

Storytime Station: A case study on using public library-created animated videos to reinforce early literacy skills and practices

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Abstract:

In 2011, the Edmonton Public Library (EPL) embarked upon a project to take its early literacy programs out of the library and into the community. After careful consideration of opportunities and budget, it was decided to produce animated videos, collectively referred to as “Storytime Station”, featuring songs, stories, and rhymes that could be distributed through a wide range of communication channels.

This paper will examine the various stages of the “Storytime Station” project to create content for young children and their families, and will identify key phases of the project as well as lessons learned. The animated videos can be viewed on EPL’s website at <http://www.epl.ca/StorytimeStation> or on its Youtube channel at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j4og3ttkKss&list=PL6667A6522073986E>.

As the Senior Marketing Consultant supporting EPL’s youth services division, I was heavily involved in this project from ideation through implementation and monitoring. At the time of this writing, I am no longer employed by the Edmonton Public Library, so this paper will cover the project components during the period from 2010 – 2013 when I was directly involved in the “Storytime Station” project.

Keywords: Animated Videos, Early Literacy, Storytime

1 BACKGROUND

The Edmonton Public Library had (at the time this animated video project was being planned) 17 branch locations throughout the city of Edmonton, serving a community of 812,201 people (City of Edmonton, 2014). As part of its 2011 – 2013 business plan, EPL had

identified this library-wide goal: “EPL is recognized as Edmonton’s #1 resource for early literacy experiences.” (The Edmonton Public Library, 2011). General youth services were already established as a key focus area for the library, and early literacy specifically had become an important part of EPL’s service-offering in recent years. In 2010, EPL had launched a brand-identity to increase awareness of its early literacy services and resources; this brand identity was called *Read.Talk.Play*. (The Edmonton Public Library, 2011). Before the *Storytime Station* video project, EPL already offered a variety of early-literacy programs, services and resources, including a free package for babies under the age of two years called *Welcome Baby* (The Edmonton Public Library, 2009) a suite of storytime-programs in EPL branches as well as partner locations around the city, a keepsake recommended-book list called *100 Great Books to Read Together* (The Edmonton Public Library, 2010) and a set of 18 instructional videos featuring the 6 skills of early literacy for babies (The Edmonton Public Library, 2010), toddlers (The Edmonton Public Library, 2010), and preschoolers (The Edmonton Public Library, 2010). EPL early-literacy storytime programs offered in the branches were wildly popular, and the branch staff could not always meet the community’s demand for more programs. As a result, it was decided that EPL would create videos of stories, rhymes and songs that could be viewed on-demand by community members, on the device of their choosing and at the time and location of their need.

2 PROJECT GOALS

Several options were considered before the EPL Youth Services team decided to develop animated videos. An extensive review of print materials, web-based programs, special events, and other promotional options used by other libraries and organizations was conducted before ultimately deciding that animated videos offered EPL the most flexibility and aligned best with its early literacy goals.

The primary goals of creating these animated videos were:

1. Make the popular, successful, early-literacy-based storytime programs happening inside the library branches available on-demand to families in the community.
2. Model early-literacy practices to parents and caregivers.
3. Showcase the talents of EPL staff to the community, in order to create and reinforce personal relationships.
4. Contribute to EPL being recognized as Edmonton’s #1 resource for early literacy experiences.

2.1 Key Lesson

Articulate goals from the outset of the project helped to avoid missteps during production. At several stages throughout the project development cycle, these goals may be used to help make critical decisions.

3 INTERNAL PARTNERSHIPS

While this project was initiated by the Marketing and Youth Services divisions within EPL, over the project lifecycle most the departments within the library were involved in some capacity. As approval from the senior management team and the board of directors was secured in advance, the project had full support from all divisions within EPL.

While not an exhaustive list, the following are the main departments that were involved in the EPL animated videos:

1. Marketing Department: involved in all phases of the project.
2. Early Literacy and Family Services internal library committee: involved in all phases of the project.
3. Senior Management: provided approval and ensured required resources would be available.
4. Purchasing: developed initial Request for Proposal and contract with external partners.
5. Finance: ensured financial resources were available for this project and coordinated payments to external partners.
6. Branch Personnel: Library Assistants, Librarians, and Managers from various branches were involved in filming. Managers made arrangements for coverage so that librarians and staff could participate in this project.
7. Facilities: ensured availability and preparedness of filming locations.
8. IT department: Determined what technological parameters should be met for (hosting, file formats, etc.) successfully sharing the videos.

