

RICK HALL PR

FOURTH ESTATE

A multi-part series on what every client should know about the media

Better know the press

Part 3: James Dunne

Series Producer/Videojournalist, CBC TV Current Affairs

WHEN YOU PROFILE SOMEONE, WHAT MAKES A GOOD PROFILE, AND A SHOW THAT YOU'RE HAPPY WITH?

With CBC programs “Venture” and “Fortune Hunters”, what we’re doing is “access-driven”. We need to be in on meetings, and important events and activities that relate to the growth and advancement of the business.

One of the first things we look for when deciding the stories to cover, is the kind of access can we get, how much disclosure our interview subject is comfortable with, and do we feel they’re being completely honest with us. We learn far, far more than we ever need to put in a story. Of the things we learn, maybe only 10 to 15 percent of it ends up in the story. Years ago, I did a story that was a very intensive, half-hour access program. I think we shot 50 hours of tape that turned into a 22-minute program.

You shoot a lot of things, not knowing if it’s going to be relevant, or turn out. Then you ignore whole days or hours of tape because they don’t contribute to the story that you want to tell. So even with the shorter pieces on Fortune Hunters that we are doing now, which are about 7 minutes long at most, it’s really about access, candor, and what the subjects will let us in on. Now that’s the first sort of filter in determining what makes a good show. The second filter is whether we are interested in that business and if what they’re doing is, for lack of a better word, “sexy” for television. There are a lot of very dynamic, interesting businesses that will just never make it to T.V. because there’s just not enough “television” happening there.

As soon as we’ve decided we’re interested in a business, we’re going phone these people to get a sense of who they are, unless we already know, in which case we can get right down to discussing and assessing access. What are the events? What are they comfortable telling us? How much action is there “behind the curtain” to be revealed, so to speak? If there’s too much that can’t be revealed or is confidential, we probably can’t do the story.

IF YOU HAVE A CHOICE OF STORIES, WHICH NO DOUBT YOU DO, HOW DO YOU DECIDE WHICH ONES TO RUN WITH?

Well other than the candor and character, the business has to be one that’s suitable to document for television – typically it’s got to be consumer focused, and it’s got to be a product or a service that people understand, and that will have some broad general relevance to the audience. Widgets – physical stuff – are all good things, as are services that people purchase or use on a day-to-day basis. Food is always an amazing topic, and other than that we look to things related to social and consumer trends, and what people talk about around the water cooler: home renovations, their holidays, caring for their elderly parents.

But then you get into the character traits of the person profiled. Is the person interesting and dynamic, can they tell a good story, can they express themselves well and honestly, and in a way that seems sincere and real. The more colourful they are, and the more willing they are to share information about their business and lives, the more dynamic a character they’re going to be on T.V. Likeability is a certain factor here, but they don’t have to be entirely likable, in fact they can be pretty prickly and still be very dynamic and interesting. We’ve worked with characters who aren’t always that likable, but very forthcoming, very decisive, and bold.

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LIKE A DONALD TRUMP?

Sure, a big personality. Personality is a big deal on T.V. You want viewers to have a reaction, whether it's positive or negative. I guess it's the telegenic factor.

WHEN IN THE FILMING PROCESS DO YOU DECIDE WHAT THE STORY "IS"?

People will say that there's a hundred different ways to tell a news story. The reality is that's not true, at least not for me. There's one right or best way to tell a story – or rather every story has its own unique best "tell". If it's wrong, it feels odd to the viewer and your colleagues will debate you about it! Typically a story will have a beginning, the middle and the end. You try to lay out very early on with "access stories" the particular goal someone is trying to achieve, what the stakes are related to meeting that goal, what's "on the line". You build towards the body of the story, finding the best expression of whether they have succeeded, or failed in reaching their goal at the climax.

