**Video Tips for GALA Choruses**



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Video can be a powerful tool for any organization’s communication initiatives, offering a visually exciting, aurally engaging window into your chorus’s performances, administration, and personal stories. Combined with the accessibility of online distribution tools like youtube and vimeo, video communications can reach a desired audience with a clear message very quickly and effectively. Like all media, however, it’s important to use this tool as a part of a larger communications plan. Especially considering the possible costs, a single high-quality, strategically distributed video is far more effective (offers a greater return on investment) than a large quantity of videos without a clear goal or distribution model. Below I will offer my tips for selecting and shooting quality video within a communications plan. My notes are sadly rather general, because I had hoped that they might apply to anyone who wants to use video.

**Be Strategic**

The key to using video as an effective tool for communications is being strategic about what you choose to record and share. In my experience the most effective videos have the following qualities.

1. *Appropriate Length* - The average youtube video is around 4 minutes. Generally, if a user is not previously invested in the content of a video, they will stop watching somewhere between 1 and 3 minutes. This means that it’s a good idea to frontload relevant, attention-grabbing content. It’s also important that the overall time is not too much longer than 4 minutes. Usually, if a user sees a longer playtime, they won’t invest in watching the video. Certainly, if you’re sharing a documented a performance, this will be different. The length of the video will be the length of the performance. It’s worth considering editing together a brief “trailer” that links to such longer videos. This is one way to get users interested in watching longer content.
2. *Engaging Content* - It’s helpful to select content for sharing that is engaging for as wide a range of viewers as possible. I have found that videos documenting the personal passions and stories of members of an organization are most impactful within the realm of non-profit communications. These include candid interviews with chorus members or administrators, “behind the scenes” footage, people telling personal stories, and so on. Recorded performances are great for sharing your work with viewers that already have a stake in your chorus, but generally don’t attract a new, wider range of viewers. They also can raise issues of copyright infringement.
3. *Quality Video AND Audio* - Viewers will usually shut off a video that is difficult to watch or hear. For this reason it is important to use some basic best practice when recording videos. The following two sections outline some tips that I have gathered for shooting quality video and audio. Shooting video onto a cell phone that you hold by hand usually looks incredibly shaky and is difficult to see and hear. It’s worth investing in an actually camcorder/recording system.

**Be Prepared**

One of the most vital aspects of recording professional quality video and audio, is good preparation. Here are my recommendations for what to do before you go to record.

1. Have a plan. - Always, always have a plan of what you are going to shoot. This applies to performances, interviews, or even just miscellaneous b-roll. It is important to think about a goal length for your final video and what images and sounds that final video must include. List these things out, actually write them down, and have that document with you when you are recording. This is called a shot list. Generally, I plan to shoot more than I know I actually need, at least two or three times more footage than my goal for the final piece. This gives me more freedom when I am editing.
2. Prepare the equipment. - It is important to adequately prep your gear for shooting. This can vary greatly depending on your resources, but the following things are generally true, and should be checked before going on any shoot.
   1. The Gear - It sounds basic, but I recommend making a list of all the actual piece of equipment that you will need to shoot. It’s worth going over this list before arriving at the location, just to make sure you have everything that you need.
   2. Batteries/Electricity - Always charge or bring more batteries than you think you’ll need when recording. It’s a frustrating, and sadly common, thing to get to set and not have the ability to power your equipment.
   3. Record Media - Double check and make sure that you have about twice as much record media as you will need for shooting. This includes SD cards, CF cards, MiniDV tapes, and so on, anything that your camera or audio recorded uses to store recorded data. It is important to have an ample supply, and to make sure that the digital media (usually SD or CF cards) have been wiped clean or formatted, ensuring that the full space on the card is free for recording.
   4. Record Format Settings - It is important to make sure that your camera or audio recording device is recording in a format that you can later use. Just what this format is varies greatly depending on what recording device and editing platform you are using. I recommend shooting a test with your equipment and bringing that media into your editing program even before the shoot to make sure everything works.
3. Arrive Early - This is another one that sounds pretty basic, but it can be a real challenge to not have enough setup time. Always arrive at the location about 45 minutes to an hour before you need to start recording. Usually, you won’t need that whole time to set up, but sometimes you will. It’s better to have some time to sit and relax than it is to be scrambling to get ready.

**Pay Attention**

You’re at the location, you are fully prepared, the equipment is setup and ready to go. Now what? It’s time to start recording. Here are a few things that I always watch to record the highest-quality video possible.

