

## Movie Making as a Metaphor for Teaching the Business Planning Process

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## **Introduction**

The business planning process can be challenging, even for individuals who have substantial management experience. Students who have been exposed to constructs from subject areas such as marketing, accounting, finance, human resources, and strategy may find that synthesizing insights from numerous disciplines into an “entrepreneurial whole” can be a daunting task.

As most teaching professionals have realized, the use of a well chosen metaphor can facilitate students’ learning by bridging the gap between what is unfamiliar and what is already understood by building upon preexisting knowledge. The author of this paper has found that likening the process of movie making to various aspects of business planning has been an effective instructional strategy (Kelmar 1992; Rhodes 1997; Leslie, Barbara et al. 1998; Colin and Jack 2004; Gerald and Steve 2004). The usefulness of this approach is due to a range of similarities between the two, which students can easily grasp.

## **Parallels Between Movie Making and Business Planning**

One of the critical skills that one should either have or endeavor to develop as a business planner or a filmmaker is that of creative visualization. The act of imagining a sequence of events, including a beginning, a middle, and an outcome, places students in a proper frame of mind to pursue a rigorous planning process. In real life, motion picture production is a complicated business unto itself, involving the use of highly

specialized technologies and individuals with diverse talents (Moul 2000; Mark, Charlotte et al. 2001). However, the beauty of engaging in the act of creative visualization is that no special equipment, skills, or tools of any kind are required, other than a willingness to employ one's own imagination. An article published in *Entrepreneur* magazine (Williams 2005) described several businesses, such as Monster.com, founded by Jeff Taylor, that were even the result of the entrepreneur's (night time) dreams.

The filmmaking process can be divided into three phases: 1) preproduction (the planning phase); 2) the actual filming, which is also known as the production phase (this equates to the creation of a product or service); and 3) postproduction (delivery to the marketplace facilitated by promotion and distribution efforts). Other similarities, such as research, budgeting, and scouting a location which occur within the aforementioned phases are discussed in further detail below.

### Both Filmmaking and Business Planning Require Extensive Research

Whatever the type of film, the more a filmmaker knows about his or her subject, the better (Mark, Charlotte et al. 2001; Paul 2004). Likewise, the business planning process also requires extensive research. To begin, a filmmaker should read everything that he or she possibly can about a subject. It is also very common in the motion picture industry to interview subject matter experts, and in some cases to retain these individuals as consultants.

Accomplished filmmakers often immerse themselves in a subject much like an ethnographer would approach the study of a particular culture and its nuances. Field

research is typically employed in scouting locations. Actors and actresses as well as directors often study characters intensively, whether for documentary or for feature films; this may include “shadowing” individuals who are real-life role models. Students who are engaged in a business planning process can be instructed to research using similar approaches relative to those of filmmakers, including consulting with experts and seeking mentors.

### Story Construction and Sequencing

A business plan is, in effect, an entrepreneur’s depiction of what a business will look like, how it will operate, and how it will grow. The same creative processes that are used to imagine and then tell a story to an audience are useful in business planning. Filmmakers use images to depict an event or a sequence of events. A business plan presenter should help an audience construct similar imagery: Where does the entrepreneur’s “story” start? What happens in the story’s sequence of events?

How does the story end? For instance, in writing a business plan, one should account for the full life cycle of the business; does the entrepreneur heroically “ride off into the sunset?” (A corporation lives on; a sole proprietorship dies when its owner dies.) Mark Victor Hansen, co-creator of the *Chicken Soup for the Soul* series of books, described the end result that he visualized to in audience in one of his seminars (attendee personal notes, June, 2003). He and his co-author imagined a best selling book and pasted the name of their book into an existing bestseller list in the number one spot. They subsequently used this mock-up as a self-motivational tool.

Another relevant question that both filmmakers and entrepreneurship students must address has to do with location. What is the location like? Is it in a warehouse district; is it a home-based business; is it retail; is it online? How is the location laid out and appointed with fixtures, furnishings, or equipment? Students who are directed to imagine the look, design and ambiance of a business location are in a much better position to articulate their start-up activities and ongoing operational needs.

Who are the principle actors? Describe the employees—what do they look like; how do they “act”? Who are the customers? What happens in the course of the entrepreneur’s story as it develops? Does the business grow? How? What other “characters” enter into the story line? How did these characters become involved in the plot (i.e., business)?

### The Storyboard Exercise

Every story has a beginning, a middle, and an end. Working either individually, or in groups, students can be directed to use a filmmaker’s standard storyboard form to create a “story” about their business idea. Basically, a storyboard is a rectangular shape fashioned to look like a television screen; the form should also be large enough to share with the audience. In actual practice, this exercise has demonstrated itself to have several useful benefits. Number one, it provokes the thinking process, even for students who would describe themselves as “not creative.” Students with well developed illustration skills can of course express themselves in this exercise, but so can anyone who can at least draw at the stick figure level of proficiency.

Second, having students subsequently talk about their idea in the class allows them to gain presentation experience and further refine their business concepts based on feedback. Third, students can be directed to develop numerous “scenes,” and can engage in the process from any starting point, such as one that depicts the customer experience, or another that illustrates how employees will be rewarded. Fourth, this exercise can also be applied to other business processes, such as planning a television commercial to advertise the prospective business. Finally, by triggering the student’s sometimes dormant creative process, you as a teacher will find that students often report that their “wheels are turning” beyond the classroom time, as they mentally storyboard (and perhaps literally) numerous scenes pertaining to their business concept.

