

Stories Move The World



Harnessing the Power of
Branded Documentary Storytelling

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How does your company tell its story?

Do you rely on charts and spreadsheets, or keywords that don't fully convey the nuances of what you do? Have you ever stopped and wondered: maybe we can tell this story with film?

Documentary filmmaking is a uniquely powerful way to rise above the noise, whether your organization is B2B, B2C, a startup or a nonprofit. Using human stories to highlight your mission helps your audience connect with your company on an emotional level. With film, your customers, partners, and stakeholders experience your product or service in action – not just as jargon on a landing page.

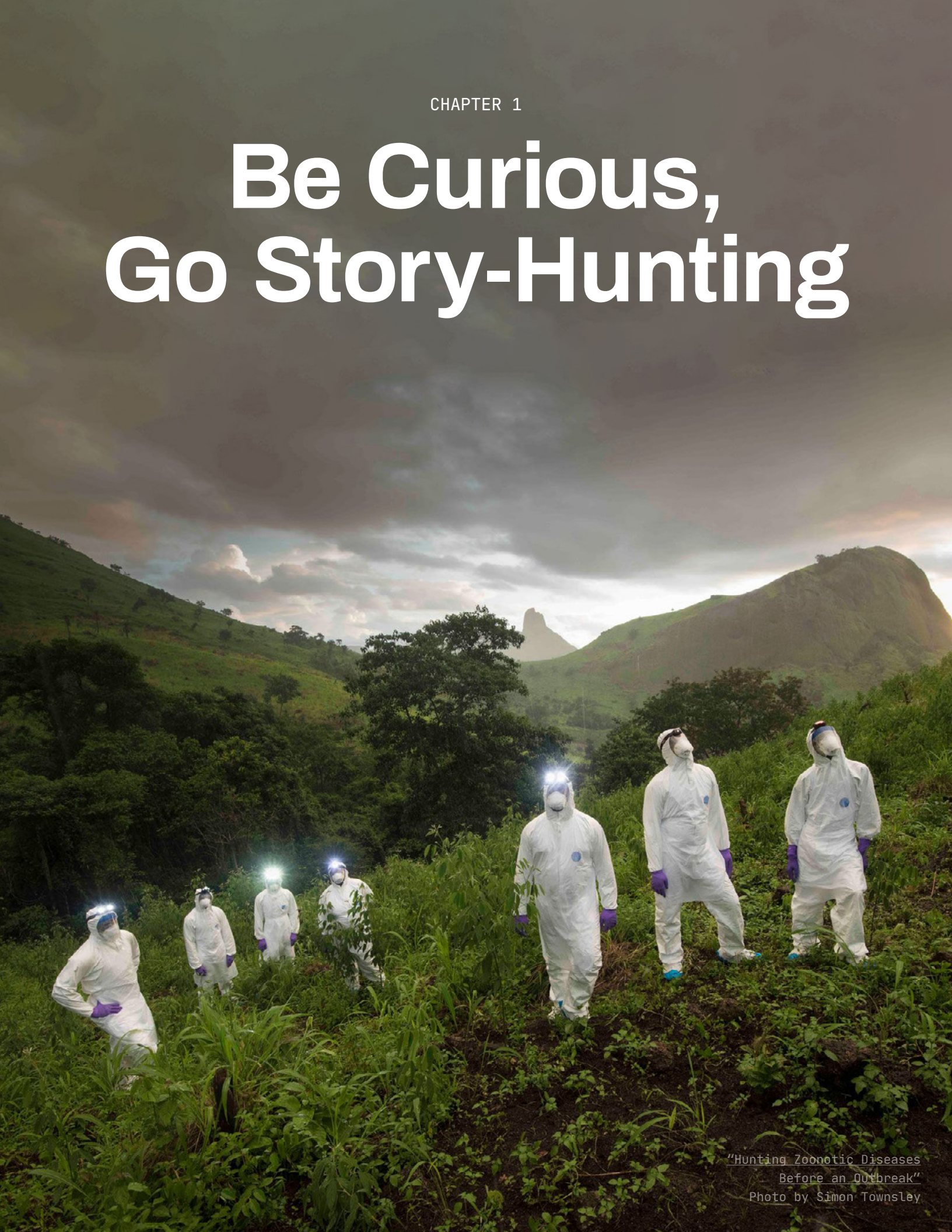
The difference between a video that falls flat and one that inspires people to share is found in a perfect blend of expertise and art – but most companies don't have the in-house ability to tell this kind of visually rich, emotionally driven story. What does it take to find and cultivate the right story, hook your audience, and develop a truly world-class film? This guidebook holds the answer. In it we share our story-hunting philosophy, our formula for creating a cinematic experience, and the details behind our marketing and distribution process, so you can harness the power of film at your own organization.

Your story is just around the corner. Where will it take you?

The difference between a video that falls flat and one that inspires people to share is found in a perfect blend of expertise and art.

CHAPTER 1

Be Curious, Go Story-Hunting



*"Hunting Zoonotic Diseases
Before an Outbreak"*
Photo by Simon Townsley


Good stories are at the heart of filmmaking, the reason viewers get hooked and stay hooked.

But stories don't just fall into your lap. If you want to tell a good story, you have to know how.

Story-hunting is perhaps the most important thing we do at Freethink – it's how we find the main ingredient around which the entire meal is created – which is why we want to share some of the lessons we've learned. Here are our six secrets to finding a story that will resonate with your audience.

The six principles of story development

We like to think of documentary filmmaking as more like playing in a jazz band than an orchestra. It's a combination of thoughtful planning and skilled improvisation. Instead of hard-and-fast rules, we have principles for story development we like to follow – to make sure we're headed in the right direction while allowing us the flexibility to improvise.



