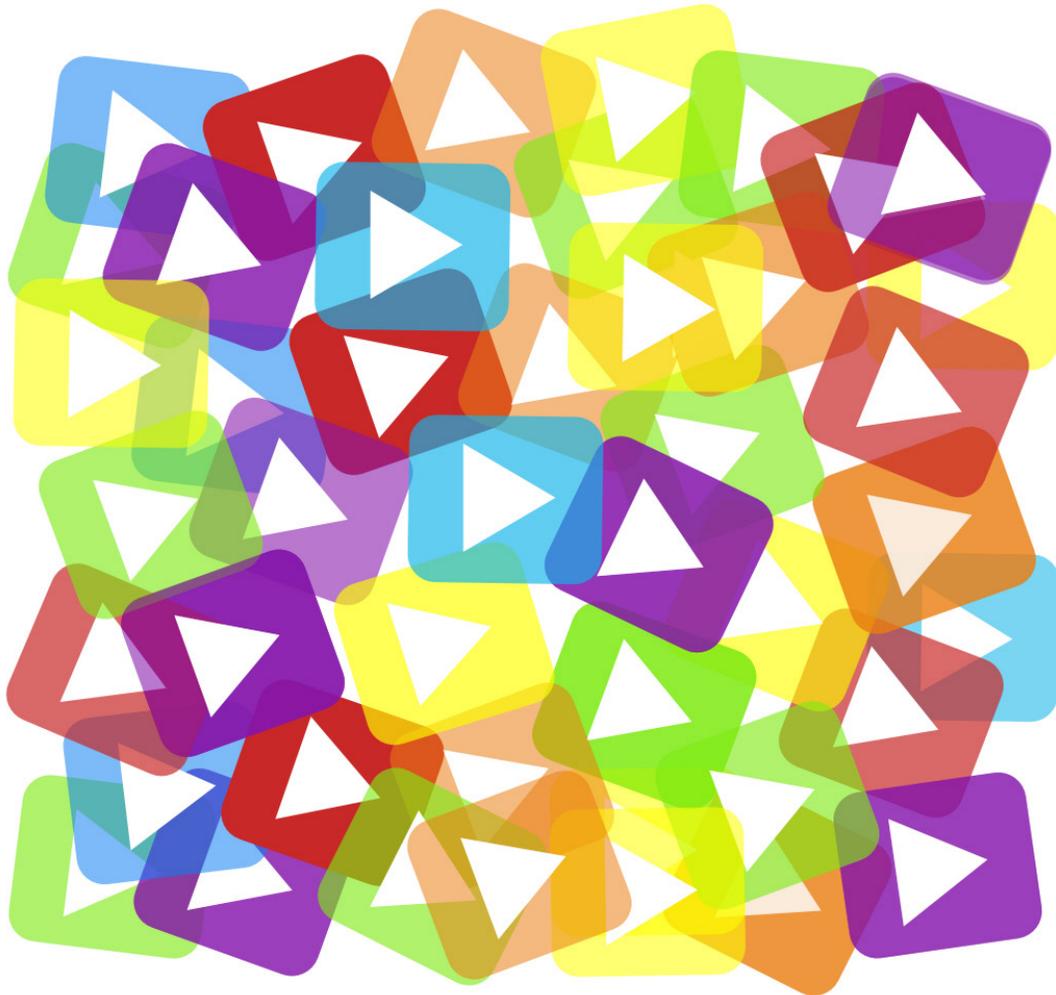


**Stephen Voltz
Fritz Grobe**



The Viral Video TOOLKIT for Nonprofits

**A step-by-step guide to creating
contagious content for social good**

Eepybird Studios

The Viral Video Toolkit for Nonprofits
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For more information, visit www.RWJF.org.

Contents

INTRODUCTION

Creating a Virus 1

PART ONE What Is Viral Video and How Can It Help Your Nonprofit? 3

What Is Viral Video? 5

What Can Viral Video Do For Your Nonprofit? 7

Testing Viral Video For Nonprofits 9

Is Viral Video Right For Your Organization? 11

Can Viral Videos Take On Serious Issues? 14

PART TWO The Four Rules for Creating Contagious Content 15

How Viral Video Is Different 17

Viral Video Is the 21st Century Sideshow 19

Rule One: Be True 21

 Show Me Something Real 22

 Just Press Record and Do It 23

 Treat the Camera Like a Person 23

 Some Videos are Clearly Staged. Are They Still True? 24

 Rule One in Action 25

Rule Two: Don't Waste My Time 27

 Nothing but the Money Shots 27

 Don't Tell a Story 28

 Rule Two in Action 30

Rule Three: Be Unforgettable 31

 Do Something Different 32

 Dive Deep Until You Own It 32

 Capture a Unique Moment 33

 Rule Three in Action 34

Rule Four: Ultimately, It's All About Humanity 35

 Give Us the Thrill of Victory and the Agony of Defeat 35

 Show Humanity, Not Perfection 36

 Rule Four in Action 37

PART THREE A Step-by-Step Guide to Building a Viral Campaign 39

[1]	Planning Your Viral Campaign	41
	Key Principles to Keep in Mind Throughout This Process	44
[2]	Setting Your Goals	45
	What Are Your Top Goals?	47
	What Kind of Messages Can You Spread Through Viral Video?	48
[3]	Developing Your Viral Concept	49
[4]	Research: Turning Your Hook into Something Unforgettable	51
[5]	Production: Keep It True, Keep It Human, Keep It Simple.	55
[6]	Post-Production: From Rough Cut to Fine Cut to Final Cut	57
	A Word About Sound and Music	60
[7]	Promotion: Getting Above the Noise	61
	Paid Promotion	61
	Paid Promotion Planning Checklist	64
	Social Outreach	64
	Earned Media	66
[8]	Releasing the Video: Here We Go!	67
	Pre-Launch Checklist	68
	Launch Checklist	69
	Post-Launch Checklist	70
	Handling Negative Reactions	101 71
	Handling Positive Reactions	101 73
[9]	Gathering the Results	75
[10]	Next Steps: Where Do You Go From Here?	77
	Notes	79
	Acknowledgments	80
	About the Authors	81

INTRODUCTION

Creating a Virus



Facebook now has more than 2 billion monthly users. Yet even an organization that has hundreds of thousands of fans may be lucky if its new video is seen by a few thousand of them.

So in a crowded, chaotic world of online content, how do you get your message heard?

Since 2006, we've been creating **contagious content** – content with the potential to go viral and get more views because it spreads from person to person – and examining how it works. With video in particular, we've identified key characteristics that make people more likely to share content with their friends.

For us, this began twelve years ago when we posted a video online showing the two of us [dropping 500 Mentos mint candies into 100 bottles of Diet Coke](#) to create 100 twenty-foot geysers of soda choreographed to music.

We told just one person. Within hours, 4,000 people had seen the video. That evening, 14,000.

Now, over 100 million people have seen that video. It took us to *Letterman*, *Ellen*, *The Today Show*, *Mythbusters*, and more.

That video also moved a lot of product. It boosted sales of two-liter bottles of Diet Coke in the United States by over 5%, and Mentos sales

went up 15% for the year. *Advertising Age* called that video the most important commercial content of the year.

In the years since, we've created videos for Coca-Cola and McDonald's, for Disney and ABC Family, for OfficeMax, and more – connecting those brands with millions of people.

This past year, with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF), we looked at how viral video – this tool that's been so effective for global brands in the commercial world – can also be effective for nonprofits that want to spread important messages to larger audiences.

In this toolkit, we'll look at what we've learned – and how viral video can help you and your organization make videos that get people sharing *your* nonprofit's message and telling their friends, "You have got to see this!"

What This Toolkit Includes

To start with, we want to give you an understanding of what a viral video is and how it can help you and your organization. That's Part One.

Part Two is a style guide – a look at the overarching principles for creating content contagious. At its heart, it's the content itself that makes or breaks a viral video, so we outline the common traits of successful online videos and show you how you can produce videos with those same characteristics.

Finally, in Part Three, we'll get into the step-by-step process of creating contagious content and launching it online – from setting your goals to developing a viral concept, from production to launch, and from gathering results to planning next steps.

FRITZ GROBE AND STEPHEN VOLTZ
Buckfield, Maine
February 2018

PART ONE

**WHAT IS VIRAL VIDEO AND HOW
CAN IT HELP YOUR NONPROFIT?**



Throughout this toolkit, wherever possible, we have linked to the original videos we mention. However, the original versions of even some classic viral videos have disappeared, in which case we have linked to copies, many of which have a small fraction of the views of the original viral hit. This is even true for many of our videos that went viral on separate YouTube channels or on other video sites.



What Is Viral Video?

Viral video is about sharing. That makes it different from every other kind of moving picture ever made.

From [Charlie Bit My Finger – Again!](#) to [Chewbacca Mom](#), viral video depends on getting people to take action – to stop what they’re doing and share that video with their friends.

Those videos can be beautiful or crazy, funny or serious, but they consistently create an emotional connection that is the key to going viral.

Going viral isn’t about getting any particular number of views. You can, and marketers do, buy views. Famously, two reporters for the LA Times got 60,000 views for their [video of paint drying](#). And if you want a million views, with the right promotional budget, you can have that by the end of the week for any video you choose. But that’s not viral.

Going viral is about getting people fired up enough to tell their friends about your video.

If thousands of preschool teachers tell every other preschool teacher they know, “This is amazing – check it out!” – that video may not get as many views as a video of puppies falling asleep, but within that particular population of teachers, that video could be a viral home run.

