo platter she calls the Destiny Video package.

"The New Zealand market hasn't matured to the stage where clients could distinguish the differences among Save the Dates, Love Stories, and Trailers," Yang says. "To make both their lives and our lives easier, we package them together as our prewedding package."

Yang's Save the Dates turn out to be "storied music videos," but they're more wistful and lighter on narrative than a Love Story. "Depending on the client's request, we will sometimes add in a short story line to spice things up a bit."

Northernlight Filmworks' John Moon also takes similar ingredients and makes them into whatever the couple requests. His MO is to shoot an engagement session and then ask the clients how

they would like it tailored. Simply, “If you want a Save the Date, then that’s how we will tailor it.” If, on the other hand, the clients ask for a Love Story, then the engagement shoot footage will be woven throughout their interview.

And then there’s Serendipity Studios’ Travis Cossel, who rejects a one-shoot-fits-all approach. To him, Love Stories and Save the Dates are apples and oranges. “It’s not my desire to create a Save the Date out of an engagement shoot,” he says. “With an engagement shoot, I want to pull the couple in a location that fits with them, but there’s less drive to create a story beyond what their relationship is like.” Likewise, “Love Story videos are an entirely different project altogether. For those, we use the interview session as a springboard for how to film the footage that we will cut into.”

In contrast, he calls his Save the Dates lightly staged ministories that inch their way toward revealing the purpose of the video. He incorporates concept and strives to be compelling and clever, “to engage the viewer and get them to start wondering what the video is about and where it’s going.” The story’s the thing—preferably a story that creates mystery and intrigue.



Left to right: Northernlight Filmworks’ Steve, John, and Jennifer Moon
(Photo by SB Childs Photography)

NORTHERNLIGHT FILMWORKS: THE MORE THE MERRIER

If Cossel goes against the grain, John Moon does his Save the Date work in a more structured format, working with photographers on about half of his Save the Dates, piggybacking on their photo sessions and even including shots of them in the video as part of the couple’s experience of the day.

Moon got into Save the Dates thanks to a handful of photographers with whom he now has close working relationships. He started out by singling out photographers whose work he respected and asking them, and the couple, if he could come along on their Engagement Shoots. With his footage, he would create Save the Date videos for the couple—gratis. Soon these photographers were referring clients to him, and vice versa. Now it’s a given that Moon is a fixture at couples’ Engagement Shoots. “It’s a win-win situation,” Moon says, because not only does he get more business based on his free videos but he often uses the photographers’ photos in his Save the Dates, so it’s a great marketing scenario all around.

“We book weddings just because of Save the Dates,” he says. “Doing them for free to us is such a huge benefit. When we started doing them, we were (and still are, I think) the only ones in our area doing them. It’s a no-brainer. It does take some effort and does take some time away from your business, but you’re going to spend money on marketing somewhere.” (To clarify, the Moons don’t have a cookie-cutter Save the Date product, and they don’t always include photographers in their Save the Dates. Each video, he says, is as unique as each couple.)

John Moon on Northernlight Filmworks’ ‘Adam & Laura’

<http://vimeo.com/2726622>

This was an engagement shoot in Broad Ripple, a culture-rich and quirky part of Indianapolis, and the couple used this as a Save the Date. We worked alongside the photographer Jessica Strickland. The couple picked the song for this video. We mixed in a little urban texture to this video as well.

There are parts of this that have the audio from the photographer and some shots of her working. The reason we do this is because this is, in our opinion, part of the wedding experience, and we want them to be able to remember some things about that day as well.



Of course, there are always couples who book Northernlight Filmworks' wedding packages directly, not through a photographer. In these cases, Moon does offer Save the Dates as a \$300 upsell. If he'll be working with a photographer he hasn't worked with, he'll always confirm with them that it's OK to share the engagement shoot and show them what a Save the Date looks like so they understand the point of it.

As words of wisdom, Moon offers, "Don't approach just any photographer. Develop an appreciation for what they do. When you're out with them, you actually learn something about how to compose shots. Find one whose work you absolutely love. Approach them with the concept of what you do, and assure them that you're going to stay out of their way."

Interestingly, where Moon goes that extra mile to work with photographers, the others dig in their heels. Salim warns, "Our No. 1 recommendation would be, don't combine the shooting session with the photo session." His reasoning: "If you combine the session, you will have only still poses, which is boring for a video. We're convinced that with a separate photo session, the results will be much better, more lively, and will fit better into the design."

Too many cooks in the kitchen? You bet, says Yang. "We always shoot it alone. Involving a photographer will



Wedding Clip's Ian Salim

mean less time for us to direct the couple, as photographers often request the couple to pose for their shots too."