The resolution of the story is "What are they going to do next?" or "Where does this leave them?" so we look for a particular quest. With a six- to seven-minute long story it's a mini quest, basically a window in time, a snapshot of the company. Their big goal might be to be the most dominant maker of falafels in Canada; the short-term goal is, can they get that account for Loblaw's. So we will follow them through on that pitch to Loblaw's with their prepackaged, ready-to-eat falafels. So everything that goes into that – testing, packaging designs, preparing for meetings, meeting with advisors, driving up to building and being nervous about going in. Hopefully we get access from Loblaw's, get to see them pitch, and find out the results.

WHAT IS AN EXAMPLE OF WHAT YOU THOUGHT WAS A PARTICULARLY GOOD STORY?

With *Fortune Hunters*, an example of a good story would be actually the first one we told, about a Vancouver firm called "Easy Wash", which was supposedly the world's most eco-friendly car wash. It was a young couple that started the business, using eco-friendly soaps, having their own water well and drawing their own water and recycling it. They charged a bit of a margin, and had some unique marketing plans.

But they spent way too much money building the thing, and had considerable construction overruns. They were deep in debt and were forced into some really bad choices about how they financed the business. They had some very expensive loans essentially. They were making good money but they were getting killed, they had the margins but they couldn't make any profit because everything was going to service the debt.

We followed them through essentially having to take the company into receivership and start over. Their original pool of investors lost a pile of money, and they lost money, too. But they kept control of the operation and got to start over again and refinance. It was a very dramatic story and we followed them through the whole process. So it was a truly dramatic window of the life of this company, and of these two people.

SOME INVESTORS WON'T FINANCE AN ENTREPRENEUR UNLESS THEY HAVE TWO OR THREE BUSINESS INSOLVENCIES BEHIND THEM. SO THE PUBLICITY YOU'RE DESCRIBING ABOVE CAN BE A GOOD THING FOR A NEW BUSINESS, BUT CAN IT ALSO BE A TWO-EDGED SWORD?

There's no doubt about it. There are pros and cons of dealing with the media and providing access to journalists. Large companies that have sizeable marketing budgets can distribute their messages in a number of ways, and have less incentive to provide access to their operations. Smaller and medium businesses don't have as many choices.

That said, one of the best examples of a smart choice by a large company to provide access to their chief executive was FedEx in a show called "Back to the Floor". Essentially this involved the CEO of a large corporation going back to the shop floor to do the jobs of the minions. FedEx did one of the episodes, and the CEO was filmed working as a driver, packer and in the warehouse. In doing this, we see him realizing, "Oh gee, some of our shift plans are not very friendly to our workers", some of our procedures could be improved, some of our equipment, and so forth. All from his first-hand experience of doing the job.

What happened perhaps was potentially embarrassing to the CEO or FedEx. Instead, it ended up being 22 minutes of prime time on Canada's national public broadcaster showing him express concern for the employees, and being himself and learning things. So for large companies there can be benefits in taking risks like that as well. For small and medium sized companies, well the benefits are all about what are the ways they have to get our message out there, and to portray something about our company or leadership.

HOW DO YOU FIND THE PEOPLE YOU PROFILE? AND HOW DO YOU DEAL WITH THE POTENTIALLY AWKWARD OR EMBARRASSING MOMENTS THAT YOU FILM? WHAT ARE THE EMOTIONS AND PROFESSIONAL ETHICS INVOLVED WITH THESE JOURNALISTIC DECISIONS?

If you look at back-stories from Fortune Hunters, you'll see the program is comparatively gentle.

We are not in business to make life harder for small business owners or entrepreneurs. We don't want to expose a business to a competitive disadvantage or some type of failure because we have something embarrassing on tape. We need the trust of our subjects in order to have access. That said, if you spill coffee on yourself before the biggest meeting of your life and it's on tape – well we are going to put it in the story. Because it's real and honest and maybe it shows your anxiety. That happens. And if you are jumping for joy after you make a big deal we'll show that too. The ethics are simple, we show what's real and relevant. Sometimes "bad" stuff happens but it has nothing to do with the story or the focus, so we drop it. That's especially easy when you are pressed for time. Emotionally, sometimes you're really happy to witness the success of people who are working hard. Other times, you bite your tongue when you can see someone might be making a mistake. It's natural for stories and characters to provoke a reaction. You use that as a guide for how the viewer might feel, and you take a few steps back to be fair to your subject. Sometimes you get legal advice because of something your subject says about a rival company. It's always multi-layered and when we're concerned we consult with our journalistic leaders.