So whatever the size of your target audience, whether it’s just a few thousand people or several million, the goal is to create an emotional response in the viewer. That way each view you get turns into more views because people pass it along to more people who pass it along to more people...

[Isn’t Trying to “Go Viral” Like Trying to Catch Lightning in a Bottle?](#)

No. While there are no guarantees, that doesn’t mean there is no rhyme or reason. There are certain traits that viral videos have in common –

characteristics that make them more contagious, more likely to spread from person to person.

Examining these common characteristics led us to **four core principles of creating contagious content**, and over the years, we've used these principles repeatedly to create videos that have gone viral and gotten millions of views. Those core principles are outlined in Part Two of this toolkit.

Does a Viral Video Still Need Paid Promotion?

When it comes to getting your message out there, creating content that people will share is only half the battle. You also need to rise above the noise in a crowded online world to get people's attention. To that end, you should be pulling as many levers as you can to get people watching. Try to infect as many people as possible, so that your contagious content will take hold and start spreading on its own.

In conventional online ad campaigns, it's all about math and money: Where and how do you spend your money so that your ad gets as many views, clicks, and impressions as possible? The more money you spend, the more views, clicks, and impressions you get.

But with a viral video, the goal is to generate **earned views** (views that result from the quality of the content and from people sharing) in addition to **paid views** (views generated directly by paid promotion).

So while paid promotion still plays an important role in getting things started, the goal is to create a **viral multiplier**: for each paid view your video should generate additional earned views from people sharing, so that your dollar goes further.



What Can Viral Video Do For Your Nonprofit?

Whether you want to raise awareness of your organization or get people talking about an important issue, viral video can be a powerful tool. There are three ways that contagious content can be particularly helpful.

1. Viral Video Can Help You Reach More People

If you create content that people want to share, the viral multiplier means each view generates more views as people share your video with their friends, so your message reaches more people than with conventional content.

And the right kind of viral video can also bring media attention – blogs, podcasts, newspapers, magazines, morning shows, late night shows, local news programs, national TV news, or even international media – helping you bring your nonprofit’s message to even more people. Our video with [250,000 sticky notes](#), for example, was featured on *Good Morning, America*, and our [Coke and Mentos-powered rocket car](#) got a full-page spread in *People* magazine. Not every video will be right for these kinds of outlets, but doing something new and different can create the opportunity for great media coverage for your organization.

2. Viral Video Can Help You Build a Stronger Connection with Your Audience

The primary strength of viral video is in creating a positive, emotional connection between you and your target audience. That means that not

only do you reach more viewers than with conventional content, the viewers you reach are measurably more engaged.

3. Viral Video Can Inspire Action

Viral video can also have a real world impact. [The Ice Bucket Challenge](#) raised millions of dollars for the ALS Association, and as we mentioned earlier, our videos for Coke and Mentos led to big sales increases for both companies. Just imagine what this could look like for the issues you work on.

While not every viral video will be the next Coke and Mentos or Ice Bucket Challenge, viral techniques can open doors to reach thousands or even millions of people very cost effectively.

So think about how contagious content could help spread the word about your organization or how it could draw attention to the important issues you're working on. How it could get people sitting up, smiling, and sharing your messages with their friends – and maybe even taking steps to change the world for the better.



Testing Viral Video For Nonprofits

With support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, we took our recipe for creating contagious content and made experimental videos for two nonprofits, GirlTrek and the National Association of School Nurses (NASN).

We wanted to know: Could viral video techniques be used to support GirlTrek's efforts to get more Black women out and walking in their communities? Could they help NASN spread the word about the increasing importance of school nurses?



[*19 Dope Ways to Lace Your Shoes*](#)

For GirlTrek, we looked for a novel way to get people thinking about lacing up their shoes and going for a walk, which led to the video [*19 Dope Ways to Lace Your Shoes*](#), showcasing cool new ways to lace up a pair of shoes – each one connected in some way to Black history. We designed lacings for the Underground Railroad and the North Star, lacings for historically Black colleges and universities, and lacings honoring historical figures from Billie Holiday to Muhammad Ali.

For NASN, we captured real audio from interviews with school nurses and children talking about the importance of school nurses. Then we combined that audio with visuals of unusual puppets made from school supplies to create the video [*School Nurses are My Superheroes!*](#)



School Nurses are My Superheroes!

The results from these two videos are promising.

In their first 24 hours online, before any promotional spending kicked in, GirlTrek's video was their #3 video on Facebook, and NASN's video was their #1 video on Facebook. Within eight days, after modest promotional spends, both videos had more views than their respective organizations' top ten Facebook videos combined.

In less than a month, GirlTrek connected with over one million viewers, raising awareness of their organization in their target audience of Black women from age 18 to 50. The video was seen by the equivalent of four times their Facebook fan base.

In the same time frame, NASN, with a smaller fan base and a smaller, more targeted promotional spend, reached 70,000 people, more than six times their fan base.

Both videos helped spread important messages to new audiences and got people sharing those messages with their friends.



Is Viral Video Right For Your Organization?

Viral video can help you reach more people and build a deeper connection with your audience than traditional video, but a viral video campaign – by which we mean the process of developing, producing, launching, and promoting a video – also demands time and resources. Before embarking on a viral campaign for your organization, ask yourself these questions:

1. Do Your Communications Goals Fit with the Strengths of a Viral Campaign?

Viral video is all about emotion, so if your goal is to tell people about the features of your products or the benefits of your programs, a more conventional video style may be best for you.

If, for example, your objective is to show people how to sign up for the Affordable Care Act, with step-by-step instructions, conventional video may be better. On the other hand, if your objective is more immediate and emotional – if you want to let people understand that NOW is the time to sign up for the Affordable Care Act – viral video can be a great tool.

Viral video works best when you want to create an emotional connection with people – to get them fired up, excited, and active. Does building an emotional connection with an online audience match your organization's goals?

2. Do You Have the Staff Time Available to Manage a Viral Campaign?

Consider all the parts of the process, from concept development to production, post-production, promotion, and release. Make sure that when it comes time to launch, you will have someone who can spend time every day monitoring the campaign and posting to your social media channels. For a larger organization, this may fit right in with the work your existing social media team is already doing. For a smaller organization, this may mean you need to allocate additional dedicated staff time.

3. Is Your Organization Ready to Open Itself Up to the Risks of a Viral Campaign?

Any social media campaign means opening yourself up to online critics, who can be harsh, and Internet trolls – people deliberately aiming to be disruptive and disrespectful. And when your goals include reaching outside your regular fan base to a larger audience, you are increasing your chances of encountering those critics and trolls. You'll need to be prepared for that.

Creating contagious content requires doing something different. That doesn't mean going off-brand, but it does mean going outside the usual, and that can open you up to criticism, from both inside and outside your fan base. Is your organization ready to do something different?

As you prepare, make sure your management, your board members, and your other key stakeholders understand why you are doing something different. Share your objectives and prepare them for the challenges and opportunities that a viral approach brings. For a quick primer on what works in viral video and how it's different from conventional video, [our short TEDx talk](#) can be an easy way to bring your team up to speed.

4. Is Your Organization Ready for a Simpler, Less Glossy Video Style?

Viral videos typically have a simple, unglamorous, production style, and that approach means there will be imperfections and rough edges. Some organizations aren't comfortable with that and want a more polished look, but a more relaxed style, often similar to homemade videos shot on a cellphone, helps your content to be more human and approachable. Of course, a more casual style for viral video doesn't mean you have to step away from a more polished look for your other video content.

Even when you go into a viral video project prepared for those rough edges, you may need to remind yourself throughout the process to resist the allure of a more polished look. Stay true to the objective of viral video and keep the focus on creating an emotional connection. Anything that interferes with that, including a glossy production style, will make your video less contagious.

► Can Viral Videos Take On Serious Issues?

Because contagious content has to be different or unusual to catch people's attention, it can be hard to find the right way to make a viral video about a serious topic.

Australia's Metro Trains Melbourne found a way to take the dry, serious topic of train safety and spin it into a huge viral hit with [Dumb Ways to Die](#). This over-the-top animated cartoon depicted stupid and horrible ways to die (including playing on train tracks) in graphic but humorous detail – and it got over 150 million views. Tapping into humor can be extremely effective, even for serious topics.

But viral videos don't have to be outrageous or crazy.

Sussex Safer Roads in England created a stunning, poetic video about the importance of seatbelts in [Embrace Life](#), a video that reached over 20 million viewers. Embrace Life re-enacts a car crash in slow-motion mime, with a father sitting in a chair while his wife and daughter use their arms to form the seatbelt that saves his life. This powerful imagery was touching and unforgettable without being wild or crazy.

More recently, Adam Donyes created [a powerful video about privilege](#). It opens with people lined up at the start of a foot race. Before they begin, however, an announcer instructs everyone to take two steps forward if both of their parents are still married. He then asks everyone to take two more steps forward if they've had access to a private education. After several rounds of questions like this, many people are much further ahead than others – before the race even begins. This physical illustration of how privilege gives some of us a head start in life that we often don't acknowledge – or even notice – created a memorable video that's reached over 70 million people.

It can take time to find the right approach, but through humor or poetry, through spectacle or simplicity, even videos about difficult and serious topics can go viral.

PART TWO

THE FOUR RULES FOR CREATING CONTAGIOUS CONTENT





How Viral Video Is Different

This is a new kind of video. And surprisingly, the video editing and production techniques you've seen in TV and movies usually hurt more than they help. To create a video that can go viral, it's crucial to understand the differences between TV and this new medium.