### Production Schedule

In filmmaking, once a storyboard and script breakdown are created, a production schedule can be prepared. Similarly, a business plan should include a set of specific steps and a strategy (Philip 2004) as well as an associated timetable for the efficient implementation of those steps. The sense of timing that one must have to coordinate the production of a film can be easily equated to typical events in starting a business. Multitasking in preparation for the grand opening of a retail store or restaurant would be examples.

Given that a filmmaker’s schedule is simply a sequence of events, optimized for efficiency, this particular analogy works very well. Further, as many “behind the scenes” documentaries about the filmmaking process will point out, the sequence of shooting is

not necessarily the same as the sequence in the final film. Thus, students can learn how to think more critically about how they will break down a complex task and maximize their own productivity.

### Budgeting

Every creative and technical decision in filmmaking is associated with costs (Orwall 1998; Phill 2003; 2005); these decisions also impact potential revenues (Roger 2002; Sean 2004). Therefore, every production decision must be factored into a budget. Business plans should provide a detailed breakdown of budgetary requirements for an entrepreneurial enterprise. The following section lists typical costs associated with movie making. For each item, depending on the type of business, students can be directed to find an analogous expense category, and subsequently assign a monetary value to the associated categories that are developed. In classroom use, one suggestion is to pass out a spreadsheet with the filmmaker's budget in one column, leaving the other column to be completed by students.

### Typical Cost Summary Items for a Film

Film & Laboratory	Animation	Miscellaneous
Optical Work	Sound Recording	Travel
Script Costs	Talent	General Supplies
Still Shots	Payroll Taxes	Camera & Audio Crew
Research	Sets	Insurance
Production Staff	Cutting & Editing	Union Funds

Shipping	Catering	Special Effects
Purchases & Services	Studio Rental	Overhead
Equipment Rental	Music	TOTALS

### Casting and Crew

Filmmakers cast individuals to play various roles in front of the camera (Scott 1999; Kate 2000). They also make hiring decisions for crew members who will work behind the scenes. Every business needs to fill operational roles with qualified individuals. Professional actors play leading roles and influence a film's box office draw; extras fill scenes with people who add life and realism to a film. This leads to questions for the entrepreneurship student: What role will the entrepreneur play? Who will fill the supporting roles? What are the necessary qualifications? How will the "actors" be trained, directed, and compensated? How will employees be motivated to "play their respective parts"?

### Selection of Sets, Studios, and Locations

Filmmakers must secure locations that meet creative and technical criteria, and also meet budget criteria. Factors include community cooperation, availability, convenience, price, transportation (accessibility), regulations, housing, food, and weather conditions. Location can be a critical decision for a business as well. Would-be entrepreneurs should ask many of the same questions above, in addition to addressing the needs of customers who may be impacted by where a business chooses to locate itself.

### Selection of Equipment and Supplies

Filmmakers employ highly specialized equipment and utilize numerous supplies in the execution of their craft. Entrepreneurs must decide exactly what equipment they will need to accomplish necessary tasks. There are many businesses where the possession and control of certain pieces of equipment becomes the enabler of the business itself (e.g., a commercial lawnmower, or a desktop publishing system). Questions also arise as to how will the needed equipment be acquired, operated, and maintained. What provisions have been made in the event that the use of certain equipment is lost? What supplies and expendables are needed? Who will operate the equipment?

### Filming (Creation of the Actual Product or Service)

Actual filming follows preproduction planning. This is the phase during which the movie is actually made; filming is conducted under the supervision of a director. Entrepreneurs must direct the implementation of their business plans in order to actually launch and operate their businesses. While there are no guarantees, it is usually the case that better planning leads to smoother operations.

### Postproduction (Delivery to the Marketplace Facilitated by Promotion and Distribution Efforts)

Once a film is shot, edited and otherwise processed, it must be distributed into the marketplace and shown to audiences (Ravid 1999; Moul 2000; John 2002;

Anonymous 2003). Entrepreneurs must promote their product or service to their customers and have access to necessary distribution channels. Successful films are often heavily promoted and benefit from revenue streams such as licensing (Anne 2002), product placements, and the sale of a variety of rights (Sean 2004; Leslie 2005). Entrepreneurs should have well developed and executable plans to promote their business and ensure the distribution of their product or service. What is the promotional plan? How will the product be positioned against other competitive offerings in the marketplace (obviously, this question should be asked continuously as markets evolve)? How can market penetration and profitability be maximized?

#### Additional Parallels

- Filmmaking is an intensely team-oriented business.
- The motion picture production and distribution process employs numerous contracts and agreements.
- Film financing is well known as a high risk endeavor (Mark, Sarah et al. 2002; Roger 2002; Phill 2003).
- Production is subject to set-backs, delays, and uncertainties (Gubernick 2001; Mark, Charlotte et al. 2001).

### **Conclusion**

Successful filmmakers are entrepreneurs. Filmmakers are communicators who set out to meet the needs of an audience. Likewise, successful entrepreneurs must plan and execute their own vision and fulfill needs. Movie production can serve as an

excellent metaphor for teaching the business planning process to students. It allows them to draw numerous parallels, and is also entertaining.

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Need a business idea? Take a cue from these entrepreneurs, and try sleeping on it.

Entrepreneur: 36.