01


Build trust and set expectations

Every story needs a human anchor – a personal element that makes the story sing. Because of this, a huge part of documentary filmmaking is about **building a relationship with your subject**, and the foundation of that is trust. At its heart, building trust is about caring for your subject. Be sincere, authentic, and open with your subjects, and they will have confidence you can tell their story with care. The best stories come when the people you interview know that you value their story and will be respectful of their boundaries. When there is trust, subjects will feel free to share their deepest thoughts, feelings, and vulnerabilities.

02

Actively listen

You can spend all day asking the right questions, but if you aren't listening, you aren't going to leave with a good story. The best story-hunters are also the best listeners – they let their curiosity lead the way and take the energy to engage actively engage in every conversation with a potential subject. Active listeners also realize that **not all stories have to be brand new** – they can ask critical questions and probe into previously told stories to find a new angle and deeper meaning.



At its heart,
building trust
is about
caring for
your subject.

03

Control what you can control

This principle takes us back to the jazz metaphor – control as much as you can behind the scenes so that the story can develop within the most nurturing environment possible. That means ensuring you have functional equipment, the right people on the job, a thoughtful agenda, and all the information needed to succeed. When you're fully prepared, you're ready for anything – and that's the fun part and where the magic happens. When you are working with people, **you never know what you are going to get**. And that's a good thing, some of the best moments are what surprise us the most.

04

Set realistic expectations


This is a good principle not only for story-hunting, but for life in general – be realistic in your expectations of your team, the storytelling process, and yourself. It can be easy to get swept up in the fire of a great concept, and setting realistic expectations can help you navigate moments of uncertainty or disappointment. Not every story comes to fruition, but that doesn't mean you aren't going to end your process with something else equally amazing.

05

Seek out visually rich stories

There are so many great stories out there, but not every story can be told in a visually compelling way. We try to avoid stories that took place in the past and can't be recreated – for example, if the main character in the story has left the company. And though we pride ourselves on making technical stories shine, some of them just aren't visually interesting enough to make a good film. Making a successful documentary means blending written story with enticing visuals. If we only have one half of that equation, we know it's not right.

**Not every story
can be told
in a visually
compelling way.**



06

Manifest a positive attitude

When you are developing a story, attitude is important. Subjects can tell when you aren't happy, and one bad attitude on-set can hinder the entire storytelling process. Having a positive, team-oriented attitude means learning how to be subtle, adjust, and go with the flow, no matter what's happening with you or your subject. The way you enter into the story-hunting process will shape your success and what you find. In order to make story magic happen, you have to be open to it, and present enough to capture it when the moment comes.

Finding the “why”

When it comes to story-hunting, the big lift is finding the right creative direction inside the raw material. Stories are all around us, but it takes a trained eye to pick the best story out of the crowd, cultivate it, and make it sing.

Sometimes a story we want to tell has been told before, but it’s missing its “why” or is begging to be told in a different way. One example is [the story of Johnny Matheny](#), who lost his left arm to cancer. He volunteered as part of a Johns Hopkins study to test the most advanced bionic arm on the market, which uses targeted muscle reinnervation. Johnny’s story had been told before from a clinical perspective, but we wanted to know more about his everyday life – and what it was like to leave his bionic arm in the laboratory at the end of each day. By focusing on Johnny’s home life, we found a way into a deeper “why” that had not been told before – why this technology is important and how it changes real lives.



Image of Johnny Matheny from [“The Real Bionic Man”](#)

Cultivating curiosity, one story at a time

To be a good story-hunter, you have to be curious. You have to be willing to dive in deep, ask questions, and spend a lot of your time listening to the answers. Stories are all around us, but it’s **what we do with them that matters**. Making a good story great is about telling the world why it matters – and that’s what we’ll explore in our next chapter.

CHAPTER 2

Find Universal Truths and Explain Why They Matter



"Building Infrastructure On Mars Is Tricky - These Bugs Could Help"

Photo by AI Space Factory

How often are you really moved by a news story?

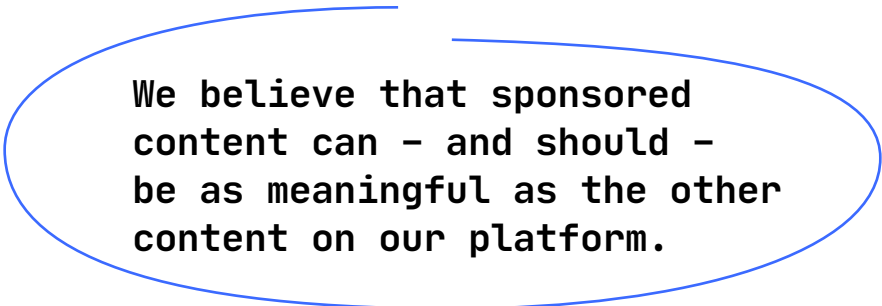
We read every day about lifesaving innovative technology, but we rarely connect with it on a personal level. Why don't these stories change the way we think, or inspire us to take action?

The short answer is that most of the content we read daily doesn't tap into the universal truths that move us. Many storytellers don't take the time to explain why these innovations matter on a real, human level.

At Freethink, we are always thinking about how to connect with our audience on an emotional level. This connection is enhanced by the power of film – the potent combination of image, sound, and narrative can change the perception of viewers in only a few minutes. In this chapter, we'll explore the ways we use story development and editing to infuse our films with meaning.

Stories are universal

One of our foundational principles at Freethink is the idea that good stories are universal. With that philosophy in mind, we create both sponsored and editorial content (unsponsored) using the same team and the same process. We do this because we believe that sponsored content can – and should – be as meaningful as the other content on our platform.