But the show is mostly positive in tone. The mission of the program is to educate and entertain, to inspire people to pursue their dream, and to learn from the experiences of others. In each episode we have two experts come in, one of who is a celebrity type entrepreneur, and the other an expert in that industry, who has "been there and done that". What these experts have to say can be beneficial to the principals of the company being profiled, as well as the viewers who want to learn about business, and running or starting their own company and small business.

We also do a piece at the end of our program called "My First Million", when we interview people who have been extremely successful. We've had Wallace McCain of Maple Leaf Foods, Herschel Segal the founder of Le Chateau, Sandra Wilson the founder of Robeez baby shoes, which she sold for \$35 million. Cindy Lee, the founder and CEO of T & T Supermarkets, which is Canada's only Asian supermarket chain, has also been on the program. These people tell in the first person their secrets of success, and how they made their first million dollars, which makes a really interesting and fun story.

FROM YOUR JOURNALIST'S POINT OF VIEW, HOW DO YOU ASSESS WHAT IS RELEVANT TO THE STORY, AND DO YOU NEED TO BRING IN THE NEGATIVE ASPECTS?

We dropped one story this year, even though we'd spent money on it, done a trip, and invested time and effort in finding it and producing it, but then decided we couldn't put it on the air. We'd come across some disturbing rumours about past business dealings of one of the principals, and we couldn't determine the validity of these rumours. We couldn't fold this into the story, as we're not an investigative program.

We couldn't provide the balance needed for sound journalism, so we said we've got to let it go.

GOING BACK TO WHAT YOU DISCUSSED EARLIER, AT WHAT POINT DURING THE FILMING PROCESS DO YOU TEND TO DECIDE WHAT THE STORY IS – HOW OFTEN AT THE OUTSET, OR HOW OFTEN DURING PRODUCTION?

That's a good question. One of the things we're asked, especially from media relations people is: "What's your angle?" With our program it's impossible for us to know that at the outset. We don't know enough

about the business, or what's going on in the business to have an angle.

We certainly have an objective, however, which is to tell a compelling and interesting story. So we start learning about the business, and what are the most compelling and interesting aspects. Generally speaking, the things they're the most nervous about are the things that are most interesting to us. The things that are the most critical to them succeeding are the things that we want to be in on, and learn about and be able to witness.

HAVE YOU HAD ANY PEOPLE PULL OUT, AND WHAT DO YOU HAVE TO SAY ON THAT?

We had a subject who got too nervous because she was only familiar with Venture and didn't have enough confidence about what the experience would be like on Fortune Hunters. We've also dropped subjects in whom we were very interested, but because we couldn't get enough dynamic activity to shoot, on the timeline we required. That was difficult. Sometimes there are stages of a business's growth that are not as active as others.

AS YOU HAVE LARGELY A BROADCAST JOURNALISM BACKGROUND JAMES, CAN YOU SAY SOMETHING ABOUT THE DIFFERING NEEDS OF BROADCAST VS. PRINT?

In terms of the stories you pursue, how you construct them, and what you need from a news source, television is the broad strokes, about the emotion, while print is about information and the details.

In broadcast, we learn much more than we will ever use. That information is essential for us to know what's most important, and how to tell the best possible story and choose the most dynamic and interesting parts of it. As a news source or subject, you're going to spend more time doing an access-driven TV show, than with a print reporter.

A print reporter will ask you to send them background documents that they can consult, and then they'll talk to you on the phone a few times, and ask you some questions. You may never meet them in person. The commitment to print is to provide a lot of information, and a little bit of time.

The commitment to an "access" television piece is to be willing to spend a lot of time with the camera, and also be willing to provide a lot of information. With television pieces, the viewer will remember something about the person and the business, an impression, and emotional connection that may last a long time. Past subjects of Venture and Fortune Hunters say they still go places and have people say, "I saw you on...". People will have a very particular experience and memory of a program.

