



Recording power to the people

by * CMW Staff

Devices that let you record and communicate with the public can help a nonprofit chronicle events that matter, network with each other, and expand their brands.

by Elsa Wenzel

Originally published in the 2009 Getting on the Air, Online & into Print Media Guide

As tools to record the world's sights and sounds drop in price, more people have the power in their pockets to show and tell intimate stories with a global audience.

Writer Howard Rheingold describes this as the "little brother" trend. In other words, unlike with fears of "Big Brother" surveilling and controlling the common folk from on high, people on the street can watch the watchers, and each other. The Smart Mobs blog is named after his book describing how digital tools are creating a social revolution.

<http://www.smartmobs.com/>

For better or worse, human rights abuses at Abu Ghraib in Iraq, for example, would never have become public without military members using their own, small cameras.

Nonprofits can use low-budget video for both heavy and light subjects. For instance, less than a minute of footage is enough to show the faucets dripping and ceilings flaking at an underfunded school. Why not do 20-second interviews with strangers on the street about a bill your group wants Congress to pass? A clip of puppies playing is a surefire ploy to get a few checks written for, or animals adopted at, the shelter where you work.

You don't need a Hollywood-quality studio to make an impact. Sometimes a video snapshot is all you need to get a point across. Think of making snack-size chunks of video for the web to tell a compelling story. The Internet lends itself naturally to video more than text, which can be hard to read on a flickering screen.

Once you upload the video to YouTube, Vimeo, or another free video-sharing service, link right away to the new video from a new blog post, or from a message on a microblogging services such as Twitter or FriendFeed. You can experiment with Seesmic.com, billed as a "Twitter for video" service, where users share feeds of their videos with each other.

<http://www.youtube.com>

<http://www.vimeo.com>

<https://twitter.com>

<http://friendfeed.com>

<http://seesmic.com/>

Sharing videos on will enable people to subscribe to your updates and view them on their PCs as well as on many mobiles phones and MP3 players including iPods.

A camcorder of \$400 or more isn't required. Even the technology-phobic can use popular mobile phones (sorry, not the iPhone) and digital cameras to shoot videos that five years ago would have cost countless hours and thousands of dollars in equipment and software to put on a website.

Popular digital cameras also shoot short videos that will be saved as edit-ready AVI files alongside your photos.

A terrific option for beginners are pocket-size video cameras from Flip, which can be found for less than \$150. They'll shoot up to an hour of footage in a bite-size format that's ready for saving to the Web on a site like YouTube or to a blog. A minimal amount of buttons and lack of cords make this gadget probably the easiest video tool on the market. You can plug a Flip camera directly into the USB port on a Mac or PC to save video to a hard drive. The newer Flip Ultra is recharged only by plugging into a computer, while older models accept AA batteries. http://www.theflip.com/products_flip_ultra.shtml

It's not too hard to figure out the features of modest recording devices after playing with them for a few hours or days of dedicated effort, depending on your comfort level. If that's daunting, just ask a fourth grader down the block to help you.

Follow some simple rules of thumb to create video. First of all, keep your clips short. Think like an MTV producer who sees 20 seconds as an eternity. The shorter you keep your videos, the less time you'll spend uploading and editing, the more routine and fun the work will be, and the more your busy viewers will watch. Waiting more than 15 minutes recently to upload a two-minute video to YouTube motivated me to slice and dice the content in half.

Shoot outdoors whenever possible. Add an external microphone if you can. Get as close to the subject as possible. Don't move the camera around. You're not trying to play Orson Welles. For low-quality video, fancy angles and zippy pans will usually make the viewer seasick.

You can still be creative with shoestring video. For example, if you want to shoot a scene of your block, hold the camera steady against the frame of an open car window as a friend drives you slowly down the street.

In a pinch, I balanced my new Flip on a cardboard box to shoot an interview with a California mayor, but the footage was wobbly. Definitely buy a mini tripod if you plan to record noteworthy people and events. Purchase of the \$20 Gorillapod, which can bend Gumby-like even to wrap around a tree branch, returns some money back to nonprofits.

<http://www.joby.com/products/gorillapod/>

Check out these video-shooting tips from Youth Noise. http://www.youthnoise.com/page.php?page_id=6074

If you'd rather sit still than shoot out in the field, webcams that come with most new laptops enable you to chat with other users of free instant-messaging services such as Yahoo Messenger or Windows Live Messenger. You can face a webcam and hit Record to save a rant, class lecture, instructional explanation, or even a staff holiday greeting that you can embed on a website or upload to YouTube.

For editing video, iMovie software comes on new Mac computers. MovieMaker comes on Windows PCs.

Source: Community Media Workshop (www.newstips.org)