3.1 Key Lesson

Ensure that all departments are informed of the project and aware of any timelines that may impact them. If possible, map out a project timeline and list all expected department involvement, then share this timeline as early as possible with all departments so that enterprise resources can be properly managed.

4 EARLY LITERACY PRINCIPLES

EPL adopted the definition of early literacy as "... everything that children know about reading and writing *before* they can read and write" (The Edmonton Public Library, 2010). At the time this animated video project began, the EPL Youth Services Division had already begun offering a number of early literacy initiatives around the community and in all of the branches. Each of the initiatives had been promoted under the *Read.Talk.Play.* brand identity, which had been developed to increase awareness and recognition of the library's efforts. The *Storytime Station* videos were intended to encourage young children to view and mimic the stories, thereby reinforcing four of the six skills of early literacy: phonological awareness, narrative skills, vocabulary, and letter knowledge (The Edmonton Public Library, 2010), as well as three of the five practices to support early literacy: talking, singing and playing (The Edmonton Public Library, 2014).

5 PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE

Before 2011, EPL had developed several video series which were available on its website and YouTube channels.

In 2010, a series of 18 instructional videos were developed by the Early Literacy and Family Services internal library committee to introduce the concept of early literacy to parents and caregivers in the community. While the feedback from those who watched the videos was positive, the relatively low number of views of these videos (as tracked by YouTube) suggested that the content was not highly valued by the intended audience.

Conversely, several live-action puppet shows that EPL had produced in partnership with a local television station in 2006 consistently boasted impressive viewing statistics each year. The most popular video currently has over 1,000,000 views on YouTube. (The Edmonton Public Library, 2006)

Based on this data, it was determined that, in order to achieve success (measuring both usage and viewer feedback), the animated videos would need to be short, entertaining, and have children as the audience, rather than the parents and caregivers.

5.1 Key Lesson

Review your organization's previous initiatives to find the successful factors, and use successful practices from external organizations' practices as well.

6 FUNDING

Since early literacy was a key focus for EPL, as stated in its 2011-2013 business plan (The Edmonton Public Library, 2011), there were monies set aside to fund related projects. While grants, one-time funding, and other financial options were considered, EPL was in the enviable position of being able to fund this project through existing operational budget. This helped immensely with the timeline, as the project team was able to get started on creating the content without delay.

6.1 Key Lesson

Whenever possible, use existing operational funds for this type of creative project, as it provides flexibility in making stylistic changes throughout production.

7 STYLISTIC APPROACH

After a thorough analysis of various video styles, the project team decided on an approach that combined live-action performance as well as animation. Working with the library's Purchasing department, the project team created a Request for Proposal that was distributed online through an electronic tendering service to video production companies and animators. Examples of existing animated videos preferred by the project team were included in the Request for Proposal, in order to narrow the scope and receive submissions from the most relevant vendors.

Some of the considerations included in deciding which style to use for the videos were:

1. Which style aligned best with the project goals?
2. Which stylistic approach would fit within the established project budget?
3. Which approach was most popular with our intended audience of babies, toddlers and preschoolers, as well as the parents and caregivers who would expose the children to these videos?
4. Which style best fit the content (popular storytime programs) we were producing?

7.1 Key Lesson

It may be difficult to compare creative proposals since they vary so widely and they typically only include a broad outline of an idea; choose a vendor whose previous work you admire, and who best understands your goals for the project.

8 EXTERNAL PARTNERSHIPS

Ultimately, EPL chose a vendor whose work most excited the project team and whose proposal most closely matched our goals for the project. EPL selected Jeff Allen Productions Inc. whose staff included a videographer and an animator, as well as a project manager who could liaise with the EPL project team (Jeff Allen Productions Inc., 2014). As this project took over six months to complete, and we worked closely with the production team to perfect the specific animated video components, it was helpful that we shared a vision of the end result; this helped us to stay on target during production.

Although EPL chose to work with a local videographer and animator, it became apparent over the course of the project that geographical location is not necessarily a factor for animation projects; we never met with the animator in-person as all drafts were submitted and reviewed over email and FTP. While I encourage project teams to expand their search for an animator beyond their immediate physical location, a local videographer is preferable to film the live-action components.