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Although many agencies think of marketing in B2B and startup environments as purely transactional, **human beings don't change just because they're wearing suits.** We know that behind every business, startup, and nonprofit, there are real people. And people love stories, not jargon and boring charts. We love telling meaningful stories about the work that companies do because we know that people want to work with, and buy from, organizations that share their values. That's why one of our primary objectives when creating sponsored content is getting to the heart of a company's mission.

Defining objectives

To ensure that you connect with audiences emotionally, it helps to start with an objectives statement developed in partnership with your featured organization. In this brief, you should hammer out how a product, service, or system works – and how it solves human problems. What is the meaning behind a company's mission? Why do they do what they do, and why does it matter to the world?

An objectives brief serves as a guide during the story development, production, and editing processes. Returning to the brief during the filmmaking process ensures you stay true to the video's objective and capture the spirit

of the company's mission. Once you've tapped into the meaning behind their mission, it's time to make it tangible – and that means finding a real person making a difference and sharing their story with the world.

Finding the human element

Though it may seem counterintuitive to tell stories about technology or business through an emotional lens, human psychology reveals that emotion supersedes logic. People, whether they are CEOs, donors, or future clients, connect with storytelling in ways they can't connect to cerebral, data-driven presentations. We believe that making an emotional connection is important, even in the business world. When you can tap into a viewer's emotions, you have the power to make a real impact.

To explain how we capture meaning in our storytelling, let's look at the story of [Chef Chad Houser](#). When you read the facts of this story – that a local restaurateur is reducing recidivism rates by offering internships to kids swept up in the criminal justice system – you might be curious, but you probably won't be moved to tears. The foundation of this story is good, but it needs human connection to make it truly meaningful.



When you meet these kids on film and hear their stories, you feel a visceral connection and the project starts to take on greater meaning. **You become emotionally invested before you ever hear the numbers:** that the kids in Chef Houser's restaurant have an 85% chance of staying out of jail compared to the 50% recidivism rate throughout the state of Texas. This is what we tap into

Image of Abillyon, an Intern at Café Momentum from ["This Restaraunt Gives At-Risk Youth a Second Chance"](#)

– not just that more kids are staying out of jail, but that these kids, whose faces you see and whose stories you hear, have a chance to make a new life for themselves.

Going off-set, getting immersive

Connecting with the human element is essential. But scripting your film takes away that natural human connection. It makes your film feel less real.

That's why, though studio interviews are important and we schedule them into our filming process, we spend considerably more time off-set. Going off-set means stepping outside the studio into the real world – whether that is the streets of the city where a story takes place, a subject's home, or a laboratory. For some filmmakers, this can be nerve-wracking, as leaving the studio means leaving the space where you have total control over your final product. But the moments of authenticity that you find in someone's home, or when you are filming your subject walking down the street, can change how the audience connects to your documentary. And these moments make the film more “real.”

To find these moments, we recommend taking that daring step out of the studio into the world. Don't just ask your subjects to come talk about their story. Go to the places where the story is happening and see what you can find there. Have your camera ready in moments when you think nothing will happen. You never know what you might capture.

Process is our essence

Tapping into universal truths and creating human-to-human connections is at the heart of what we do, and this requires a deliberate process. It takes about four months for the Freethink team to move a documentary film from story development to completion, and we pride ourselves on our careful approach to content creation because we know it works. It takes time to find the right story and infuse it with depth and meaning – but if you're looking for meaningful engagement, it's time well spent.

Scripting your film takes away that natural human connection.

It takes time to find the right story and infuse it with depth and meaning.

CHAPTER 3

Creating a Cinematic Experience Through the Narrative Arc



"Can AI Predict Which Depression Treatment is Most Effective?" Photo © Microgen / Adobe Stock

No matter the length of your video or the message it's trying to convey, story is essential. You can spend thousands of dollars on expensive equipment to make a video look and sound like a Hollywood film, but without a compelling story, you are going to fall flat.

Though our videos are only 4-10 minutes long, at Freethink we think cinematically – something that comes in large part from our experience making feature-length films. We want to emulate the best kind of movie theater experience, the kind where viewers walk out feeling transformed by what they've seen.

To create a cinematic experience, you need an Oscar-level story structure. Whether your film is explaining how healthcare technology is improving lives or telling a co-founder's backstory, every viewer should get caught up in the suspense of the story and leave feeling like they can change the world. In this chapter we'll explain how to create a narrative in your film that will leave your audience feeling like they've had a big-screen experience.

Embracing the three-act structure

After years of making movies and writing stories, we've found the most effective way to develop a strong narrative for your film is ancient: the classic three-act structure. We love it because it works for any story, whether we are talking about building a robot or changing the education system. It's adaptable, and it taps into the human love for stories – after all, it's been around in some form or another since at least the fourth century A.D.

Freethink films technically have four parts; we begin with a cold open, which acts as a trailer for the film. We'll talk more about the cold open – and why we use it – in Chapter 6. But once we dive into the meat of our story, we focus on three main acts:

Act I

The Inciting Incident

The inciting incident introduces the problem at hand – **what are we trying to solve?** This act also covers background information about the main players in the film and sets the tone.




**Covers
background
information**

Act II

Building the Machine

Act Two is all about doing the hard work of solving the problem – we call this “building the machine.” In this act, our main players are seen **collaborating, problem-solving, trying, and sometimes failing**, and suspense builds as we work toward the climax of the film. This act is all about seeing process in action as we build up to our main event.