And as for giving their work away, since they're not calling in any favors, most studios don't. Cossel asks \$450 per Save the Date, while Salim's start at \$1,500. For SODE's Destiny Video 3-pack, it's \$1,399 NZD (about \$910 U.S.).

WEDDING CLIP: GET A ROOM!

Some might say that Ian Salim of Jakarta's Wedding Clip takes Save the Dates in a refreshing direction by believing that they needn't be overly romantic or full of PDA. And while

he's probably not the only wedding filmmaker who feels this way or who strives for something edgier, he's the only one who pointed it out, and we think it deserves mentioning.

Maybe it's a cultural check that's common outside of the U.S. If you look at SODE's videos from New Zealand, there is a similar, Bollywood-style restraint shown.

Instead of aiming for the excessively maudlin, Salim went with the concepts of "fashionable" and "cool" in the clip he shares here. "We feel that there are a lot of concepts that can be explored, not just the typical sweet and romantic one (e.g., just kissing and hugging throughout the video)."

SODE: TALK TO ME

Three words: "Communication. Communication. Communication!" SODE's Yang believes that the bride and groom need to be the "shapers" of their own Save the Date. This includes deciding their location, concept, and other important details.

While the studios included in this article do pride themselves on their collaborative processes, Yang is especially adamant about hearing what the couple wants and needs from the very beginning. Not every videographer wants the couple involved as much as possible, from the top. But she believes in it whole-heartedly and counts on it for the success of her Save the Dates.

Ian Salim on Wedding Clip's 'Sherlia & Irsandy'

<http://vimeo.com/809401>

Our concepts for this video were "fashionable" and "cool." We decided on these concepts due to the face, character, and gesture of the couple. In the future, we'll explore a variety of innovative styles.

This video was shot in early 2008, using the 35mm adapter to achieve a more cinematic look. Singapore was chosen as the location because of its convenience and variety. The editing was done using Sony Vegas; our color-correction approach was crushed colors and high saturation. The wardrobe is based on the "fashionable and cool" concepts and the dominant colors.



Sylvia Yang on SODE's 'Iris & Kenny'

www.vimeo.com/4425542

The secret of producing a good Save the Date video is preparation. We shortlist the shots that we wish to achieve with the couple, although improvised shots often come out surprisingly well too. Treat the video like a little short film, in which the [bride and groom] are the lead actors. Their performance largely affects the quality of your video. You need to be well-prepared to make them feel confident and relaxed.

A well-organized shooting day plan will take the stress out of them, and make them less aware of being in a shoot. (You don't want to constantly remind them, "OK, we have to run, or we'll be late for the next location.")

Although a personalized shot list is essential to fit the couple's style, a formula shot list is always recommended. To develop your own formula shot list, create a list of certain camera movements, angles, and actions that you want the couple to act out. Finally, you have to know very well how you can combine those lists to create a new style.

A tip for a natural-looking Save the Date: Find the couple something to do—a game, or anything that will draw their attention away from the camera.



Sure, she tries to pick up on their vibe when she meets them to talk about the project. But "sometimes vibes can lie," she points out. "It's important for our clients to incubate their ideas, because they know each other best and they understand their needs best."

Getting the clients to generate as many ideas as possible to discuss is a perfect way to get to know them better, she says, "and [it] makes them feel they have more ownership of the project, rather than just showing up and being directed, with no control over the video."

Yang's role, as she sees it, is to tell the couple whether their ideas are possible in terms of re-creating them in front of a camera. "We will also further their concepts and encourage them to try new things." Or if, for instance, they want to shoot at 2 locations that are far away from each other, she might nix one, taking into consideration travel time and efficiency.



SODE's Aaron and Sylvia Yang

Again, that's not to say that the other studios don't fold their clients' visions in to their Save the Dates. It's just that Yang steps off her pedestal much earlier to accept creative direction from her clients.

Take, for instance, Cossel. He considers vendor-client collaboration a signature approach of Serendipity Studios. But, he says, "Initially, we don't involve the bride and groom much, although we do give them the

option of feeding us ideas. Most of them have no idea what they want to do, though. So we start brainstorming ideas for them and then take that list to them to get their opinions. In the end, the process is a collaborative one. It's very important to us that we produce a video that fits with the vision the couple had."

Salim and Moon encourage client ideas too. Before the shoot, they meet with the couple to get their vibe and hear their needs. But videographers are paid for

their creativity and innovation, after all. "Developing the concept, location, wardrobe, and so forth, is pretty much our decision (maybe almost everything)," Salim says unapologetically. "That's how we work."

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