Television uses tricks like quick edits, cuts from one camera to another, odd camera angles, news crawls, and sound effects to keep viewers from turning away. These techniques manipulate us into continuing to watch by exploiting a primal human reaction called the "orienting response."

The orienting response is what kicks in when we hear a sudden noise or see a sudden movement. Immediately, we involuntarily orient all of our senses toward the stimulus. From an evolutionary standpoint, that's an important reaction, because a sudden noise might be a snake in the grass. A sudden movement might be a tiger that's about to attack.

Television is constantly stimulating our orienting response. Every sudden zoom, quick cut, flashy motion graphic, and sound effect forces us to pay attention, if only for a moment. When that moment is gone, they hit us again and again, so that we can't turn away.

Research by Robert Kubey at Rutgers, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi at Claremont, and others has shown that this over-stimulation of the orienting response has a side effect: it numbs us into a lethargic stupor. You know that feeling if you've ever clicked on the TV for a moment, only to find yourself groggily reaching to turn it off three hours later, wondering why you just spent all that time watching reruns of *The Golden Girls*.

For television networks, putting viewers into that kind of trance is a home run, because it means that once viewers start watching, they find it hard to stop. And every hour the networks get us to watch is another hour when they've sold our eyeballs to more advertisers.

If you want to go viral, putting your audience in that kind of a passive trance is a problem. Your goal in creating contagious content

is to get viewers to take action – to stop what they’re doing and tell their friends about what they’ve just seen.

Jonah Berger and Katherine Milkman at the University of Pennsylvania have studied what gets people sharing content online. And indeed, what they’ve found is that when we’re passive, we’re less likely to share. We’re most likely to share when we see things that get us fired up and make us feel good.

Videos that make us feel sad – passive and negative – are generally among the least contagious. Videos that make us feel passive, positive emotions like contentment are also not usually contagious.

	Passive	Active
Negative	sad	angry afraid
Positive	content	happy amazed

Things that make us angry or afraid – negative and active – are more contagious, but most contagious of all are the active, positive emotions: things that make us laugh, things that amaze us. The research shows that to get people sharing, you want to get them actively engaged with strong, positive emotions.

Our own experiences in the trenches of viral video over the past decade confirm this.

As we did the work that led to our book, [The Viral Video Manifesto](#), we found that, to create contagious content, there are four core principles that are crucial to understand:

1. **Be true.** Don’t fake it. Make it real.
2. **Don’t waste my time.** Get down to business right away.
3. **Be unforgettable.** Show us something we’ve never seen before.
4. **Ultimately, it’s all about humanity.**

These four principles help make videos contagious. The more you can stick to all four, the better, although strength in one area can often overcome a weakness in another.

Throughout this part of the toolkit, we'll look at specific strategies that will help you use these principles to create your own contagious content.

► **Viral Video Is the 21st Century Sideshow**

When we started making viral videos, although Fritz's background was in advanced mathematics and Stephen had spent twenty years as a trial lawyer, our common expertise was in theatrical circus. Stephen had had a one-man show. Fritz was a world-record-setting juggler and toured with a Cirque du Soleil spinoff. Between the two of us, we had spent decades immersed in that type of performance.

To our surprise, we found that the same rules that apply to creating a good circus act apply to creating viral video. It turns out that, in many ways, viral video is modern Vaudeville. It's electronic street performing. It's the 21st Century sideshow.

Traditionally, the sideshow was a combination of skill acts (like the jugglers, magicians, and escape artists), danger acts (like the fire eaters, sword swallows, and knife throwers), and the oddities (like the bearded ladies, contortionists, and two-headed turtles). Each gave the audience something new, amazing, or downright weird to marvel at. The sideshow was in your face, with a gritty reality filled with wild things you'd never seen before.

That's exactly what we see working so well today in viral video. It's immediate and unpolished, and it embraces the bold, daring, and unabashedly strange.

Whether it's a guy hammering a nail into his nostril or a Cirque du Soleil aerial ballet, a video of [a sneezing baby panda](#) or [Susan Boyle singing](#), the core of what makes them work is the same.

A key element of the sideshow is the up-close, raw, unfiltered experience of actually seeing things like [a guy doing a backflip into a pair of jeans](#). It is real. You saw it. You were there. That's the core of our Rule One for viral video: **Be True.**

Similarly, when your living as a street performer or carnival barker depends on people not walking away, you learn very quickly to cut everything that

doesn't immediately grab and hold people's attention. That's Rule Two: **Don't Waste My Time.**

And just like a sideshow act, whether you've got a sneezing baby panda or 100 geysers of Coke and Mentos, every viral video needs to provoke the crucial reaction: "I've never seen that before – you've got to see this." Which is Rule Three: **Be Unforgettable.**

And just like in sideshow, in the end, everything comes down to Rule Four: **Ultimately, It's All About Humanity.** Even in the sideshow, to create a strong, positive emotional experience, the people are what matter. The best circus and sideshow performers often aren't the ones who can do the most difficult tricks. It's the ones who have been able to project their humanity, and by doing that create a real connection with their audience.

As we look at each of our Four Rules in detail, it can be helpful to recognize that viral video is very much the 21st Century sideshow.



RULE ONE Be True



[The Extreme Diet Coke & Mentos Experiments](#)

We crave true, unfiltered experiences. Movies and television give us re-packaged versions of life, but the Internet can give us raw reality like no other medium. [A kid](#) whose brother just bit his finger, [a rat](#) dragging a piece of pizza down the subway steps, [an elaborate Rube Goldberg machine](#) that turns the page of a newspaper, [a mom](#) laughing uncontrollably in a Chewbacca mask – those are real. They’re true. And that truth helps make them contagious. “This really happened – you have to see this.” That’s when we click on the share button.

Delivering a video that’s true can mean being in the right place at the right time ([Battle at Kruger](#) captured an astonishing showdown between lions, water buffalo, and a crocodile), or it can mean shooting *Candid Camera*-style (Internet prankster [Rémi Gaillard](#) captures candid reactions to outrageous situations).

But staying true doesn’t mean your video is unplanned. There are several strategies you can employ. Like our Coke and Mentos stunts or [Noah K’s time-lapse video](#) showing his own face changing over the course of several years, your videos can be rehearsed or elaborately planned. The key is that nothing is fake. You’re not trying to use actors or editing to make us think it’s real. Everything about the video should be

true, and nothing should interfere with the connection that the simple truth creates with the viewer.

Strategy One: *Show Me Something Real*

Show real people having real reactions to real events.

What really happens when you drop [500 Mentos mints into 100 bottles of Coke](#)? What happens when you actually send [250,000 superballs bouncing down a hill in San Francisco](#)? What do bored news anchors really do [during their commercial break](#)?

Compare the contagiousness of something real: [JK Wedding Entrance Dance](#); and something fake: [Disneyland Musical Marriage Proposal](#).

JK Wedding Entrance Dance is a homemade video shot on a single, shaky camera of an entire wedding party entering the church at an actual wedding. Instead of making the typical stone-faced march down the aisle, these bridesmaids and groomsmen danced their way in, celebrating while Chris Brown's "Forever" played in the church. The dancing was rehearsed, but everything about the video is simple and real. It captured true emotion, and because of that, it is extremely contagious. Over 90 million people have now seen *JK Wedding Entrance Dance*.

On the other hand, look at *Disneyland Musical Marriage Proposal*. This faked video shows an elaborate song and dance number on Main Street, USA at Disneyland, building up to a young man supposedly popping the question to his girlfriend as people "spontaneously" cheer. Because the video used actors and a script, with lots of cameras and microphones all over the place, it's full of subtle giveaways that it isn't real, and it winds up being little more than a sterile imitation of the true emotion in videos like *JK Wedding Entrance Dance*. With all of Disney's promotional muscle behind it, *Disneyland Musical Marriage Proposal* got only about 4 million views the year it was released – a fraction of what *JK Wedding Entrance* got.

People want to share the one that is real.

So show us something cool that really happened and you've got a chance to make us care enough to share with our friends.

Strategy Two: *Just Press Record and Do It*

Viral video is about raw, unfiltered experience, so don't dress it up.

Every edit and camera move filters your viewers' experience and makes them feel more like they're watching a TV and less like they're right there witnessing a real event. You want your audience to feel like they're actually there.

It's no accident that many of the biggest viral hits of all time are unedited footage shot with a single, fixed camera. If Judson Laipply's classic [Evolution of Dance](#) had been shot as a music video with multiple cameras, odd angles, and quick MTV edits, it wouldn't have created the true feeling of being right there in the crowd watching him, and chances are it would have gone nowhere. But seeing Judson dancing in one uninterrupted shot from the middle of the live audience makes the experience extraordinary. The raw, unfiltered experience is what is so compelling.

If your content isn't strong enough to hold people's attention without using editing and production tricks, **make better content**.

Strategy Three: *Treat the Camera Like a Person*

Film and television directors move their cameras all over the place, but the best technique with viral video is to treat the camera as a real person, a spectator who is right there watching things unfold as they happen.

That means don't use multiple cameras, and don't move the camera from place to place. Don't put your camera in places a real person wouldn't be. Don't have it fly through the scene on a crane or on a dolly, because a real person can't do that. You want viewers to feel like they're actually there, so set up your shot so that everything can be seen from one, unmoving camera, ideally in one uninterrupted take.

