

From Demos to Promos

Your demo is your calling card." For more than a decade we've heard that a polished demo reel is no less important to your videography/filmmaking career than the finger you use to press Record. It has enjoyed starring-role status as a marketing tool, inspiring workshops, articles, and blog posts.

In the cover story of our January 2005 inaugural issue, "Reel 'Em In," Geoff Daily reported that demos are one of the most effective marketing tools for videographers. "[D]emo reels offer videographers the opportunity to demonstrate their technical aptitude while making a good first impression with potential customers," he wrote.

Later, in "Deconstructing the Demo," from *EventDV's* March 2009 issue, filmmakers walked readers through the productions of

their demos. The demo's purpose, they explained, was to put the work and client reactions front and center to represent them. Some demos took the form of a "greatest hits" reel, while others incorporated narration and testimonials.

Today, the demo is arguably no less important than it was in years past. It's delivered differently—in most cases, brides are much more likely to encounter an event filmmaker's demo online than on a DVD. But a handful of adventurous wedding filmmakers, in an effort to stand out among a growing talent pool, have begun to offer a more introspective marketing piece to complement, or even replace, their demos: the promo video.

The key difference between promo videos and demos is their focus. Where demos highlight a filmmaker's skills, sometimes with client testimonials about the value of those skills,



promos introduce viewers to the people behind the cameras. They are short films specifically about the filmmaking team members, their personalities, and the image of themselves they use to brand and promote their studios.

Three dramatically differing promos have caught the eye of the wedding filmmaking world—those produced by Seattle's Angel De Armas, Matt Davis of Life Stage Films in North Carolina, and Chicago-based I Do Films' Lori Roche.



Here they explain why they created their promos and what their promos have done for their businesses and presumably the industry.

JUST US

To get noticed among the sea of wedding filmmakers advertising on the internet—some tenured, others less experienced but with DSLRs in hand—De Armas felt he had to do something more memorable than post a demo on his website. With widespread 5D use and easier access to Glidecams, sliders, and other professional equipment, he says, “Everything started to look perfect; the quality, the depth of field, the colors. Everything improved in a matter of months.”

“Which is great,” Davis chimes in, “but now we’re all looking the same.” DSLRs not only democratized the field, they homogenized the footage.

“It’s harder to see differences in shooting and editing styles,” admits De Armas. To be unique, he settled on a promo idea that went against the grain. “My instinct was to go the opposite direction; I wanted to show that beauty also comes with imperfection.” To that end, De Armas produced a stylish but straightforward piece (“Honest and elegant simplicity can be more powerful than complex approaches to an idea,” he believes), shot on film, in the style of a family home movie. “It was more important to convey this side of us than it was to convey a glossy, perfect quality image of our work. Love beats, hands down, any form of promotion. At least in this field,” he explains.

Just Us, the title of the film, was his version of the “dreaded” webpage of the same name. After struggling to come up with the words to convey what he represents, De Armas figured he could more accurately do so visually. “Why not show who we really are, not what you see behind a logo or read on a website?”

The problem with website copy, according to De Armas, is that it is becoming just as uniform as the demo. “Phrases like ‘Every couple is



Seattle-area filmmaker Angel De Armas



Angel De Armas' wife, Lisa Ann, featured in their family-centric *Just Us* promo



Angel and Lisa Ann's son Lucian in *Just Us*

unique’ and ‘As the day unfolds, your inner beauty will be captured’ are just white noise. “Even though the

words are meaningful, they did not represent me. And to be honest, this kind of writing is spreading like a

virus in all the wedding filmmaker websites. Sorry peeps, but it is true,” he scolds.

“*Just Us* [<http://vimeo.com/29732573>] gives clients the opportunity to see who we are behind a brand. The trick,” he says, “was how to show our lives and make it entertaining and emotional, without being self-absorbed. I found a great song that fit perfectly with the footage and started in a linear way going through our life. It felt like the right way to connect to our story. I hope that it conveys love—love for what I do, love for my family.”

Exclusivity is part of De Armas’ brand, so he sends the link to the promo to only a few prospective clients. In contrast, his website homepage displays his demo for all to see. “A promo does not replace a demo reel. You have to build up your portfolio first and then create a promo, not the other way around,” he believes.