It is time-and-cost-effective to understand from the outset of the project how the animations and live-action components will be used together, and whether an introduction and closing section (whether animated or live-action) will be required. A key consideration for this will be how the videos will be distributed. The EPL project team added these sections during the editing phase of the project, and it caused a slight delay.

8.1 Key Lesson

You will be working closely with the videographer and animator throughout production, so establish a shared vision and decide in advance as many of the specific details as possible to avoid any conflict during the editing phase. Use storyboards to plot out the final video frame-by-frame.

9 SCRIPT DEVELOPMENT

For the EPL animated video project, it was imperative to choose rhymes and stories that would appeal to a broad range of ages, since the intended audience included babies, toddlers, preschoolers, parents and caregivers. As well, the videos needed to work independently as well as in partnership with the others, since the viewer had the option to watch only one video at a time, or several of them consecutively.

One week in advance of filming, EPL provided the performers scripts of two stories that they would perform; this gave the performers the opportunity to practice and get comfortable with the material. As well, this allowed the performers to personalize the stories through vocal inflection and body-language.

9.1 Key Lesson

Consider the style, format and distribution channel when developing a script to take advantage of any cross-promotional opportunities.

10 FILMING LOCATION

For the *Storytime Station* videos, the background for the videos was to be animated, so there was a lot of flexibility in filming location as only a white-screen was required. The project team chose to use a room within one of the library's 17 branches to ensure flexibility in scheduling and complete control over setup. A central location was chosen, as performers were commuting from different parts of the city. The project team chose a filming room that was quiet, available for the entire duration of nine hours (for consistency of lighting and background noise levels), and free from natural light. The construction of the white-screen background, lighting and sound levels took approximately one hour and was completed well before the first performer was scheduled to ensure that filming would not be delayed. A large supply of drinks and snacks were available for the videographer and performers, and lunch was delivered to the filming location to mitigate any breaks in filming.

10.1 Key Lesson

Choose a single location to avoid unnecessary setup time.

11 WARDROBE

As the filming of the live-action sequences was done before the animations and there was an opportunity to make the animated backgrounds match the performers (rather than vice versa), the EPL performers were not given many restrictions concerning colors and styles.

Performers were asked to wear comfortable clothing in neutral colors that did not feature any wording, images, or branding from non-EPL sources, and to make hair and makeup decisions that allowed for body movement.

11.1 Key Lessons

If you are using a green-screen, advise performers not to wear green-colored clothing or accessories.

When possible, have performers make wardrobe, hair and makeup styles that align with the content they are performing. Also, if your organization has a brand-strategy that includes specific colors, instruct performers to choose from that color-palette.

12 PERFORMERS

As one of the goals of this project was to leverage the talented performers working at EPL branches, and to create and reinforce recognition, EPL personnel were used for each of the videos. This approach also provided flexibility with filming, particularly as it concerned making changes to the scripts during filming, since all of the performers had experience with delivering storytime programs.

As these videos were intended for use in the community, EPL selected performers who best represented our audience; we intentionally included a representative sample of different ages, genders and races.

For the eight planned videos, EPL chose to film stories, rhymes and songs with 20 different people. This provided options for which stories best translated on camera. Since some of the filmed stories were not used in the initial batch of videos produced, it was disheartening for those performers. As these were permanent staff members, it was imperative that they felt positively about the filming experience and confident in their performance capabilities. Communicating from the outset that not all of the filming will be used in the final project helps to forestall any hurt feelings later.

While the filming of each performer only took 15 minutes on average, performers were scheduled for one-hour segments; this allowed them time to arrive, get comfortable, view other performers to get a sense of the process, and have time to do multiple takes on camera to get their best performance. While extra time is helpful, it would be unnecessary and ill-advised to schedule all performers for the whole duration of filming.

Although the project budget only included enough monies for eight videos, the project team decided to take advantage of the performers' availability and the already-constructed white-screen-set to film extra stories for later use. Whether these would be used for future animated videos or some other opportunity was unclear, but it cost no extra money and negligible extra time to film extra stories to have on hand for other use.