If, because of the nature of what you're shooting, the camera absolutely has to move to follow the action, move the camera as if it were a person walking exactly where a real person would walk. Videos like [LIPDUB – I Gotta Feeling](#), where the camera moved through an entire building to follow the choreography, and OK Go's [This Too Shall Pass](#) –

Rube Goldberg Machine, where the camera had to track the action of an elaborate chain reaction, used this technique well.

But whether your camera is moving or stationary, always shoot your video in a way that lets your viewers feel what it would truly be like if they were actually there.

► **Some Videos are Clearly Staged. Are They Still True?**

Some viral videos capture reality as it happens. *Chewbacca Mom* and *Pizza Rat* show us amazing spontaneous events.

But like OK Go's huge Rube Goldberg machine and *LIPDUB - I Gotta Feeling*, many contagious videos are very carefully planned reality. They do more than happening to stumble across real situations and less than faking them. They create intriguing moments by staging interesting, real situations and then capturing what really happens. The sword swallower, the fire eater, and the snake charmer at the sideshow are all real, but they also give well planned performances.

So you can plan, even practice, for an event you're going to shoot for your video, as we do for all our videos. You can set up 100 bottles of Diet Coke in the woods and choreograph and rehearse a two-minute Coke and Mentos geyser show. Just don't fake it with hidden garden hoses or show staged audience reaction shots – stay true.

Evolution of Dance is literally staged – on an actual stage – and it's an honest documentation of a performance that really happened. It is an extremely well-rehearsed dance, and the video simply captures that dance in front of a live audience. There's nothing fake about that. The real, live energy has a contagiousness that *Disneyland Musical Marriage Proposal*, which is false from the beginning, can never have.

So while it's a good idea to get rid of the actors and throw away the script, you don't have to go in without a plan in order to show us something true.

► **Rule One in Action: *Don't Fake It. Make It Real.***

For [School Nurses are My Superheroes!](#) for the National Association of School Nurses (NASN), we asked real nurses, real parents, and real kids about the importance of school nurses. Their responses provided the audio for the video, with puppets acting out their words.

We never scripted people's words. They never had to act. Because of that, all the emotion in those voices is real, and that truth helps make the video more contagious.

For [19 Dope Ways to Lace Your Shoes](#) for GirlTrek, we ran into circumstances that reminded us to keep it real.

The concept for this video was to film people dancing while wearing elaborately laced shoes. Initially, we shot it indoors on a set to have more time to shoot and more control over the lighting. But the set wasn't real. The ideal location was outside in a park. Like *Disneyland Musical Marriage Proposal*, there were subtle (and not-so-subtle) indications that our indoor set was fake. We could have tried to make the set a better fake, but the best choice was to be true.

In the end, even though it took extra effort, we shot the final video outside in a real park in Washington, D.C. The difference was enormous.



[19 Dope Ways to Lace Your Shoes](#)

The concept of Be True also raised a challenge for both NASN and GirlTrek, as it also has for many of our corporate clients: to accept an intentionally less polished, rougher production style than they were used to.

To keep things real, you want to embrace a simpler style. You're looking for the feel of a video that one of your friends might have made with their

iPhone. If you make something too glossy, with that beautiful lens flare or dramatic camera angle, people will pay attention to that, not to the content itself. Anything that distracts from the content itself has to be trimmed away.

That's not to say you don't want things to look good. You want ample lighting, clear sound (when that's relevant), and a decent camera. But you don't want anyone to notice any of those things.

Having a shiny, high-production video is reassuring, but it undermines the contagiousness. Keep things true and keep the focus on why people are watching in the first place: you have something unforgettable to show us!

Minimizing Camera Moves

While it wasn't practical to film either *19 Dope Ways to Lace Your Shoes* or *School Nurses are My Superheroes!* in one continuous shot, we kept the editing to a minimum, to keep the audience connection as continuous as possible. So we never cut from one angle to a different view of the same shoes. We never zoomed in during a particular puppet scene. Each individual shot was unbroken, with one camera that was generally stationary. Having as few edits and camera moves as possible helps keep things simple and true, giving people the feeling that they are there, getting an unfiltered experience.



RULE TWO

Don't Waste My Time



[*The Extreme Sticky Note Experiments*](#)

Online, your audience can leave whenever they want. And leave they will.

If they get bored, they're gone.

Most attempts at viral video take too long to get down to business. To hold our attention online, you need to grab the viewer's attention right away and keep showing them content compelling enough that they keep watching.

That doesn't mean every video should be 30 seconds or less. [*Sneezing Panda*](#) (92 million views) is 17 seconds. [*Battle at Kruger*](#) (58 million views) is 8 minutes. Both of these classic viral videos get right down to business, show you what you want to see, and wrap it up without wasting any time.

Strategy One: *Nothing but the Money Shots*

To avoid wasting time, make your video nothing but your money shots.

What's a money shot? In movies, money shots are the spectacular (and often expensive) sequences that make a film memorable. Traditionally,

they're the big car crashes, space battles, tidal waves, or other over-the-top special effects that are a key selling point for certain films.

This nothing-but-the-money-shots approach is one of the ways in which viral video is the 21st Century sideshow.

If you have [a baby monkey riding backwards on a pig](#), show us that. Immediately.

But sometimes, in the same way that the punchline of a joke may require a setup, you may have to include slightly more than just the money shots.

The structure of a sideshow act is setup and payoff. The payoff is the main event: the sword swallower swallowing swords. The setup is whatever we need to know – and only what we need to know – to understand what we're about to see. For example: is it a real sword? Is it sharp? To show us that, a sword swallower may start by dramatically slicing a head of lettuce in two. As soon as that setup is complete, it's on to the swallowing.

In shooting your video, ask yourself: what is absolutely essential for us to see in order to appreciate your payoff? It may be absolutely nothing. Great. We don't need much setup to appreciate a dog riding a skateboard. Just show us your [skateboarding dog](#).

For other videos, a little clarifying setup may be needed. But be ruthless in trying to keep it to the essentials. Only keep a shot when it provides crucial information. Otherwise, get rid of it.

For [our first Diet Coke and Mentos video](#), for example, the payoff was a hundred geysers of soda choreographed to music. What do you need to know to understand that? You need to know that a handful of Mentos dropped into a single bottle of Diet Coke almost instantly sends the soda shooting twenty feet up into the air. So we included a short clip demonstrating that at the beginning of the video. And after that simple setup, it's nothing but the money shots.

Strategy Two: *Don't Tell a Story*

Contrary to popular belief, and unlike almost all other film and video, viral video is not about story.

Advertisers and filmmakers are used to thinking of everything as a story, because stories are powerful tools to grab and hold people's attention, but surprisingly, in viral video, story works against you.

If you've got a sword swallower, show him swallowing swords. Don't tell us his life story.

This lesson was brought home to us with our video [*The Extreme Sticky Note Experiments*](#). We made it in partnership with Disney, and we were working with a talented team of Hollywood directors, actors, and producers. But as a result, the video used a lot of television techniques rather than fully embracing our four principles of viral video, and because of that, the video takes too long to get down to business.

The Extreme Sticky Note Experiments takes an agonizing 58 seconds before it gets to what we've promised – and what was something people had never seen before: some very cool stunts with over 250,000 sticky notes.

What got in the way? Story. Those first 58 seconds show a woman working in an office. Then her boss comes in. He gives her more work to do. And then he leaves. And then we see other people working in the office. But then two pranksters show up with a pad of sticky notes. Eventually, after all of that story, we finally get to the fun, surprising stunts with sticky notes.

But all that story is a waste of time.

What is the viewer waiting to see? Extreme sticky note experiments. What did we open with? Story.

In the end, the video still got four million views in its first few weeks and won some prestigious awards, but we still ask ourselves, how much better would it have been, how many more views would it have gotten, if we hadn't wasted those first 58 seconds?

We got a glimpse of that recently, when someone in Azerbaijan posted an edited, unauthorized version of *The Extreme Sticky Note Experiments* on Facebook. What did they take out? The story. And that version racked up over six million views in a month.

So don't get bogged down in story. Just show us your sword swallower swallowing swords.

► Rule Two in Action: *Get Down to Business*

To make sure we're being as efficient as possible, we often ruthlessly cut as much as we can from a video, cut it again, and then cut it some more. When the video gets so short that it starts to be confusing, we add just enough back in to make it sensible again.

In [19 Dope Ways to Lace Your Shoes](#), the video starts with two women holding signs with the title of the video on them, and then it gets right to showing what viewers are there to see: cool ways to lace your shoes. There are no establishing shots of the park. There's no preamble showing people starting to lace up. There's just an opening title, and then it gets right to it.

Each lacing is introduced by a title card, and then each clip aims to show you the lacing as clearly and as quickly as possible. We tried to make the video shorter by superimposing the name of each lacing ("The Billie Holiday", e.g.) over the shot of that lacing, but, as it turned out, seeing all that at the same time was confusing. When we put the names of the lacings on title cards *before* showing each lacing, that was efficient, without being confusing.

We also had to work to make sure that GirlTrek's presence in the video wasn't a waste of time, so we incorporated their brand in 3 ways:

1. The women seen at the beginning and the end all wore distinctive blue GirlTrek t-shirts. These shots show their logo clearly but keep it understated – never lingering on the logo for longer than is natural.
2. At the end of the video, when the viewer wants to know who made this video possible, we show eight shoes with laces spelling out GIRLTREK. That makes their brand part of the core content, not just an add-on.
3. We also put an unobtrusive watermark of their logo in the corner throughout most of the video. This isn't always the right choice, but for this video, it works as a way to show viewers who's responsible for all these fun ways to lace your shoes – all the way through the video.

