

November 19, 2015

How video is pushing the marketing industry to innovate



Phil Klassen, Travel Alberta's vice-president of global consumer marketing. Travel Alberta has produced a series of interactive 360 videos that put viewers in the virtual driver's seat.

By Suzanne Wintrob
Special to Financial Post

Need to get away? Try flying over the snow-capped peaks of Jasper, dogsledding on the trails of Spray Lakes near Canmore or exploring dinosaur fossils in the Canadian Badlands. If you don't have the cash to make the trip, just go online and pretend.

For the past 18 months, Travel Alberta has been wooing would-be sightseers to the picturesque province through a series of interactive 360 videos that put them in the virtual driver's seat. Facebook users simply choose a destination and then take control of the adventure by moving their cursor or finger or turning the screen to view the scene from every angle. They may not be there physically, but it's much more fun and life-like than reading about the experience or flipping through photos.

“The ultimate goal of any marketer is to create and foster two-way dialogue with your audience,” says Phil Klassen, Travel Alberta's vice-president of global consumer marketing. “Video allows us to connect with travellers' interests using inspirational content and destination messaging in a more intimate and compelling way than other different forms of media. The imagery is very powerful.”

Video has been part of the marketing mix for a while, yet the constant need to produce compelling content for online channels has pushed the industry to innovate. According to ComScore, online viewing has grown 44 per cent since 2013 and is up across the generations. YouTube boasts more than one billion users – almost one-third of all people on the Internet – who watch hundreds of millions of hours and generate billions of views. Last year, four of YouTube's biggest trending videos in Canada were from Canadian advertisers including Nike, Budweiser and 20th Century Fox. Users crave experiences, which is why 360 video, virtual reality and Choose Your Own Adventure videos are particularly popular. The viewer becomes active, not passive, because the content is engaging. In return, marketers gain eyeballs, build brands and make money.

“No matter what it is, the role of online video is to accomplish one of three things: educate, entertain or inspire,” says Bob Cornwall, Google Canada's head of brand activation. “It should be integrated into every single campaign. When you complement online video with other traditional efforts, we see much more incremental impact of the collective media compilation than we do otherwise.”

It doesn't have to be complicated or costly. YouTube now supports 360 and virtual reality, Facebook is rolling out 360 in News Feed and camera prices have come down to make in-house filming possible. Andrew McGovern, vice-president of media and entertainment at 360 video experts Immersive Media in Kelowna, B.C., who produced Travel Alberta's videos, says costs are comparable to shooting traditional video and can run anywhere from \$20,000 to \$1 million if “big-time actors” are involved.

“Taking something that was once very elite and hard to get your hands on is now available to the masses - that's incredibly exciting,” adds Cornwall. “You're telling really great stories at a completely new level, with more engagement, creating a bigger experience that's memorable.”

But whether a video is 15 seconds or two minutes long, it's important to get it right from the get-go. Cyrus Mavalwala, founding partner of Advantis Communications in Toronto, spends a great deal of time working with clients on scripting and shooting angles

because every word and frame counts. And he's quick to warn that the work doesn't stop when the film crew packs up.

"It doesn't end with posting a video on YouTube," he says. "A lot of platforms can measure videos in very detailed ways. With interactive video, you can understand what people are clicking on, and that goes directly into the sales system. Marketing is more about big data, and you can get a lot of data from various digital channels. Video is certainly one of them."

Travel Alberta expects to produce additional 360 videos in the next 12 months as costs come down further and virtual reality goes mainstream. The goal, says Klassen, is to grow the province's business economy to more than \$10 billion by 2020. Combining interactive video with traditional advertising banners and social media channels may do just that.

"At the end of the day, video is one of the content formats that really allows us to create an emotional connection with travellers and ultimately make them aware of what Travel Alberta has to offer," he says. "There's not another type of content that has that same level of impact."