WHY WOULD AN INDIVIDUAL OR COMPANY WANT TO WORK WITH YOU?

For the small to medium businesses, it's really along the lines of: "there's no such thing as bad press." Exposure is good exposure. The subject has to realize, however, that this is not a commercial message. You didn't pay for the message, so you do not control it. On the other hand, the viewer will regard the program as a more reliable source of information than a commercial or a marketing brochure.

WHEN HAS A SUBJECT BEEN UNHAPPY WITH A PROGRAM?

We've had subjects unhappy initially, and then after they've had a few people respond to them, they become more at ease. A great example is a story idea for Venture about a professional hockey player who invested with his friend and partner in creating a line of sports apparel. The company had been around 18 months or two years, but they were just really starting to come into their own.

We were there witnessing their growing pains, production delays and quality glitches. We filmed them not hitting their sales target for this particular season. Some of those moments were embarrassing, because they're regular guys, good guys, hockey guys, and some had more business experience than others. To people in the garment business, or experienced business people, they may have looked amateur. But they had the right combination for what they were doing.

Their first reaction to the program when it aired was "Hey, what did we ever do to you guys?" Then they started getting e-mails from people saying "we loved the story", "we love what you're doing", "it's so great

that you're a Canadian company" right down to "we want to support you" and we'll give you warehouse space for free if you need it. A few months later, one of the subjects said to us, "I know at first we were really anxious about this, and there were things we were upset about, but your story gave birth to our company."

In other cases, generally speaking, people have been upset about a particular scene, like, "I can't believe you put that shot in where I was wearing a hair net". Or one company was making nutrition bars and we had a beautiful scene of a photo shoot with this food doctor who sprayed the food to make it glisten, and did a number of other things to enhance the image of the product. We had a very detailed shoot revealing exactly how this was done. But that's the nature of their business, it's just like putting make-up on a model. It was so fascinating, but there were viewers who didn't know that "doctoring" was part of food marketing and they wrote in to say "what a scandal!".

ANY LAST WORDS THAT COME TO MIND ABOUT WHAT MAKES A GOOD NEWS SOURCE?

There are a couple of things I should mention. Anybody who wants to deal with access-driven television should have good "self-knowledge", be comfortable with themselves, and how they represent themselves.

Years ago we did a professional development workshop with a multiple award-winning business program producer from the BBC. He said something I believe is very true: "Business is the modern-day gladiator arena, because people are so passionate about their work, their business, and are so absorbed and committed to their work."

In some cases entrepreneurs and business people are like artists, their work is part of their identity, it is part of who they are. It's a great privilege to tell those stories.

AT THE END OF THE DAY IT'S A HUMAN-INTEREST STORY, IT'S ABOUT PEOPLE?

Absolutely – it's about people.



JAMES DUNNE is a TV programmer and producer who has both created and relaunched TV programs, as well as shot and produced verite style documentaries for CBC Television. James' most recent project is creating, pitching, developing and producing **Fortune Hunters** (www.cbc.ca/news/fortunehunters) a new business show on trends for Newsworld, Canada's News Network. James conceived branded show

segments designed to be shared with new media partners such as YouTube and MSN, wireless carriers and for CBC News Airport Express. He managed his Series Producer duties in addition to full-time responsibilities shooting, and field producing 16 of 22 stories in the show lineup. James has also worked with CBC Learning and Development since 2004. He helped developed the weeklong Masters Class for Video Journalists, and also co-wrote and edited the CBC Video Journalism Handbook for novice VJ's. Prior to joining CBC in 1997, James worked in media relations. He has a degree in Communications with a major in Film Studies.



Effective media relations, in public, private and non-for-profit sectors, is critical. Success depends on it. Without exception. And key to effective media relations is understanding the media – print and broadcast. In a series of web postings on www.rickhallpr.com, direct feedback from today's important writers and editors will be featured, offering clients a rare window into the world of journalism, what works and what doesn't in media relations. The better a client knows the media, the more effective media relations will be.

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