These three tactics make GirlTrek's presence in the video strong without interfering with what the viewer is there to see. If you have too strong a brand presence, your video can feel like a commercial and turn viewers off. With the right light touch, your brand presence will be clear without getting in the way.



RULE THREE

Be Unforgettable



[The Coke Zero & Mentos Rocket Car](#)

Just like a sideshow act, every viral video has a hook – something that pulls people in and provokes the reaction: “I’ve never seen that before!”

Your goal is to make something that would have a great carnival barker’s pitch: “Step right up! Step right up! Watch [a baby monkey](#) riding backwards on a pig!” “See what happens when we put an [iPhone in a blender!](#)” “Watch [a mom in a Chewbacca mask](#) laugh uncontrollably!” Those videos have great hooks.

Contagious videos stand out from the crowd. In order to get us excited enough to share with our friends, your video has to be, in some way and to some degree, unforgettable. There are many different ways to do this, from being the biggest or the best to being unusual or even laughably bad, but most attempts at viral video simply fail because they fall short of this goal. Most attempts are, in a word, forgettable.

And while being unforgettable is difficult, there are several strategies that can help you develop memorable content.

Strategy One: *Do Something Different*

The Internet rewards bold and crazy choices. It's the odd, unusual, weird, and obsessive that stand out.

Take a look at [Slippery Stairs](#) where contestants on a Japanese game show try in vain to climb a set of slippery stairs, or [Les Horsemen](#) where a trio of men in silly horse costumes pretend to race. Those videos presented something new, bold and unabashedly weird, and that was a crucial factor in their success.

So is your idea different enough? Here's a test: Try to imagine the carnival barker's pitch for it. When it's as compelling as "Step right up! Step right up! See a baby monkey riding backwards on a pig!" you've probably got something.

Remember: **outrageous is contagious.**

That said, being different doesn't have to mean going off-brand. Being different can also be beautiful. From our [Extreme Sticky Note Experiments](#), to Sony Bravia's series of stunning [color videos](#), there's an elegant side to viral video as well – still with great carnival barker's pitches: "See 250,000 sticky notes transformed into flowing paper waterfalls of color!" and "See 250,000 Superballs bouncing down the hills of San Francisco!" Unforgettable but not outrageous.

Strategy Two: *Dive Deep Until You Own It*

Once you've got a strong idea, run with it. Take it as far as you can. Whatever quirky niche you've chosen to explore, take your bold choice and go extreme with it. Ramp it up, explore every possibility, and don't stop until you own it.

When we first started work on [The Extreme Diet Coke & Mentos Experiments](#), there were already dozens of online videos showing single geysers of Coke and Mentos. That's where we started. But then we took the time to dive deep and turned that obscure science trick into an absurdly huge 101-bottle production number choreographed to music. That deep exploration was a big part of the video's viral success.

The challenge here is that to dive deep enough to find something unforgettable, you have to be ready to spend the time it's going to take to

get there. The opportunity, though, is that anybody can do that. *You* can do that.

Take a look at the hand dance in Up and Over It's [We No Speak Americano](#), the treadmill dance in OK Go's [Here It Goes Again](#), and even [19 Dope Ways to Lace Your Shoes](#) to see how ordinary people – people like you – have taken simple ideas and then explored them far beyond what anyone else had done before to create unforgettable, contagious videos.

Strategy Three: *Capture a Unique Moment*

The more you can give people a one-of-a-kind experience, the better. Sometimes those moments are planned, sometimes they are spontaneous, but they're most contagious when they are unique.

Sometimes this means you have to be in the right place at the right time. If you can catch video footage of [a baby panda sneezing](#) or a [breathtaking life-or-death battle](#) in the wild between a pack of lions, a herd of water buffalo, and a crocodile, you've got something.

And while luck always helps, you can create your own luck. You can create your own unique moments like Matt Harding did in [Where in the Hell is Matt?](#) Dancing in places like the demilitarized zone in Korea, in a field of tulips in the Netherlands, and on the edge of the crashing surf in Tonga, he created the circumstances for something unique to happen, and it did.

This doesn't have to be expensive. Rahat Hossein set up unique moments, *Candid Camera*-style, in his video [Drive Thru Invisible Driver Prank](#). He built a simple costume that looked like the front seat of his car. When he drove up to a fast food drive-through window, it looked like the car had no driver. His video captures the entertaining reactions of the people working at the window to these extraordinary, fun circumstances.

Those unforgettable moments help make that video so contagious.

► **Rule Three in Action: *Show Us Something We've Never Seen Before***

For both [*School Nurses are My Superheroes!*](#) and [*19 Dope Ways to Lace Your Shoes*](#), the search for something unforgettable began with trying something different: unusual puppets made from school supplies and unusual ways to lace your shoes. Then we dove as deep as time and budget would allow. Our team of puppeteers spent hours coming up with as many surprising puppets as possible. And each shoe lacing took hours to invent and refine. We took those ideas as far as we could, to be as unforgettable as possible.

But being unforgettable means going out on a limb and trying something different. That can seem risky. Are you bold enough to be unforgettable? Is your boss bold enough to let you? What about your board of directors?



[*School Nurses are My Superheroes!*](#)

For *School Nurses are My Superheroes!*, acting out real audio clips with puppets made from school supplies was the hook. That was what made the video different from just another talking head video. But using puppets like that meant going out on a limb. We had to find a balance: making the video fun and unusual, without making it disrespectful or off-brand.

As we developed the concept, the staff at the National Association of School Nurses talked with members of their board to make sure everyone understood that this playful approach would be an innovative way to reach new audiences with something bold. And we all worked as a team to ensure that this approach didn't inadvertently trivialize the importance of the work school nurses do.

That balance of being bold and unforgettable while being respectful and on-brand can be tricky. It is a subjective judgment, so not everyone may agree. When *School Nurses are My Superheroes!* was released, it was encouraging that the response from the public was overwhelmingly positive and the video was highly contagious.



RULE FOUR

Ultimately, It's All About Humanity



[19 Dope Ways to Lace Your Shoes](#)

Viral video is the 21st century sideshow, but in both real life and online, sideshow without an emotional connection is hollow. Circus performers know that the best acts are not about superhumans, they're about humans. If the audience doesn't see the performer as a real person, an act can be amazing but it won't be affecting.

Online it's the same. Much more than TV or film, viral video has an ability to create a direct, personal connection, and that intimacy is incredibly powerful.

Strategy One: Give Us the Thrill of Victory and the Agony of Defeat

Show us moments of true emotion.

If you show someone making an amazing leap from rooftop to rooftop, make sure to include her shout of "Yes!" and her fist pump afterward. If you show a skateboarder wiping out, show his grimace of pain and disappointment, too.

Showing those real human reactions is crucial because those moments are what create the emotional connection with your audience. For [The Extreme Diet Coke and Mentos Experiments](#), we spent almost every weekend for six months developing dozens of different geyser effects. We made swinging geysers, crossing geysers, spinning geysers, whole lines of a dozen geysers firing at once, and yet people regularly tell us that their favorite moment isn't any of those – but rather, at the end, when we both throw our arms up in the air in celebration.

All those geysers are important. They're our hook and they're crucial to making the video unforgettable. But throwing our arms up at the end in our moment of triumph is our human reaction to the crazy thing we've just done. Showing that moment of authentic joy is what creates an emotional connection between us and our audience.

Make sure your video has at least one strong, authentic, emotional moment and you'll be well on your way to having something contagious.

[Strategy Two: Show Humanity, Not Perfection](#)

Don't try to be perfect. Be real.

Two different videos from Italian foot juggler Selyna Bogino teach a great lesson about the difference between overly glossy, non-contagious perfection and beautifully imperfect, viral humanity. In 2011, Bogino posted two videos on YouTube showcasing her mind-boggling dexterity with her feet. One went viral.

The first, [Selyna Bogino – Tigerpalast 2011](#), shows her world-class juggling act performed live, on stage, in Frankfurt, Germany, with a fancy costume and slick choreography. She tosses and catches long cylinders, flipping them end-over-end using only her feet; she spins four small carpets, one on each hand and one on each foot; and finally, in a remarkable sequence, she throws and catches five basketballs between her hands and feet in a series of creative, jaw-dropping moves. The audience loves it, and as juggling fans, when we first saw this video, we really enjoyed it, too. Her skill is phenomenal.

Then Bogino made a second video, which she describes simply as “practicing at home for fun, to beat the world record of the longest and most difficult 5 balls routine ever..!” [Selyna Bogino Doing the Five Balls Longest](#)

[*Routine Ever! XD*](#) shows her rehearsing in her attic studio. She turns on the single, fixed camera and walks into frame, wearing sweatpants and a t-shirt. Behind her is a random assortment of boxes, chairs, and other stuff you'd find in any attic. After a couple of quick stretches, she's starts right in, doing the same amazing sequence with five basketballs, but now with a few extra, even more astounding tricks. She finishes by tossing the balls onto the floor and tilts her head nonchalantly as she walks up to the camera to turn it off.

It's this second video that went viral.

The video of Bogino on stage got a respectable 40,000 views, but her second, sweatpants-in-the-attic video, where all she was doing was rehearsing got 1.5 million. That view count made it one of the top 10 juggling videos on YouTube at the time.