1. Camera/Recorder Placement - For camera placement, I recommend that you use a tripod in almost all cases. It’s hard to shoot handheld with a camera. It often just looks too shaky, even if you’re propped up against something. A steady tripod shot is almost always the best bet. Also, the camera should be at eye-level, as much as possible with your subject or subjects. It can be very distracting to watch footage that has been recorded from too far above or below a subject. I also pay attention to where the subject is in the frame. Of course, this will vary greatly depending on what you are recording and how, but it’s important, at the very least, to make sure that we are seeing all the vital parts of the subject within the camera’s viewer. For audio, it’s best to get mics within a foot and a half to two feet away from the subject. This helps record the highest quality audio from a subject, blocking out most of the rest of the noise in a space.
2. Audio Levels - Watch and listen with headphones to the audio that you are recording. Most recording devices have level meters that jump when they record audio. I generally recommend recording audio that averages around -12 dB and peaks at around -6dB.
3. White Balance - What does the color of the image look like? Is it really blue, really orange, just right? Most cameras have a setting adjust or set the color or white balance of an image. Turn this setting so that it looks appropriate. A good rule is to look at the color white anywhere in the frame. Does it look similar to the way that white looks to your naked eye?
4. Exposure - How bright is the image in the frame? Is everything far too dark? Is the image all blown out to white? Most cameras have a setting that allows you to control the exposure of the image. This can also be called iris or aperture.
5. Focus - Is the image sharp? Focus is one of the most challenging things to maintain while shooting video. When your subject moves, or the camera moves the image could come out of focus, getting blurry. Locate the focus setting (often a ring on the front of the camera) and learn how to adjust it to make a sharp image both before and during shooting.
6. Zoom - Be aware of the zoom setting. Most cameras have the ability to zoom in and out. Be sure that this setting is set to what you desire. Be aware that an image that is very “zoomed in” or shot with a telephoto lens is more difficult to keep in focus and to keep steady.
7. Recording - When recording both video and audio, it’s important to leave something called heads and tails before and after the footage that you want. This means that I start the camera or recording device rolling about five second before the footage that I want, and leave it recording for about five seconds after the footage that I want. This ensures that I don’t cut out any of the footage that I actually want when I am editing.

**Put It Together**

Editing can be a complicated and time-consuming process. I won’t go too far into detail about various editing practices or programs here. Each method and software used for editing comes with it’s unique advantages and challenges. The following, however, are things to keep in mind no matter what method you use.

1. Data Management - Keep digital files well labeled and organized before even opening an editing program on a computer. Most of the contemporary editing process is moving and manipulating files on a computer. Being organized from the start is keep to helping this process run smoothly. Also, though it can be a challenge, always back-up original media files in more than one location. A sizable external hard drive or data array can be a lifesaver for anyone working with video and audio.
2. Clear End Goal - It can be very challenging to begin editing without a specific, clear end goal in mind. I recommend knowing your target length and subject matter for a video before you even begin editing. This saves so much time when making editing decisions, and helps keep things on task and clear. It’s also helpful to know where the video or audio well end up being distributed. Is this a youtube video, or a donor DVD? Each will have its own unique needs.
3. Importing and Exporting Media - One of the most challenging aspects digital editing is bringing media into and out of an editing program. It’s worth taking some time to research which are the optimal video and audio formats to edit with, and which are the best to use for your final goals for a video.

**Share, Share, Share**

Creating an engaging video is only half the job. A great video needs an interested audience. Sharing through social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook remains one of the most effective ways to distribute online content to a given community. Each platform relies on real-world connections and interests. Generally, for an online video, you would post the video that they edited together in your digital editing program to youtube. Then, you would copy and paste that youtube link (or embed code) onto your organization’s website, facebook page, twitter feed, and so on.

**Equipment/Software Recommendations**

The following are some very basic equipment and software recommendations for recording video and audio. These are just a few of the many many tools that are available for recording, editing, and distributing video.

* Tripods - Tripods can vary greatly in cost and application. Generally, the heavier the camera, the more expensive the tripod. Here are a couple of manufacturers that offer excellent, professional quality video support equipment.
  + Manfrotto - <http://www.manfrotto.us/video>
  + Sachler - <http://www.sachtler.com/us/products/camera-support/systems/category_tripod-systems__none.html>
  + Vinten - <http://www.vinten.com/en/products>
* Cameras - There are thousands of possible recommendations to include here. I will list three cameras, of varying price ranges, that I have seen used successfully in the past.
  + Panasonic AG-HPX170 - Though more expensive the HPX170 is a fantastic camera for communications uses. It is execellent for short interviews as well as longer performances. I highly recommend this camera. <http://www.panasonic.com/business/provideo/ag-hpx170pj.asp>
  + Canon Rebel T3i - This is one of the cameras most commonly used for video among Canon’s DSLR line. It’s a great camera, but not, in the end designed for video. It’s ideal for shorter, well-planned shoots, interviews. It also needs to be accompanied by an external audio recorder. It also records excellent still images. <http://www.usa.canon.com/cusa/consumer/products/cameras/slr_cameras/eos_rebel_t3_18_55mm_is_ii_kit>
  + Panasonic HC-V110K - This is a great, cheap camcorder. It’s not the greatest quality, or the easiest to work with, but it will record decent video. <http://shop.panasonic.com/shop/model/HC-V110K>
* Audio Recorders - Here are two audio recorders that I have used very successfully in the past.
  + Zoom H4N Recorder - <http://www.zoom.co.jp/english/products/h4n/>
  + Marantz PMD661 Recorder - <http://www.bhphotovideo.com/c/product/898192-REG/Marantz_pmd661mkii_Marantz_PMD661_MKII_Professional.html>
* Microphones - Here are some manufacturers that I have used, and had success with.
  + Sennheiser - <http://en-us.sennheiser.com/mics>
  + Rode - <http://www.rodemic.com/mics>
  + Lectrosonics - <http://www.lectrosonics.com/Microphones/Microphones/microphones/menu-id-160.html>
* Editing Software - Each of these options have their ups and downs, but they each can edit and output video that will function. I recommend one of the first two, if you can afford one.
  + Final Cut Pro X - <http://www.apple.com/finalcutpro/>
  + Adobe Premiere - <http://www.adobe.com/products/premiere.html>
  + iMovie - <http://www.apple.com/ilife/imovie/>