**Solving
the problem**


Act III

Climax / Resolution

In Act Three, we reach the climax of the film: this is the payoff that the audience has been waiting for. We also take a few seconds to capture the falling action or resolution – after the big reveal, what happens next? What does it all mean? This is where we **consider the future**.



**Consider
the future**



Transforming the story

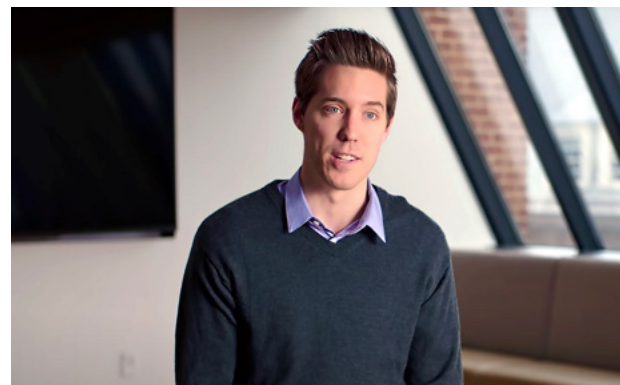
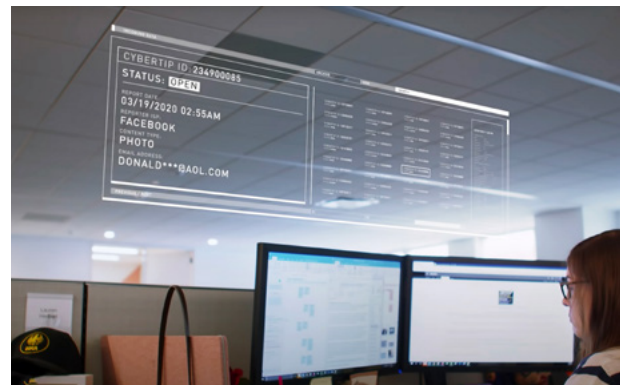
What does the three-act structure look like in action?

One example of this cinematic transformation is our film about [Palantir and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children](#), or NCMEC. For this project, we needed to take something that most people don't often consider gripping – **big data** – and turn it into a moving, edge-of-your-seat thriller.

In Act One, the audience is presented with a huge problem with heart-breaking consequences. NCMEC, the centralized reporting organization for materials involving child sexual abuse, is concerned that with more than 60 million images a year to sift through and only 25 analysts, they are missing clues that could help save a child from ongoing abuse. To solve this problem, we meet Palantir, a software company that helps organizations manage large quantities of data.

Act Two follows a few main players, including the Georgia Bureau of Investigation (GBI), as they follow-up on Palantir alerts from NCMEC. This is where we see the technology in action. Where in previous years NCMEC analysts had to recall and match reports based on memory, Palantir sends alerts that allow analysts to find, group, and send reports to law enforcement with as much data as possible so they can track down and rescue an at-risk child. With Palantir, analysts can prioritize data that signals a child currently in danger.

What does this all mean? In Act Three, we talk about the 500 arrests and 350 rescued children that have come from NCMEC's partnership with Palantir. That's a powerful story on its own. But rather than leading with the data, **we focus on personal stories first – so when it comes time to talk about big data, it feels rooted in something deeply human.** It's a tool that saves lives. That change in perception is the power of the cinematic experience.



Images from "Fighting Child Exploitation with Big Data"

(Top) Act One, (Middle) Act Two; Nick Montgomery, Forward Deployed Engineer at Palantir, (Bottom) Act Three; Big Data graphic

CHAPTER 4

Hook Me and Keep Me Hooked

"Quantum Teleportation Demo
Sets New Accuracy Record"

Illustration by
Andrew Brumagen

In the world of digital media, your film's competition is everything from Netflix to TikTok, with all of these various channels competing for viewers' limited time and attention. In this sea of media, the ultimate goal is to achieve meaningful attention – meaning that your viewer is giving full attention to your entire film – but to do that you need a powerful hook, and then enough suspense along the way to keep them hooked.

At Freethink we take attention so seriously that we actually guarantee completed views, that puts a lot of pressure on our producers and editors to make the content we create as engaging as possible.

That pressure is by design – we think we should be accountable for our sponsored partners' success, and our guarantee pushes us to make every film remarkable. To grab viewer attention and keep them watching, we've learned that you need a few ingredients: an engaging opening, the right pacing, and data, which provides a way to measure and bolster your success.

The art of the cold open

In Chapter 5 we talked about our three-act structure, but there is a critical part of our formula that comes first: the cold open. The cold open serves as both the prologue and a short “ad” for your video; it’s the hook that grabs a viewer’s attention and pulls them in.

Generally speaking, the cold open should:

- Last 30-60 seconds
- Feel high-energy
- Include the most compelling footage and soundbites; and
- Pose a problem or make a promise that will compel the viewer to keep watching

The cold open acts as the video’s cliff-hanger. It sets the scene and alludes to the mystery or quandary that will shape the rest of the film. Visually, the cold open is engaging, fast-paced, and enticing to the eye – it has to grab the viewer and keep them guessing.

You can see the cold open at work in our video about [NASA’s Planetary Defense Coordination Office](#) – a team of physicists responsible for ensuring that we don’t experience another mass extinction event due to a rogue asteroid heading for Earth. In this cold open, the audience is told that an asteroid is coming someday soon (the “problem”), and is enticed to keep watching with the understanding that the rest of the film will answer the important question: what are we going to do about it?

Keeping attention through pacing

Once the cold open has done its work and hooked the viewer, the rest of the film becomes all about pacing as you follow your three-act narrative structure. Even in a video that’s only six minutes long, **you need to keep a fast pace to entice viewers and maintain suspense.**

To keep audience’s attention, our target for pacing is to change the narrative every 30 to 45 seconds.

