

Q&A with Frank Swoboda of Corner Booth Media: Telling stories via video

Linn Parish February 2nd, 2017



--Linn Parish

Corner Booth Media's Frank Swoboda says the 15-year-old company has been doing more consulting work in recent years.

Maybe you don't know Corner Booth Media by name. But chances are, if you've watched TV in the Inland Northwest, you've seen the company's work.

Corner Booth is a video production company that makes television commercials, corporate presentations, and other videos for companies and organizations throughout the western U.S., with a concentration of clients in the Spokane area.

Founded by Frank Swoboda about 15 years ago, Corner Booth, with its staff of seven employees, recently received praise in an Inc. magazine article naming the Best Local Ads. The article highlighted its campaign for one of its longtime clients, Spokane Teachers Credit Union.

We sat down with Swoboda to talk about the company, the industry, and its nationally recognized campaign for STCU.

Journal: How is the video work you do now different from when you first started Corner Booth?

Swoboda: I think the biggest, most obvious difference is the amount of stories we create out of the video that we film. We slice it in lots of pieces. We used to make one, big corporate video. We used to make maybe three TV commercials for a campaign. Out of that same content, we'll create multiple versions for different mediums.

Basically, we were serving one distribution method that people would see in the corporate world, which was DVD, and television. Now, we're creating stuff for presentations, for websites, for YouTube, for Instagram, Facebook—all of which carry video now—plus television.

It's all different lengths. It used to be that 30 seconds is what you had to tell your story in, and we'd tell it in different stages. Like for STCU, we'd do several over a year. Now, we have other mediums. We try to keep everything under two minutes, but not necessarily. We've done six-minute videos that have gotten 60,000 views. It's because it's good. If it's a good story, people will find it.

Journal: At first, if it wasn't a TV commercial, were you creating longer pieces then?

Swoboda: If it was corporate work, it might be in the five- to 10-minute range. We used to call it seven-minute videos. For the web, if I can keep it to two or three minutes, I can keep you watching it all the way through.

Journal: At this point, would you say you're getting more mileage out of the video you produce?

Swoboda: We're repurposing the content we film, which is the most expensive part of the process, several times rather than just once. It holds its value for several years, so we tell our clients, you need to amortize these things. That footage you film, you're going to have use of it for three to five years.

What's changed for our company is we don't just make the content anymore. We aren't just the creative guys who create it and film it and produce it and tell a great story. We now help our client figure out a plan before we make it. That's what makes it go even further. We know what you're trying to accomplish and the brand you're trying to build. How you're going to use this and the audiences you're trying to reach, the stories you're trying to tell. And your bottom line: Is our business going to grow or are we going to increase the awareness.

We make sure we film everything we're going to need at the same time. If we're interviewing someone who is critical to the story, I can ask them everything about it, even if I'm not going to use some of that content until two years from now.

We've been able to build a really cool process where we start with brand and story strategy, then we go to the filming, make that content, and now we've expanded into how do we get this content in front of people, especially online. We help our client figure that out, and we place it. We actually buy the media for them.

Journal: So, you're moving into more consulting work?

Swoboda: Yes, I switched over to consulting about six years ago, as a kind of thought leader in the business, helping a client get a strategic plan built.

Family Home Care is one of the first ones I can think of, where I did that work with Mike Nowling. I said, 'Let's figure out what your plan is before I tell you what you need.' Figure it out, follow a plan, and he built a business from a \$7 million-a-year business to \$25 million a year and sold it five years later.

I remember the day he sold it. I gave him the strategic plan we developed. I said, 'Read this. It's going to blow your mind. This is exactly what we said we were going to do.' That was the beginning of me thinking, 'Whoa, this works. I know more than I think I do.'

Now, we do it regularly for lots of clients here and in Colorado. Weekly, we're helping them to manage their brand and the results and the analytics. We look at how many people are seeing this and does it result in, 'I made more money this year.'

STCU is the story we always preach, because it's been our best client for 16 years now. STCU had \$350 million in assets in 2000, and I think they're at \$2.6 billion today. They keep score in assets and membership. Kind of simple. They grow membership in lots of different ways, and we talk about that. It took them 60 years to get 70,000 members. In the last 16 years, they've gone from 70,000 to 160,000 members. One in every four people in this region is an STCU member. I still marvel at that.

Journal: Speaking of STCU, how did the Inc. magazine article come about?

Swoboda: Totally randomly. They were studying the issue of, does regional and local advertising have a bigger impact than national advertising. Their conclusion is that it is. So, if regional and local advertising is having a bigger impact, who's doing the best of it?

I don't know how they found us. They called us, but really what they wanted to do is talk to Tom Johnson, of STCU. They wanted to know, how is it affecting the business.

What I'm most proud of is, Inc. broke it down by category. Ours was community, which I was proud of because I think that's what people are craving more than anything. If you can build community around your brand, then you're going to win. It's much more sustainable. I've done comedy really well. I've done real people community stories really well. Both endure, but comedy won't last that long. You get tired of the act. You never get tired of a real story and somebody moving you.