IT’S A RAP

Matt Davis, who won a 2009 WEVA Creative Excellence Award for his company’s demo, agrees that the demo still deserves prime website real estate. His demo and brand-new promo, an original rap video called “Wedding Day” (<http://vimeo.com/29605019>), work together “like a one-two punch.” Davis’ demo lives on his website homepage, and he plugs “Wedding Day” on his Who We Are page, in emails with prospective clients, in his studio meet-and-greets, and wherever else he can. By doing so, he feels he is piquing interest that will translate into more views of his demo and clips.

“In order for me to stand out, people have to connect to us personally,” Davis explains. “There’s no driving force for making people click on a samples page. They’re all starting to look the same. People are just looking at prices. Make them look at your work,” he urges, “and then they’ll click on your samples because they’re excited.”

The “Wedding Day” crew—his good friends Evan Vetter and Joey



Matt Davis and his Life Stage Films team



The rapping “groom” and the Life Stage team in Life Stage Films’ “Wedding Day” rap video

Connolley—spent nearly a year planning a rap video reminiscent of Will Smith’s *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* that introduces Davis and his team members and their families. It features a staged wedding involving scores of volunteers lured with a free buffet and an open bar.

The idea to do a rap video occurred to Davis because, as he puts it, “Who the heck has a rap video on their website?” Vetter, a video producer, and Connolley, the DP, took Davis’ vision and ran with it. “They did a good job of making it happen, so I could run my business all year instead of having to plan this.” The

level of planning and producing was unlike a typical wedding film shoot. “This was a different animal,” with various takes and cuts. Unlike a wedding-day shoot, the crew had great lighting gear, so they could light the couple the way they wanted to. “It was heaven for us,” Davis says. Every team member starred in their own scene, and 80 to 90 family members and friends (many of them wedding vendors in the area) played the guests.

Everything for the shoot was donated—the cake, the venue, the flowers, the food, and even the equipment. A shooter from nearby Screen Gems Studios, the studio



A Cosby-sweatered Matt Davis and his family hamming it up in "Wedding Day"

behind *One Tree Hill* and *Dawson's Creek*, loaned dollies, jibs, lighting gear, and so on. Davis felt humbled by everyone's generosity and wanted to give back. "Listen, we're going to have to pay for something," Davis decided. "If we're going to get people to come here on a Friday night, let's just make it a party. We opened up the bar and made it into a celebration." The extras were intrigued to see what goes on behind the scenes. They were so excited to have been a part of it that they shared it with others, which for Davis, was a marketing bonus.

In many ways, "Wedding Day" was a win-win for Davis, helping to make his website stickier than the rest. "Everyone has their work on their website. That doesn't set you apart," he reasons, but his rap video does.

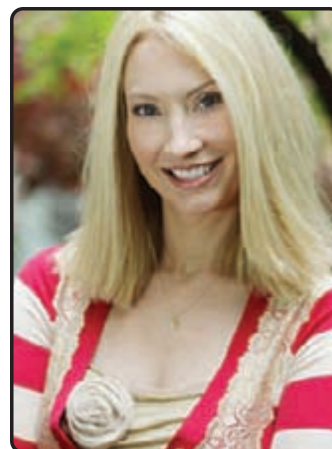
A SENSE OF WONDER

In part, this is why Lori Roche never even offered a traditional demo reel. She relies instead on her highlight films to speak for themselves. "Our website features many of our wedding highlight films, so it didn't make sense to create a separate demo that featured the same type of work." She doesn't subscribe to the idea that a demo on your website, or a promo for that matter, is a must-have. What is a must these days is to be unique. "I

come from an advertising background, so it was instinct to go the less traditional route and film a promo that would be catchy [and] fun and [that] let potential clients get to know us a little better."

The result was a nostalgic homage to the coming-of-age TV hit of the '80s and '90s, *The Wonder Years* (<http://vimeo.com/12786595>). Like De Armas and Davis, Roche wanted to do a film about her team, and she wanted to make it something her clients could relate to. Having just introduced Super 8 film into her product mix, she thought it would be a great opportunity to show clients what that would look like. "Often when we described what Super 8 was to the clients, we would say, 'You know, it's like *The Wonder Years* look.' It became pretty obvious to us that our promo should be a re-enactment of *The Wonder Years* intro."