Why did one video go viral and not the other?

Both videos are true. Both videos get down to business fairly quickly. Both feature almost identical juggling skills.

But the first video is dressed up with choreography and a full-on circus costume. Bogino is putting on a big show for us, and on the stage, she's the image of perfection. That perfection, however, makes her somehow distant, not just physically, but emotionally.

The second video is raw. It's just Bogino, her impressive tricks, and her nice-but-ordinary clothes. She's not putting on a big show for us, so we see more of her real self. We see the humanity that her polished stage performance hid. And that humanity forges an emotional connection that makes the video contagious.

So let your videos show the imperfections of humanity and your audience will be more likely to relate to them – and more likely to share them.

► **Rule Four in Action: *Finding Human Moments***

[*School Nurses are My Superheroes!*](#) has a more fun style than the National Association of School Nurses had ever used before. Rather than focusing on policy points, the video focuses on the human side of school nursing.

The audio interviews with real nurses and real kids captured humanity, not perfection. We looked for the moments that showed the individual joys and difficulties of day-to-day life, while steering away from anything that seemed overly polished or sanitized. Using puppets made from school supplies to illustrate the audio added smiles and laughter. Combining serious stories about the importance of school nurses with a surprising, fun attitude allows the brand to be human.

It's not always easy to open up and let your organization show a different, more human side, but ultimately, *School Nurses are My Superheroes!* enabled NASN to reach a wider audience and create a strong emotional connection with those people.

Showing Humanity with Feet

Showing humanity in GirlTrek's [19 Dope Ways to Lace Your Shoes](#) presented some novel challenges.

When we shot the test footage for the video, we had to figure out how to show shoelaces and show humanity. We experimented with everything from showing just the lacings on shoes on a table (Don't Waste My Time) to showing the whole person wearing them and smiling (Ultimately, It's All About Humanity).

Just the lacings on a table fell flat. The lacings were 100% clear, but there was no humanity in those shots.

Surprisingly, the test footage we shot showing a smiling woman wearing the lacings also had a problem: the humanity was emphasized more than the lacings. Very subtly, those shots were getting people thinking, "René has such a nice smile!" and not "Wow, that lacing is amazing!" which is what the video needed.

We were shooting for a balance between Be Unforgettable (all about the lacings) and Ultimately, It's All About Humanity. We found that balance in showing the lacings on dancing feet. There was a surprising expressiveness and humanity in dancing feet, so even without showing people's faces, a lot of humanity came through.

For an even deeper look at the Four Rules and why they work, along with lots more examples, see our book [The Viral Video Manifesto](#).

PART THREE

**A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE TO
BUILDING A VIRAL CAMPAIGN**



[1]

Planning Your Viral Campaign

Whether you're aiming for something as specific as getting 1,000 teachers excited about a new project or something as general as getting 1,000,000 people to ask themselves if they're getting enough sleep, the step-by-step process for getting your message out to new viewers is the same.

A viral video campaign (again, by "campaign," we mean the entire process of creating and launching your video) has three phases:

1. **Concept Development:** creating and refining the viral concept
2. **Production:** capturing the concept on video
3. **Promotion and Launch:** getting the video out to the public

We also recommend setting aside some time when your campaign is over to analyze your results and consider next steps.

Your creative, production, and promotion teams may be outside your organization – handled by separate companies or by a single agency – or you may be doing all this in-house. If your campaign budget allows, having some of this work handled by people who specialize in creating viral content, shooting video, or managing social media campaigns can remove of the burden from your in-house team.

1. Set Your Budget and Timeline for Creative, Production, Launch, and Promotion

Developing the right **creative concept** generally takes more time than it takes financial resources.

Production doesn't generally require creating the look and feel of a conventional ad so spend your budget on doing whatever it takes to make your video unforgettable.

You'll also want to use paid **promotion** to get above the noise in this crowded online world. Most of our budgets have ranged from 50/50 production vs. promotion, to 75/25 production vs. promotion. Wherever your budget lands, make sure promotion is significant part of the plan. With the right creative concept, those paid views then generate earned views when people start sharing with their friends.

Set your timeline for each phase of the project, including:

- concept development
- concept approval
- research and review test footage
- shooting final video footage
- editing: rough cut, fine cut, and final cut
- promotion planning
- launch and promotion
- results and analysis

2. Determine Who Will Develop Your Creative

Your “creative” is your viral concept, your hook, the core idea for your video. “[100 Coke and Mentos geysers choreographed to music](#),” “[watch an iPhone get destroyed by a blender](#),” and “[19 dope ways to lace your shoes](#)” are all examples of good hooks.

Whoever you select to do this work, whether they're in-house or from an outside company, should be thoroughly familiar with the Four Rules in Part Two and understand that the goal is contagious, emotional, honest content produced in the simple, straightforward style described in this toolkit.

3. Decide Who Will Shoot and Edit Your Video

If you are hiring an outside company, find one with experience in this style. Most video companies are used to producing more conventional, polished videos. Be wary of companies that will deliver you the most

beautiful video. You're looking for people who understand the Four Rules and will deliver you the most contagious content, not the prettiest. Show them [JK Wedding Entrance Dance](#) and [Disney Musical Marriage Proposal](#) and make sure they understand how big the difference is between those two videos. You need them to stay as far away as possible from something like *Disney Musical Marriage Proposal*.

4. Determine Who Will Handle the Promotion

The promotion team plans your strategy, optimizes your paid promotion as the campaign rolls out, and reports results at the end. Given how the mechanics of social media are always changing, hiring a specialist here, if you can afford one, can help you be more effective.

If an outside promotion company isn't in your budget, the most effective approach may be to post your video on Facebook and spend what budget you have promoting that post directly on Facebook.

If at all possible, reaching out for earned media coverage should also be part of your campaign. If you have the resources, you may want to have a PR firm assist.

5. Appoint a Project Lead

Appoint a lead for the project who will supervise your creative, production, and promotion teams. This person will coordinate your team's feedback on concept development, video edits, and promotional plans. The production and promotion teams will look to your project lead for the final word on any questions.

Also designate a lead for social and earned media to coordinate the nitty gritty of making posts, measuring results, and earned media strategy and implementation.



[School Nurses are My Superheroes!](#)

► **Key Principles to Keep in Mind Throughout This Process**

- The strength of viral video is creating an emotional connection, not in communicating features or benefits.
 - Aim to create content that people will want to watch and share. You can have a perfectly crafted message, but if no one wants to watch, no one will want to share it.
 - Viral video generally has a rougher, less polished style than most conventional advertising. This may be different from what you, your board, or your constituents are used to.
 - Focus your time, energy, and budget on the big picture: creating contagious content.
-

[2]

Setting Your Goals

What Do You Want This Campaign to Accomplish?

Do you want to raise awareness of your organization, draw attention to an issue, or get people to sign an online pledge? Your goals will affect both the content of your video and how it is promoted. At this stage, you want to clarify three things:

- What key messages do you want to spread?
- What are the specific goals of the campaign?
- What is your call to action?

What Specific Goals Would Most Benefit Your Organization?

Most goals break down into three types: increased awareness, online engagement, and offline (in real life) engagement.

Campaigns whose goal is to **raise awareness** can focus on calling attention to your organization, your message, a specific project, or a larger issue, by generating as many impressions and views as possible. The National Association of School Nurses wanted to increase awareness of the important work school nurses do everyday. GirlTrek, on the other hand, was specifically focused on getting more Black women to know about their organization.

Online engagement is typically measured in social media participation, through likes, comments, shares, retweets, and new followers – all of which are typically reported by the platform. Or you may want to encourage other kinds of online action, like visiting your website or signing an online pledge. Every viral campaign however, wants to do well on one particular metric: **shares**. That's the core of going viral.

Often the ultimate goal of any campaign is **offline engagement**: motivating viewers to take action, such as attending an event, making a donation, or volunteering in person. GirlTrek's ultimate goal, for example, is to get Black women moving from passive viewers to active participants – first engaging with their video, then signing the GirlTrek online pledge, and eventually, lacing up their shoes and getting out in their communities to walk with other GirlTrekks.

Typically, offline action like this involves a deeper level of commitment. It may take exposure to multiple campaigns to really trigger action, but campaigns like [the Ice Bucket Challenge](#) and our work for Coke and Mentos show that sometimes you can hit the jackpot and even a single viral video can lead to significant real world action.

So what are *your* top goals?

What's Your Call to Action?

Your specific goals will shape your call to action, which can be anything from “Sign our petition!” to “Share this video!” or “Learn these cool lacings!” Your call to action may be featured both within the video itself and in the promotional campaign around it.

To start, come up with a few candidates for your potential call to action. With your key messages and goals in mind, figure out exactly what you want people to do when they finish watching your video. Your call to action can be as simple as, “For more information, visit [OurWebsite.org/thisproject!](#)” where you guide people to a landing page on your site that has more information and next steps they can take.

The National Association of School Nurses focused on simply: “Help spread the word! Share this video!”

GirlTrek used the call to action: “Lace up YOUR shoes! Learn all 19 ways at [GirlTrek.org/laces!](#)”

Keep your call to action simple and specific. It might not focus directly on your ultimate goal (say, people attending your events). Think of it as the first step you want people to take toward that goal. The first step towards getting people to attend your event may be signing up for more information. Once people take that first step, you can be ready to help them take the next.

► What Are Your Top Goals?