What does changing the narrative mean? There are several strategies editors can leverage to keep it exciting, including

The cold open acts as the video’s cliff-hanger... it has to grab the viewer and keep them guessing.

switching up the scene, shifting the speaker, altering the visuals, and playing with sound. In the Planetary Defense video mentioned above, for instance, the video moves between speakers relatively quickly, never lingering on the same visual for more than 10 or 20 seconds.

A secondary pacing goal is balancing polished studio cuts with natural or improvisational moments. Balancing the informative parts of the film with moments of human connection captures the viewer's attention and offers a more nuanced emotional and intellectual experience.

Balancing art and science

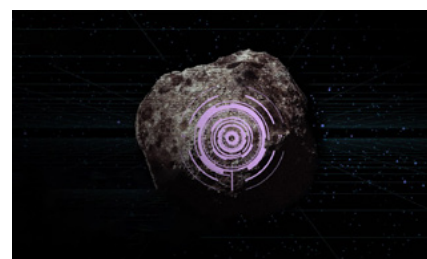
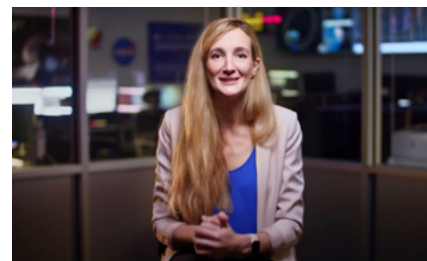
Capturing attention isn't just an art – it's also a science. At the foundation of our editorial process is a **focus on data**. With data, we can measure drop-offs in attention and make alterations that reflect the experience of real viewers.

To measure attention before publishing a video, we use **"dark testing."** Dark testing is a method to gauge user experience by allowing a select handful of users to watch a video before its official launch. We can then track where viewers stop watching and look for trends – if too many viewers stop watching at a cold open, we know we have more work to do in the intro.

We use data gleaned from dark testing to make final adjustments to the video. That way we feel confident the final product is as tight and engaging as possible upon public release.

An emotional hook

The heart of creating a strong hook is emotion. If you can get viewers emotionally involved in your story from the very start, you can carry their attention all the way through. Whether we're building excitement or appealing to a viewer's empathy for our subject, we are always trying to work on an emotional level to speak to our audience.

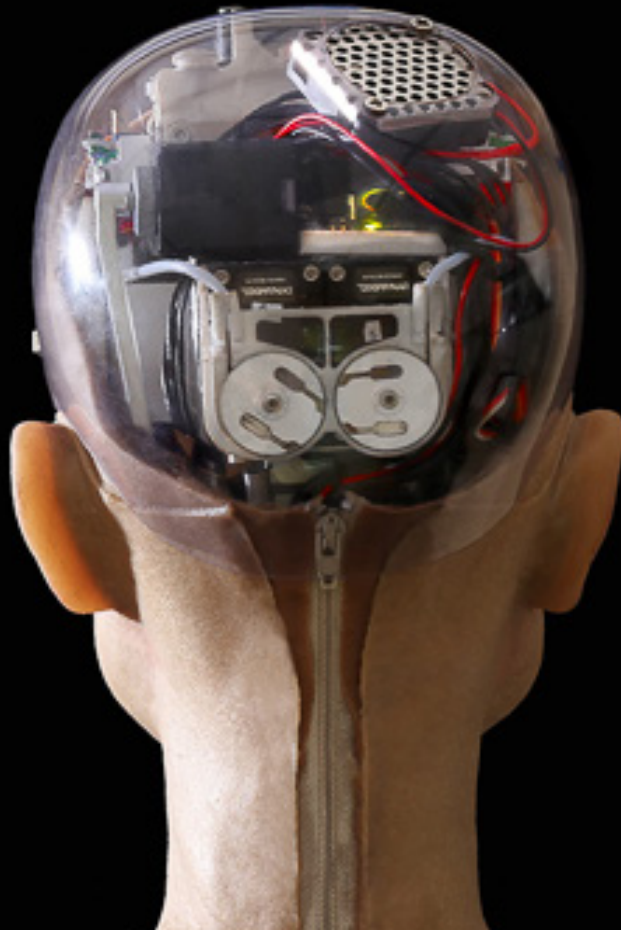


Images from
["NASA's Plan to Stop an Asteroid Headed to Earth"](#)
 (First) Elena Adams
 (Second) NASA's Dark Mission
 Technology
 (Third) Andy Rivkin
 (Fourth) Asteroid graphic

* **But before a viewer ever clicks the play button, they have an emotional response to a video's packaging – we'll talk about that in Chapter 7.**

CHAPTER 5

Package to Inspire Curiosity



"Sophia the Robot Will Be
Mass-Produced This Year"
Photo by Hanson Robotics

Though we like to believe that a skillfully made documentary can stand on its own, marketing plays a pivotal role in the success (or failure) of any video project. How you market your product is just as important as the product itself – without the right packaging, viewers might just scroll by and miss out on the hard-hitting content you just spent months creating.

In this chapter, we'll look at some best practices for making your video stand out.

Study the market

Before developing a distribution plan, it's important to understand the market: how are other creators packaging content and what seems to be working?

A successful market analysis will dive deep into your distribution platforms and provide an understanding of what your content will be up against. Your focus should be on the traits and techniques that top videos share. This means studying similar videos on sites like YouTube and making note of successful language used in headlines and descriptions, branding, and thumbnail images. Conducting this in-depth analysis not only helps determine what competitors are doing right, but it also helps you differentiate yourself from top performers in your niche.