Additionally, it was discovered during filming that some performers possessed unexpected talents; when one performer was found to have a beautiful singing voice, she was asked to record several songs on film to be used in future projects. Similarly, when it was discovered that another performer was fluent in multiple languages, he was asked to record stories in each of the languages for use in future projects. The flexibility of using EPL personnel, a local videographer, and an internal filming location were all valuable in allowing the project team to capitalize on these opportunities.

12.1 Key Lesson

When possible, use existing staff and librarians. However, be sure to work only with people who are comfortable being filmed; forcing someone to participate will lead to a stiff performance, and ultimately a subpar final product.

13 EDITING

The editing phase of the video production was, by far, the most expensive phase. Initially, the project team endeavored to involve many people in reviewing the video drafts and incorporate all requested changes. However, the production project manager quickly advised us that the agree-upon budget was being depleted and, at the rate the team was requesting changes, less than eight videos would be made.

As the Senior Marketing Consultant leading the project, I was personally tasked with coordinating all feedback and staying within budget. I solicited feedback from multiple stakeholders, including the project team and a group of parents and children who represented our eventual audience, and compiled all requests into the essential changes needed to make

the videos. I would then liaise with the production project manager to communicate those changes and review the edited video footage to ensure all requested changes were completed. Since not all changes requested by EPL stakeholders could be made within the existing budget, it was necessary for me to assign requests into categories; I used *personal preference*, *early literacy tools*, and *video-flow* as category headings for which requested changes to include and which to discard. As well, I used a rating system of *required*, *preferred*, and *optional* for requested changes. I then requested estimated costs from the production project manager for each change being considered to help determine how many changes we could make while staying within budget. In future animated video projects, I will be as prescriptive as possible from the outset of the project to ensure minimal required changes during the editing phase.

The editing phase was the most difficult of the project, as the vendor was anxious to limit the amount of time spent on changes in order to preserve its profit in the agreed-upon contract, and the EPL project team wanted to ensure perfection in the final product. Diplomacy, agreed-upon project goals, an established contract, and transparent communication were key factors during this phase.

13.1 Key Lessons

Avoid making edits based solely on individual preference; solicit feedback from multiple sources and incorporate only the changes that will positively impact the final product.

Request frequent budget updates from external partners to ensure the project is on-schedule and within budget; this helps to avoid surprises as the end of the project.

14 DISTRIBUTION

As planned, EPL launched this series of videos on its website and YouTube channels, and the community was alerted to their availability through promotional updates on Twitter and Facebook, as well as a feature ad on www.epl.ca using a rotating artbox.

Although all eight videos were ready at the same time, only one video was released each week for a period of two months; this was done to increase anticipation and demand. Different days and times were tested to see which had the best viewership results each week, and adjustments were made accordingly to realize the highest number of immediate views and online shares; over the weeks, we discovered that our audience was most likely to view the videos immediately if they were released in the late morning on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Once all of the videos were available, reminders were sent out through various channels on a regular schedule to continually direct traffic to the videos.

In addition to social media updates, the videos were promoted using EPL's electronic newsletters, bookmarks in the branches, and personal recommendations from library staff and librarians.

An unanticipated barrier discovered after the launch of the videos was the fact that some of the community organizations we hoped to reach our intended audience through, notably the provincial health offices and certain daycares and schools, placed restrictions on their computers' access to YouTube videos. To combat this, the EPL project team decided to also make available the eight videos on a physical DVD. These DVDs were produced by another

external vendor, with EPL's graphic design team creating custom cover artwork and menu graphic elements to align with the *Storytime Station* design theme, as well as to cross-promote other early literacy materials available from EPL. Also, since the DVDs had the capacity to contain more content than just the eight *Storytime Station* videos, the previously-produced 18 instructional videos were also included on the DVDs in a bonus features section. These DVDs were made available free of charge upon request and were promoted to organizations that had high traffic of EPL's intended audience, such as health offices and daycare centers.

EPL employs several community librarians, and these individuals were each provided with copies of the *Storytime Station* DVD to help spread the word about the videos. Additionally, each EPL branch was provided with a copy to broadcast as appropriate; some branches had dedicated children's spaces where the DVD could be played publicly. Other branches chose to play the DVD in program rooms before storytime programs to entertain those families that arrived early. At various EPL events, including interactive movie showings and public author readings, the DVDs were broadcast as commercials and used to advertise the library's early literacy services.