The promo, on the homepage of I Do Films' website, belies its somewhat off-the-cuff production. "We really didn't do a lot of planning for the shoot," Roche admits. "We had each member of the team watch the original *Wonder Years* intro online, and then we asked everyone to put together their best *Wonder Years*-inspired outfit for the shoot." They all met at co-owner Matt's parents' house in the Chicago suburbs and took turns shooting with the Super 8 camera. Each team member shot a



I Do Films' Lori Roche

scene while the others played to the camera. "We didn't try to copy the exact scenes for *The Wonder Years* intro; we definitely did a lot of improvising and tried to give it our own personal spin," she says.

Her promo helps clients connect with the crew behind I Do Films because almost all of her clients are familiar with *The Wonder Years*. They grew up with the show and they relate to it, "which translates into them feeling like they relate to us and that we relate to them." Potential customers are sometimes so enamored with the promo that they don't even watch any of her sample wedding films. "They know they want to hire us because of our promo. Sometimes they get a little star-struck when they do meet us in person. It sounds crazy," she says, "but they watch the promo over and over and then they are really excited when they actually meet us face to face."

THE FILTER EFFECT

Some who view Davis' rap video promo are less than star-struck. "We know there are people who might be turned off by the rap promo. But you know what? That's perfectly fine if it filters out the brides who get a kick out of it. Those are our brides. If someone has a problem with it, well then they have a problem with us, because that's exactly who we are. We may be a little quirky," says Davis of his team, "but at least we have fun and have

the guts to make something as enormous as we did.”

De Armas shares that “this is who I am and I’m proud of it” attitude, making no apologies. “I don’t need to prove myself to anybody. I am trying to find that balanced place where I can focus in my work with simplicity and excitement,” says De Armas, unashamed.

This transparency saves everyone time. The promo helps couples imagine you there for one of the most important moments of their lives. “This is exactly why I thought that the promo would work,” De Armas says. “If you trust me to film the most important day of your life, then you should see exactly who you are hiring.”

Davis feels his promo lets clients see that he and his team members are “like another friend or family member,” and thus, they’re able to blend in more. It also allows him to point out who they are *not* hiring by poking fun, in a good-natured way, at kooky “Uncle Ray” and his camcorder. “I wanted to show people we’re aware of that stereotype, and that’s not who we are,” Davis says.

FINDING YOUR ANGLE

Davis, Roche, and De Armas urge would-be promo producers to find an angle that’s original to your company and promote it in a way that makes sense to your brand. “This form of promotion,” De Armas explains of his personal, invite-only promo film, “worked for me because that is my approach to the image. You have to know your brand and your clientele.”



I Do Films' Wonder Years promo homage



Getting by with a little help from my friends: Lori Roche's I Do Films team

No matter the advertising vehicle, “Make sure it has a purpose,” Roche recommends. “Think of it as your company’s advertising campaign. What do you have to offer that is different, and how can you get that across to potential clients? Maybe a promo is the solution, but there are other ways to reach your potential clients too.”

Above all, “Be true to yourself and your company,” De Armas says. “When you are authentic, it will show, and that will be reflected in your work

and everything you do. Your clients will know the difference.”

Resist the urge to do a rap video or a *Wonder Years* homage, unless you want to be laughed at. “It’s brilliant,” Davis says of Roche’s promo. “It’s so original that [if you copied it] people would know it and you would be made fun of. That’s not something you want to represent your company with. Just sit for a few months and brainstorm how you are different and how to put that on video.”

Not to overwhelm you, but you might consider freshening up your promo every few years. In the same way you might revamp your website and demo from time to time, you could do the same with your promo, particularly if you

have had family or staff changes or a shift in focus or approach. “Your brand is your personality, so it is constantly evolving. And so is the presentation of your work,” says De Armas.

As a business coach, Davis hears many videographers moan that their phones aren’t ringing. “Having a promo solves part of that prob-

lem. It’s not risky to make one. Anything you can do to separate yourself from others is going to keep you surviving in an economy like this.”

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