Typically you'll find dozens of videos covering your topic area, but two or three of them will have millions of views. Ask yourself why. Have they positioned the story in a way that hooks you? Is the image compelling? Why are those two or three out performing the rest? If you look at the market through this lens, it will help you stand out as you develop your video packaging.

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Create compelling images

Humans are visual creatures. We see and process images on our screens much more quickly than we read a snappy headline. Because of this, choosing **compelling thumbnail art** to accompany your content is essential to hook viewers.

On many video platforms, including YouTube and Apple News, **click through rates (CTRs)** determine which content is boosted and which is not – so your video's success on a given platform has a lot to do with the thumbnail image you choose.

At Freethink, we often spend days debating art direction, trying different concepts, and tweaking details until it checks all of the boxes. Sometimes this comes in the form of a custom illustration. Other times high quality photography. And often we end up with a hybrid or collage style.

Thumbnail strategy and design is so important that we've developed an entire guide around it for our team. Here are just a few considerations to think about when developing your own:

THUMBNAIL STRATEGY & DESIGN:

Think about your brand tone

For example, at Freethink artwork should feel authoritative, yet optimistic. This supports our mission to inspire people to build a better world. What's your brand tone?

Image should be compelling

The image should have a strong composition, clear subject, and strive to evoke an emotion. When in doubt, try to capture a feeling related to the story, rather than information. Don't get carried away trying to fit all the elements from an article or video into the artwork.

Keep it simple

Cluttered background, excessive filters and effects, sepia tones, excessive grunge, or poor contrast can dramatically effect performance.

Optimize for small sizes

Since your content might be viewed in so many different media contexts, images need to communicate well and maintain clarity at every size from full-screen on desktop to thumbnail on mobile. Images that scale down well generally have a clear primary subject or focal point, minimal background, and strong contrast.

Image + Title = Movie Poster

There should be a synergy between the image and the headline. The image should compliment the story and help tell a small piece of it in a way that isn't captured in the video or article. It doesn't have to tell the whole story. The image should signal to the intended audience: "this is for you."

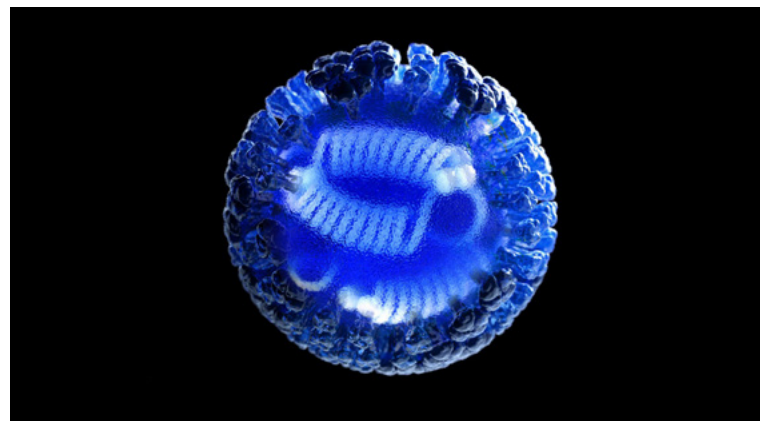
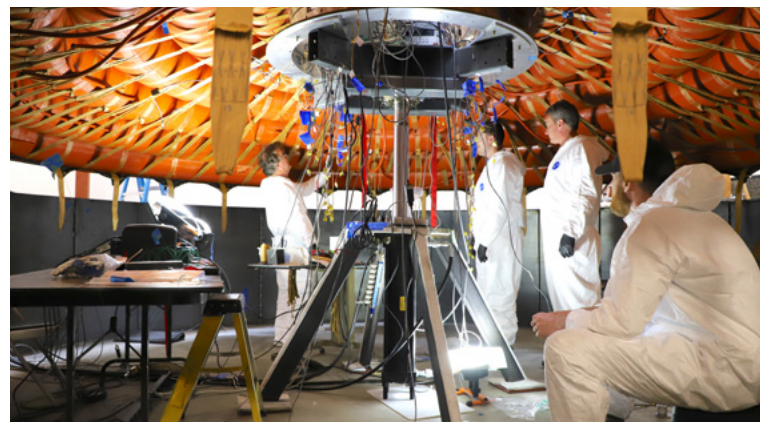
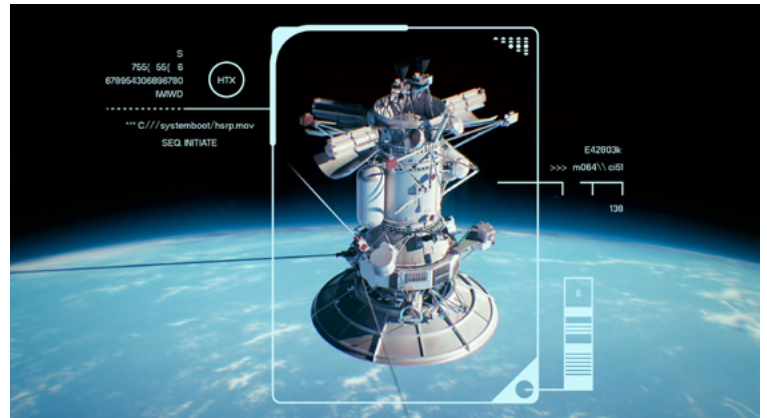
Avoid stock clichés

If there is no better image option available and generic stock needs to be used, look for the simplest, cleanest, and most elegant image available. Avoid images with overused or tired effects.

Use limited color palette

Limited color palettes communicate more clearly and effectively. Select colors that contrast well with each other.