- **awareness** (impressions, views)
 - of your organization
 - of your key message
 - of a specific project
 - of a general issue
 - **engagement on social media** (shares, likes, comments)
 - getting people one step beyond viewing
 - **other online actions**
 - likes on your Facebook page
 - followers on Twitter
 - sign-ups on your email list
 - signing an online petition
 - taking an online pledge
 - filling out an online questionnaire
 - making an online donation
 - attending an online event
 - **offline actions**
 - attending a real-life event
 - completing an offline project
 - taking a photo or video and submitting it
 - volunteering for your organization
-

► What Kind of Messages Can You Spread Through Viral Video?

The strength of viral video is in creating an emotional connection.

It's tough to find the emotional angle in messages like:

- Download our organizer field guide.
- The medical complexity of hospitalized pediatric patients has increased over the past 15 years.
- 30% of our plastic now comes from renewable plant materials.

These are important, but they're for later, once you get people emotionally invested in you and what you do.

Viral video is best suited for spreading high-level messages that can be carried by active, positive emotion. Messages like:

- Go for a walk and be a part of our community! (for GirlTrek)
- School nurses do important work! (for the National Association of School Nurses)
- Think about plastic bottles in a new way! (for Coca-Cola's new environmentally-friendlier PlantBottle)

With a dry topic, look for ways to make the message more emotional and engaging. Remember: [Dumb Ways to Die](#) was able to make train safety funny and unforgettable, and [Embrace Life](#) found viral success by tapping into the emotional reasons for wearing a seatbelt. You can do that too.

So what's your high-level message? Focus on how you can tap into active, positive emotion.

[3]

Developing Your Viral Concept

Where Do Viral Ideas Come From?

The key to developing a viral idea is finding your **hook**. Your hook, which is often also the video's title, is what pulls your viewer in.

"See [a baby monkey riding backwards on a pig!](#)" Who wouldn't click on that? Is there a good carnival barker's pitch for your video concept? "Step right up, step right up, and see _____."

You're looking for something people have never seen before – something that will make them think, "Oh, I've got to see that!"

See if you can go extreme in some way. Go big: [a Coke and Mentos world record](#). Go small: [tiny hamsters eating tiny burritos](#). Go strange: people competing to climb [a set of super slippery stairs](#). Go beautiful: an epic stop-motion animation of [books in a bookstore after closing time](#). Go surprising: [a giant "x-ray screen"](#) shows pairs of skeletons dancing, kissing, and hugging. When each couple steps out from behind the screen, we are surprised to see they are combinations of all races, religions, and genders. The tagline: Love has no labels.

The hook should have a thematic connection to your organization (like lacing up your shoes in cool ways that connect with Black History – to go for a walk with GirlTrek) or integrate your organization more directly (like puppets made from school supplies – talking about the importance of school nurses for the National Association of School Nurses). Your organization's presence in the video, however, should be natural and unforced. Your brand should be connected to the hook in some way, but not overshadow it.

Hooks range from "[Felix Baumgartner jumps from the edge of space](#)" to "[OK Go on a zero gravity airplane ride](#)" and from "[19 dope ways to lace your shoes](#)" to "[crazy puppets made from school supplies](#)."

Generally, the stronger the hook, the happier we are with that concept.

Our process at Eepybird Studios is to come up with three to five hooks that fit our client's brand and key messages. After discussing each of them with the client, we'll then flesh out one or two concepts further, focusing on which has the best combination of brand fit, messaging, and most importantly, contagiousness.

How Do You Assess the Viral Potential of Your Concepts?

First, how does it do on the Four Rules?

- Rule One: Be True. If there's a script and acting involved, that's generally a problem. The more your video captures real people having real reactions to real events, the better.
- Rule Two: Don't Waste My Time. Does your concept avoid storytelling and focus instead on nothing but the money shots? A quick setup and a clear payoff is what you're looking for.
- Rule Three: Be Unforgettable. How different is this idea? Don't go off-brand, but show people something they've never seen before.
- Rule Four: Ultimately, It's All About Humanity. Your goal is to create an active, positive emotion, and if we can see smiles, celebrations, curiosity, fun... That human connection is often the key.

Not every hook will score 100 points out of 100 on each rule. A strength in one area may make up for a deficiency in another, but overall, the higher it scores on all four, the better.

[4]

Research

Turning Your Hook into Something Unforgettable

If the hook for your video is showing crazy ways to lace your shoes, the research phase is when some of the people on your team (or people you hire) sit down with a bunch of shoes and a bunch of laces and figure out as many fun ways to lace those shoes as they can.

If your hook is real audio interviews brought to life with puppets made from school supplies, this is when someone gathers interviews and someone develops lots of puppets.

This research phase is crucial. It's when you take your raw idea and methodically turn it into something unforgettable. This takes time. There's no getting around that. But it doesn't have to be expensive.

Test Early. Learn Quickly. Repeat.

Aim for rapid prototyping. Build as quickly and cheaply as possible, and see what your idea looks like by shooting early test footage. Then take what you learn and build your next prototype. This allows the concept to develop further, allows the video to move towards becoming memorable, and allows you to see how you're doing on the Four Rules, on video, as you go.

It may be time-consuming and challenging, but this is where you want to devote your resources. Find the right people to develop your hook. Do what it will take to make your video memorable. To create something unforgettable, invest in developing your concept to the point that it becomes something no one has ever seen before.

Many videos have gone viral with small budgets, with the only significant expense being time spent on the research phase. [We No](#)

[*Speak Americano*](#), by Up and Over It, is simply two people sitting at a table, doing an elaborate dance with their hands. It didn't take a lot of money to shoot. But it took time to develop the choreography. Similarly, Rahat Hossein's [*Drive Thru Invisible Driver Prank*](#) needed an inexpensive costume – and time to develop. OK Go's [*Here It Goes Again*](#), showing the band dancing on treadmills, needed a few treadmills, but most of all, it just needed time to explore the possibilities of dancing on treadmills. So don't be afraid of the time it may take to develop an idea like these.

When we enter the research phase at Eepybird Studios, some concepts come together quickly, while for others, there are no shortcuts. Some take just a few days of testing, while others involve weeks of engineering and problem solving. Either way, the primary expense is usually time, rather than materials.

For our first [*Coke and Mentos video*](#), we spent pretty much every weekend for the better part of six months experimenting with different sodas and candies, developing as many different fountain effects as we could, and choreographing them to music. That was a big investment of time, but the materials only cost about \$1,000.



[*19 Dope Ways to Lace Your Shoes*](#)

For [*19 Dope Ways to Lace Your Shoes*](#), we spent many hours coming up with as many different ways to lace up a pair of sneakers as we could. (Be Unforgettable). Then we also experimented with the best way to capture the laces on video, shooting test footage to try to get a combination of clarity and fun (Don't Waste My Time and Ultimately, It's All About Humanity).

Whoever handles this phase of the development of your concept, keep in mind that the goal is to develop something memorable. It won't take a million dollars to get there, but it will take some time. With the right concept, you can make something just as, or even more, unforgettable as the big guys like Coca-Cola or Red Bull, because you don't need a big budget to make something unforgettable.

As your test footage progresses, you should start incorporating:

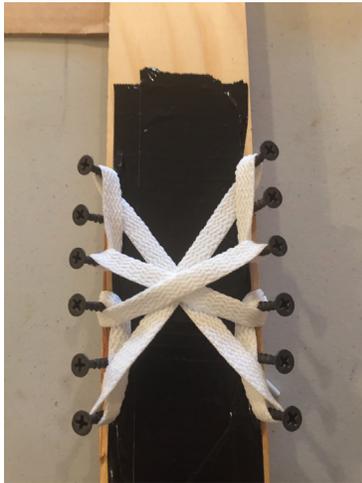
- draft video titles
- draft calls to action
- draft landing page URLs, if needed (“For more info, visit [OurWebsite.org/thisproject!](#)”)

These may further shape the concept and impact production choices.

As you get ready for production, you'll need to make decisions on personnel, equipment, location, costumes, props, etc. For each of these decisions, keep asking: How will this contribute to the contagiousness of the video? Avoid the temptation to make it look pretty!

If that expensive location will help it Be True or Be Unforgettable, great. If it's just going to make things pretty – but not more contagious – save your money.

Early research of shoelace patterns
for [*19 Dope Ways to Lace Your Shoes:*](#)



that became the basis for the butterfly
in “The Muhammad Ali”:



[5]

Production

**Keep It True,
Keep It Human,
Keep It Simple**

If you have laid the right groundwork, production won't involve any surprises, and won't be an expensive part of your process.

If you're attempting to capture everything in a single, uninterrupted shot (see Rule One: Be True), it can be tough to make sure that everything in that one shot actually works without a hitch. You'll need careful planning, and often lots of rehearsal.

A single, uninterrupted shot can be ideal for a viral video, and while it makes editing easier, it makes production harder. It may take you five, ten or sometimes even more takes to get what you need. Many of the all time classic viral videos required extensive rehearsal and often repeated takes during production, in order to get everything right in one shot. It took us a few tries to get an elaborate series of tricks to work perfectly for [Coca-Cola Glass Magic](#), and it took a lot of rehearsal to get [The Extreme Diet Coke and Mentos Experiments](#) to work on the first try. The prize winner may be OK Go's [White Knuckles](#), featuring the band with a dozen dogs doing an incredible sequence of choreographed stunts, which took 124 takes before they got it right. But when they finally did, they had something truly unforgettable.