A local television station approached EPL for permission to broadcast the videos during its early morning children's programming; of course EPL granted permission and asked only that the television station provide it with measurements with regards to viewership and broadcast schedule after broadcast for tracking purposes. The viewings on the television station channel dwarfed the YouTube viewership because of the larger reach the television station had. As well, because of the licensing agreements that the television station had with cable providers provincially and nationally, the videos were seen by a larger audience base than just the Edmonton community; while this was never the primary goal, EPL was thrilled to offer high-quality videos modelling early literacy behaviors to all children.

Other area libraries, schools, and daycare centers also requested permission to link to the videos or host them on their own channels and were all granted permission. Since the videos included EPL branding elements, including its logo, there was built-in reference to EPL as creator of the content and permission was always granted.

14.1 Key Lessons

For best results, make the content you create freely available and encourage other organizations to use and display it. Incorporate your organizations name, logo and its brand identity to ensure proper attribution regardless of communication channel.

When using a common video-sharing tool, such as YouTube, test and refine the keywords and descriptions used in order to get maximum exposure and be linked to related videos from other organizations.

15 MEASUREMENT

The long-term goal of this project is to improve early literacy skills throughout the Edmonton community, theoretically leading to better overall literacy rates since "(k)nowledge of alphabet letters at entry into kindergarten is a strong predictor of reading ability in 10th grade" (Kid Lit Plus Consulting, 2012). This improved overall literacy rate would then theoretically lead to a better community overall in terms of education, employment and

quality of life. This is obviously not easily measurable, and many factors impact the results over time, so instead EPL measured the immediately-available statistics regarding number, channel, and location of video views, with the hope being that favorable results, combined with a number of other resources that EPL makes available to the community, would positively contribute to the long-term goal.

As the videos displayed on EPL's website were embedded using YouTube tools, all views on the site would be captured by YouTube tracking tool. Similarly, any non-EPL website that linked to the videos either on www.epl.ca/StorytimeStation or on EPL's YouTube channel, would also be included in the YouTube viewing statistics.

For DVDs, the only measurement available was the number of physical DVDs distributed; it would be unreasonable to request that recipient organizations track how often the DVD was played and/or how many children were watching it during any given broadcast. Estimates could be used based on typical traffic patterns, and that measurement should be sufficient.

From the outset of this project, it was decided that success-measures for this project would include positive results in both quantitative and qualitative measurements. During each production phase of the videos, feedback was solicited from various people to ensure positive reactions to the videos. As well, once the videos were publicly launched, comments were curated from social media, YouTube, EPL's website, and branch staff interacting with community members about the videos. All of these comments were reviewed regularly by the project team and reported on to senior management to ensure the community was satisfied with the videos. Positive feedback was also used in testimonials to encourage more viewership.

15.1 Key Lesson

Where possible, use a central tracking tool (such as YouTube) to easily manage and analyze results.

16 ADDITIONAL KEY LESSONS LEARNED

16.1 Plan a Lot in order to Pay a Little

With creative endeavors, it can be difficult to understand exactly what the end product will look like. As you develop your content, it's valuable to spend time envisioning as specifically as possible what you want the end result to include. For EPL's *Storytime Station* project, it was not until after the first draft of the animated videos was completed that the project team realized the need for some additional, unplanned elements. The production team then had to spend time and money re-animating the videos to include those elements. While some editing is expected, the more you can mitigate the need for extensive editing, the more time and money you will save.

16.2 Promote or Perish

Once you have the content, you must distribute it effectively in order to capitalize on all of the resources you have invested up to that point. Even in the case of quality videos that are beloved by viewers, it may languish on YouTube and your website if you are not directing traffic to it. For videos, print materials, and any other media you create, do not expect that users will find it; you must deliver it to them using every channel available. As well,

promoting the content should be a regular occurrence; use all available channels regularly to remind your audience that the content exists and to alert new users.

16.3 Project Management

Whatever form it will take, the creation of content is a formal project. Use all available project management practices and tools to assist you and ensure the most effective use of time, money, and other resources. Set goals and refer to them regularly; track your progress consistently; communicate with stakeholders frequently; and manage your budget dutifully. Whether your content will be created by an individual or a large network of stakeholders, the most successful result will be achieved if the creation of the content is treated as a formal project from beginning to end.

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