* Examples of high-performing Freethink thumbnail artwork



Use headlines and copy to sell the click

When it comes to copy for video, there isn't much room for error, so every word needs to pack a punch. Most videos include a description of only a few hundred words along with a short headline to accompany your thumbnail image. Use this limited real estate to find a way in. How can you create an "idea packet" that speaks to your audience and sells the content?



Every word needs to pack a punch.

Like your thumbnail, this copy should be clear and hint at a larger story that will compel viewers to click through and watch. At Freethink, our copywriters spend significant time crafting a headline and video description; often, they'll do A/B testing of different versions to see which yields a higher click through rate (CTR).

Getting found is a combination of art – images and words – and science – SEO and testing. Using keywords in your video descriptions and teaser blog posts helps search algorithms find your video and share it with your target audience.

Obsess over CTR (click through rate)

How do you know if you've packaged your video effectively? The answer is you can find a strong filter in YouTube's CTR. On this platform, attracting a click in a sea of content is a huge challenge, but the percentage of clicks you generate is a major driver for videos going viral. We'll discuss other metrics for evaluating more meaningful attention for videos later. But in terms of packaging, this is the one.

When we're looking at the success of our initial packaging – the thumbnail image, headline, and search-optimized description explained earlier – a high CTR is a sign that our marketing team has done their job well. CTRs vary across

genres, but as a general rule, less than 1% is bad, around 2-3% is good, and anything above 5% and you have the potential to go viral. If 6% of impressions are converting into clicks, you should be in business, and you can expect the YouTube algorithm to push your content out to a much wider audience.

The whole package

In this noisy media landscape, it takes more than just compelling content to capture and keep a viewer's attention. If you want your content to make a difference, **you need to sustain your audience's attention**. That means not only packaging your content but ensuring that your distribution plans touch every corner of your target audience.

If you want your content to make a difference, you need to sustain your audience's attention.

CHAPTER 6

Don't Just Post, Distribute With a Plan



"Google Trends Reveal
a Boredom Pandemic. How Can
We Help?"

Illustration by
Andrew Brumagen

Once you've packaged your product to make an impact, you need a **plan for distribution**. Social media channels are a logical first choice, but complex algorithms make it unlikely that many of your followers will see your content – never mind the target audience beyond your immediate network.

To ensure your film finds its audience, you need to **develop a distribution plan** that balances organic and paid channels. Search engine optimization, cross-posting, and submitting your work for critical recognition all offer ongoing opportunities for your documentary to reach the right viewers.

Befriend like-minded brands (and their audiences)

While posting organic content on your own social media channels often leads to limited results, cross-posting on partner channels can help you reach a wider audience.

To start tapping into these like-minded audiences, make a list of brands and publishers that share your interests and values. They are likely looking for quality content that will engage their viewers and may even have their own projects they'd like to share with your audience. By developing a network of connections, you can share resources and highlight organizations that share your principles.

As an example, the **Freethink Media network reaches tens of millions of people per month across our various platforms**, social accounts, and websites. And we've been able to expand that reach significantly by developing relationships with other publishers that focus on solutions-based storytelling. Look for cross-posting partners that are in the same topical categories as yours and have roughly the same size and reach. If you find the right fit, both sides will benefit from ongoing cross promotion.



Share resources and highlight organizations that share your principles.

Utilize paid media as a catalyst for virality

A surefire way to ensure your video reaches a meaningful number of people is to **invest in paid media**. Paid media campaigns on social channels target not only your current audience, but also look-alike audiences. Paying for targeted views allows you to plant seeds in the right communities and give your content a chance to spread.

Platforms like Facebook, Youtube, and Instagram offer the opportunity to reach your target audience based on age, gender, location, income, and interests, among other demographics. LinkedIn lets you go a step further and target by job title, company size and other B2B criteria.

These campaigns not only generate views but can also boost your following by introducing a wider audience to your brand. Remember, though, paying for views is easy. But you

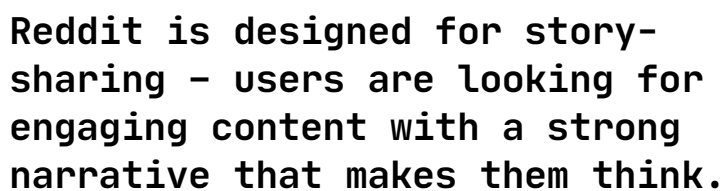
can't buy completed views. Getting someone to watch your video all the way through to the end depends on the quality of your storytelling. You can read more on this in Chapter 9.

Don't forget Reddit

Reddit is an often-neglected social media platform – and one with a huge amount of potential, if you know how to approach it in an authentic manner and leverage it to promote positive conversation.

With the sheer number of niche communities on Reddit, you're likely to find dozens of audiences who will be interested in your content. And more so than Instagram or Twitter, Reddit is designed for story-sharing – users are looking for engaging content with a strong narrative that makes them think.

By seeding your video in these forums, you can build a following and increase viewership. For best results, we recommend establishing an account and becoming an ongoing contributing member within these communities. This is a best practice, particularly on Reddit, where content that isn't vetted can be marked as spam.



Reddit is designed for story-sharing – users are looking for engaging content with a strong narrative that makes them think.

Optimize for search engines

To ensure your video continues to reach users over time, you'll want to optimize your content for Google search. The best way to do that is with a keyword-rich article to accompany your video.

Smart marketers will start the keyword research process before a video has ever been shot. Understanding search trends and what's popular can go a long way for attracting

attention in the long run. Once you have that final video ready for distribution, it's a good idea to include a long, keyword-optimized companion article. Having this text will give the content a much higher chance of indexing in search engines and delivering a steady stream of views over time.