Journal: How do you gauge your success?

Swoboda: When we look at the results on Facebook and YouTube particularly, we're counting a couple of different categories. There's impressions and reach. And then there's views.

I might have 100,000 impressions. That means 100,000 people came across it on their Facebook page or their news feed. They saw it, but they didn't do anything. But the ones who actually stayed on it or watched it, that counts as a view. If you click on it and watch it past the "skip ad," that's view rate, and that's the golden territory for us. If you watch it all the way through, that's a touchdown.

With a lot of our stuff, the reason it works so well is people watch it all the way through.

For Gonzaga, we did a campaign for their online master's program. We helped them do a co-branding effort with Starbucks, Twitter, and Ben & Jerry's. It's amazing because we got to film at all three places. The Ben & Jerry's one had ridiculous view rate.

In a month, of the 91,000 people who watched it online, 56,000 actually watched it all the way through. The agency in Boston that placed it called us and asked, 'What did you guys do? Why did this ad do so well?' The reason it's great is, it's Ben & Jerry's. It's Gonzaga. And it's the story of Sean (Greenwood). His official title is the grand poobah of PR at Ben & Jerry's. He's just a rad dude. That's part of it. That guy came through. We were able to capture who Sean is, and people couldn't stop watching it.

Journal: Make the link for me. Is Sean a Gonzaga graduate?

Swoboda: He is. He's an online graduate from Vermont. He found them online for their master's program, checked them all out. He took it, and he's a Zag in Vermont. That's the whole story. Why the hell is a guy in Vermont who works for Ben & Jerry's a Gonzaga grad? It was a really good story.

We tell our clients that if you can get 2 to 5 percent of the people to click on it and watch it, you have success. That's the benchmark. The ones we've been doing lately, especially for some clients in Colorado, we're getting 20, 30, 40, 50 percent view rates, because we're telling a good story and people are looking forward to the next one. We're telling the story of individual people, and you probably know them because they're in your town. That's one of the reasons local/regional is working is we can geo-target, or geo-fence, marketing.

Every community is a small town. New York City is big, but Queens isn't, comparatively. That's how we focus. Make sure the people who should be seeing it, see it. Big Brother is here, so we know exactly where you view, what you watch, and everything is here.

Journal: How much of what you're doing now, in terms of services, would your clients have had an advertising agency do in the past?

Swoboda: Of the three big things we do—the planning work, the strategy behind what their brand story is going to be, and the placing and writing of the ads online—we wouldn't have done any of it. We were just making the video.

Journal: More of a subcontractor then?

Swoboda: Basically, yeah. I would come in as a director and producer, take the script I was given, and make it better. That shifted with STCU, because we started working directly with them.

Journal: Has the type of client that you have changed over time?

Swoboda: I think so. We've definitely grown to include a regional/national type of client. Companies like MWH Global, an 8,000-person company that's building the new Panama Canal. That's a huge company we probably wouldn't have worked with before.

FICO Scores in San Francisco. One of the ways we're working with them is creating presentations for their executives. Every CEO wants one thing. They want to have their own TED Talk. PowerPoint is not enough. People are tired of it. We're making really cool, glorified PowerPoints with video throughout and helping people write the kind of presentation that is just blowing people away.

A lot of the work we do is helping people build a killer presentation.

Journal: At this point, what percentage of your work is straight-up advertising compared with other types of corporate marketing?

Swoboda: In terms of the balance of it, it's still probably a 50-50 mix. We do a lot of corporate, if you want to call it that, content creation and strategic work. And we really help manage a lot of creative brands for clients.

Journal: And that's been consistent through the years?

Swoboda: I'd say so. It's really been a decent mix of both.

This is art to me, but you have to balance the commerce of it. Otherwise, you don't get to keep making cool stuff.

We've won all kinds of awards for the work we've done creatively, but that doesn't get me as excited as having a client do 20 percent over what they did last year. It's a bigger puzzle, and it's so much fun to work with.

Journal: The technology that you use to create the video, how has that changed over the last 15 years?

Swoboda: The cost of the gear has gone down, and more people have the ability to purchase their own gear.

We're doing a lot of drone filming now. If it's used right, it's killer. You can get a drone for \$2,500.

The editing software is less expensive. The computers are running faster. The cameras have come way down in price.

But we've never been a place that's about the gear. If you get caught up in gear race, it'll pass you by all of the time. Doing it well is harder. It's harder to tell your story well, because we expect a lot more.

We are all constantly bombarded and are watching really cool stuff all of the time. If the content you're making and the story you're telling aren't good, you're going to get killed. You could make a crappy TV commercial when I first started, and it would be OK. That's not going to fly anymore. You've got to be really careful, because it is a direct reflection of your brand.



Linn Parish  [e-mail](#)

[Follow](#)

Deputy Editor Linn Parish has worked for the Journal of Business for a total of 10 years, dating back to 1998. A self-described sports nerd, Linn has worked as a professional writer/editor for nearly 20 years.

[Read More](#)