We see these articles as an extension of the documentary – while they embrace Search Engine Optimization (SEO) to work within Google's algorithms, they also reflect the deeper meaning and messaging of your content.

With an optimized written article attached, your video will continue to show up in search results when users search for the keywords in your post. Long after your paid media campaigns have ended, your video will continue to reach viewers who want to learn more about your subject.

Remember your old friend – email

It sounds simple, but be sure to **feature your work in customer and community newsletters**. Similar to our cross-posting partners tactic, try to find like-minded brands and publishers who will include your video in their email promotions. A surge in viewership from a big-time email newsletter could be the initial spark you need for a video to take off.

Does your company have a sales force? Linking to your video in email signatures is a great way to build credibility and get more exposure to your content. Often a brand will create a shorter **“cut-down”** version of the video for this purpose.

News aggregator will take your reach to the next level

Think about how you consume content when you're on the go these days. Most people use news aggregators like Apple News, SmartNews, Google News, or Flipboard. All of these platforms are filled with audiences browsing for high-impact content. If you are able to get your content distributed across these channels, it will not only expand your reach many times over, but it will also **add to your brand credibility** as a content creator.

Getting accepted into news aggregators is hard. You have to prove yourself as a credible publisher and also develop your website in a way that can be picked up by the systems. A shortcut is to work with an established publisher who's already jumped through the hoops of getting accepted.

Hit the festival circuit

Finally, don't be afraid to put your documentary in the creative spotlight. There are dozens of film festivals and awards that recognize short and feature-length documentaries. For instance, the Shorty Awards recognize excellence on social media, while more prominent film festivals like Sundance and Telluride offer opportunities for both short and feature-length films.

Submit your video and see how you fare – truly high-quality storytelling will get the recognition it deserves.



High-quality films get recognition; Freethink's video "[The Future of Cancer Research](#)" was the winner of the 2019 Webby for People's Choice Long Form Branded Content.

Image of Bryce Olson at Intel from "[The Future of Cancer Research](#)"

CHAPTER 7

Master Meaningful Measurement



"Coral Reefs Are Dying, but Here's Why There's Still Hope" Photo by Freethink Media

You've produced an incredible documentary, packaged it, and developed a master distribution plan to share it with the world. Now you're wondering: what do viewers really think?

Media agencies and publishing companies will likely show you impressions and 3-second views as evidence that your documentary is reaching its audience. But if your mission is to tell a nuanced story, these surface-level values don't meet the mark.

Mastering meaningful measurement means going deeper and exploring the impact that your story has on the world. Are your ideas making change? Inspiring viewers to take action? In this chapter, we've created a guide to meaningful measurement so you can be sure your documentary is making a difference.

What are vanity metrics?

Vanity metrics are measurements that look good on paper – but they **don't demonstrate sustained interest and impact**. Although they give the impression that your content is meaningful, they only prove that viewers are engaging with your video for a few seconds at a time.

Vanity metrics include impressions, which show how many times your video thumbnail has appeared on a given web page; clicks, which measures how often viewers click on your content; and 3-second views. Total video views and page views are similar – though they show that the video was initially of interest (as noted in Chapter 7), they don't prove that viewers were interested enough to watch your video to completion.

The same is true for one-time visitors to your video's page. While it's great that those visitors found your content, they may not have stayed long enough for your documentary to make a real difference.

Meaningful measurement: a guide

Meaningful metrics prove that a visitor didn't just find your video – they stayed there to watch and engage. Your goal with meaningful measurement is to determine how many visitors **watched your video to completion**. And an even more meaningful metric is engagement in real conversation or even proof of action. These measurements are hard to obtain, but they mean a lot more than clicks or page views.

It's easy to determine video views or article views – and that's why many agencies and publishers default to these metrics. While some meaningful data, like Freethink's completed views, can be measured with traditional data analytics, how do you measure qualitative data, like perception shifts, engagement, and action?



Some meaningful measurements include:

- Completed video views
- Completed article views
- Real conversation
- Real perception shifts
- Real action

Measuring impact

At Freethink, we want to make sure our videos are making a real impact, and we do that by measuring how much a viewer's perception of an issue changes after watching a film. In fact, **we often see shifts of 20-30%**.

We measure perception shift using control groups and surveys. First, we ask a control group of 300+ people about their perception of a target issue, and then we compare their response to a similar group that has watched the video. For example, for a video produced about prison education programs, we asked our control group how they felt about providing prisoners with access to college courses. Then we asked the same question to an "impacted" group - a group that had completed the film. By comparing the results of both groups, we got a good idea of the difference that video made on our viewer's perception of this issue.

Talking back

Engagement and understanding are also critical to making an impact. Make sure you read and respond to comments on your videos and social media pages to **cultivate conversation and understand your viewers' thoughts**. At the end of the day, it's important to remember that there are real people behind the numbers. And there is real power in rocking someone's world with quality videos, one viewer and one screen at a time.



Image from ["Earning College Degrees In Prison"](#)

ABOUT

Freethink Media



About Freethink Media

Freethink believes in the power of film to tell inspiring, solutions-focused stories. We partner with major brands and philanthropic organizations to tell stories of innovation, inspiration, and impact that are changing the world every single day.

We know that there are millions of incredible stories out there, waiting to be told. We want to help you tell those stories – and connect with an audience of like-minded next generation leaders who can help you make a difference.

Our team handles every step of the process, from pitch to publication, with a tried-and-true story development process and a guarantee of meaningful attention on every film. Our platforms reach an audience of tens of millions of next generation leaders and activists every month, an average of over **200,000 completed views** per video.

It's time to tell your story.
Let's move the world together.

Freethink*

Ready to get started?

Learn more about our process and how we work with brands [here](#)

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