Whether your video is a single, uninterrupted shot or a series of shots, the editing should be as simple as possible. Most video production crews are used to taking multiple shots from multiple angles and editing them together later in post-production. But you should plan to shoot so that the editing is as minimal as possible. Remember: you don't want cuts and multiple camera angles undermining the direct connection with your audience. Keep it simple and Be True.

At this point in the project, to the extent that they may appear in the footage you shoot for video itself, you should finalize:

- the video title
- the call to action
- the landing page URL, if needed

For example, in [*19 Dope Ways to Lace Your Shoes*](#), rather than insert an opening title card in post-production, we shot live footage of two women running into frame holding handmade signs that said “19 Dope Ways to Lace Your Shoes” and “Black History Style!”

Keep It Legal

Finally, make sure to get signed releases from all creative talent involved, giving you permission to use their work in the video. This includes:

- everyone who appears on screen
- camera operators
- director
- editors
- everyone who helped develop your viral concept
- anyone else who contributed creatively to the project

[6]

Post-Production

From Rough Cut to Fine Cut to Final Cut

Post-production is everything you do between capturing the raw video footage and your final edit. Generally, there are three phases of post-production: the rough cut, the fine cut, and the final cut.

The Rough Cut

Your rough cut is the first version of your video that resembles the final product. It may be too long, the audio may be uneven, colors may need adjusting, etc. Don't worry about fixing those things yet. At this stage you just want to see if the concept and the overall shape of the video are on target.

Here are 10 questions to ask your team members when you are evaluating the rough cut:

1. Did you smile? (If that's the objective.)
2. Did you laugh? (If that's the objective.)
3. What key messages do you think come through in the video?
4. What parts do you think best represent your image, messaging, and goals?
5. Is there anything that feels inconsistent with our image, messaging, or goals?
6. Is there an important idea or message that you think has been left out?
7. Is there anything that feels confusing?
8. Is there anything that feels inaccurate or misrepresented?

9. What are your favorite moments – things you might like to see more of?
10. Overall, what was your reaction?

Seeing the rough cut and looking at these questions will allow you to assess whether you need to make any adjustments to the concept itself or if you need to shoot any additional footage to make a second rough cut.

If, for example, you didn't capture the right shot from beginning to end, now is the time to go back, reshoot, and make another rough cut. Your rough cut should contain all the footage you'll need for your final edit.

The Fine Cut

The next step in the editing process is the fine cut, the next-to-final edit that is getting close to the finished product.

This is where Rule Two: Don't Waste My Time comes to the forefront. Be ruthless in pursuit of keeping your video short and sweet. Deliver the setup, deliver the payoff. Make it as long as it needs to be and not a moment longer.

That's not to say you want to make it as short as humanly possible. With almost every project we've done, we've cut and cut and cut to the point that we find that we've cut so much that the either the setup or the payoff is no longer clear. At that point, we put back just enough to ensure that everything is clear again.

Getting from the rough cut to the fine cut may quick and easy, with just a trim here or there to tighten things up, or you may find that you need to go back and shoot additional footage.

With the fine cut, there may still be small tweaks like a bit of rough audio or colors that need adjusting that can wait for the next stage, but at this point the pacing should be right and the video should be close to complete.

At the end of editing your fine cut, you should be happy with:

- the video title
- the call to action
- the landing page URL, if needed
- the length of the video
- the look and feel – likely an intentionally rougher, less polished style than most conventional advertising
- the clarity of your message
- the balance between your organization’s brand presence and the compelling content that makes your video memorable
- the extent to which your video gets people in your test audiences sitting up, engaged, and ready to share

The Final Cut

The last step is the final cut. This is where you make those small tweaks needed to get your video ready for release. Getting from fine cut to final cut should only be about the details, things like cleaning up the audio or making final color corrections.

► A Word About Sound and Music

Music on Facebook

If you want your video to spread on Facebook these days, you have to expect that most people will watch your video with the sound off. Silent autoplay means that if you have any dialogue at all, you should have subtitles. Luckily, adding subtitles to Facebook video is easy with their built-in tool.

If you do use music, it shouldn't be crucial to the success of your video. Even people who love your video may never turn on the sound.

That's unfortunate, because viral video is all about making an emotional connection and music is a direct line to emotion. So even with silent autoplay, don't forget that music can be a powerful tool for making your video more contagious.

Finding Music for Your Video

On YouTube, the music in your video can be an important element, helping make it contagious. You may be tempted to use a pop song for your soundtrack, to tap into what's hot and what has the right feeling, but don't use any music without permission. Your video could get shut down and all your work will go down the drain. You might even get sued.

Licensing a pop song will generally cost tens of thousands of dollars, at a minimum. Even if you have that kind of money to spend, you should be spending it on making your video more unforgettable or on promoting it to a wider audience. Those things will do more to help your video be successful than an expensive soundtrack.

Using original music is great if you can find the right artist to work with. There are also several websites like GettyImages.com/music and MusicLoops.com that offer licensing for reasonable prices. We licensed the music for the videos in this pilot project from sites like these for less than \$100 each. It can take time to find the right track, but if your video is going to be posted to sites like YouTube, it's worth spending that time.

[7]

Promotion

Getting Above the Noise

Remember that, when it comes to getting video views, creating content people will share is only part of the battle. As we discussed in Part One, you also need to rise above the noise and get attention for your video in a crowded online world. To that end, you should be pulling as many levers as you can to get people watching. Try to infect as many people as possible, so that your contagious content will take hold and start spreading from person to person.

Your promotional push should have three parts: paid promotion, social outreach, and earned media.

1. Paid Promotion

First, finalize your goals. Are you focusing on awareness, engagement, online action or offline action? Knowing that, you can determine your general strategy. What social channels (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc.) are currently your strongest channels? What's your target audience? What specific demographic groups and geographical areas are of interest? What channels are those groups using most? On what channels are people sharing content like this?

Given all that, what channel(s) will best meet your goals? If your resources are limited, it's usually better to focus on a single channel, rather than spreading yourself thin over multiple channels.

When you've answered those questions, you can set the launch date for your campaign and your promotion team can help you formulate a detailed plan and optimize media buys to best meet your goals.

As of this writing, in 2018, we often recommend the following strategy: post one copy of the video to your ideal social channel and

use paid promotion to drive people to that single copy. All other posts will point back to that single copy. That gives that single copy more significance to potential viewers when they can see the view count reaching high numbers. With all the views and shares pointing to one place, your video will start to spread on its own, multiplying the effect of the views from your paid promotion.

Also, as of this writing, we often recommend that the paid promotion be spread out over about 4 weeks. That way, people will have multiple exposures to the video over time and organic spread will have time to grow with the paid campaign.

Finalize Your Digital Assets

Next, you'll need to create the final assets for the campaign:

- the final cut of the video
- text for ads or promoted posts
- still images for your video and any promoted posts

One of the key images to select is a **thumbnail** – the still image that people will see before they click to play your video. A good thumbnail image that provokes curiosity can help get people clicking on your video and watching it. Make a choice. If you don't, the Facebook and YouTube algorithms will pick a random image that may be boring and hurt your video's chances of spreading.



Thumbnails for [19 Dope Ways to Lace Your Shoes](#) and [School Nurses are My Superheroes!](#)

There are many strategies for creating great thumbnails, including featuring human faces or putting in big, eye-catching text. Since the goal is to stand out, that also means being different from what everyone else is doing, so these strategies are ever-changing. It's almost always a good

choice to simply find the most visually intriguing moment in the video and set that as the thumbnail.

For the text and images, focus on getting people to click, to watch, to engage. Focus on your hook, your carnival barker's pitch, your version of: "[Watch a blender destroy an iPhone!](#)"

The first job of the text and images is to get people's attention, to get them to want to watch.

You should generate multiple options for text and still images for multiple posts and/or multiple ads. The campaign can test several of these early on, then focus on putting more money behind those that perform best.

Managing Your Campaign

If you're using an outside experts for promotion, you'll need to give them access to your social channels so that they can promote your posts. You can often give them limited access to do only promotion, or you can give them more complete access so that they can create the posts as well as focus your promotional budget on the best-performing posts.

Set a specific schedule for your posts. Many social platforms and social media management tools allow you to schedule in advance so that your content goes live exactly when you want it to. Your promotion team may need you to stick to that specific schedule so that they can plan what budget to put behind which posts.

Whether you schedule automatic posts in advance or post in real time, make sure to monitor your posts carefully. Major news events may mean you need to step in quickly and cancel or change a scheduled post if it would be inappropriate given the news of the day. You don't want a scheduled post about having fun in the rain going up on the day a hurricane hits. You also want to keep track of the kinds of comments you're getting and be ready to respond quickly if need be.

► Paid Promotion Planning Checklist

- Confirm your in-house social media lead who will work with your promotion team to oversee and implement this campaign.
 - Finalize the goals of your campaign:
 - awareness
 - engagement
 - online action
 - offline action
 - Formulate your general strategy:
 - What social channels (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc.) are currently your strongest channels?
 - What's your target audience? What specific demographic groups and geographical areas are of interest?
 - What channels are those groups using most?
 - On what channels are people sharing content like this?
 - Given all that, determine which channel(s) will best meet your goals. If your resources are limited, focus on a single channel.
-

2. Social Outreach

This is where you use good old fashioned word of mouth to draw attention to the video by tapping into your existing networks and communication channels.

By sharing the link to the video with your email lists and friends, with key influencers and groups that might share an interest in the content of the video, you help get the word out to as many people as possible to get the momentum going. And once people start watching, liking, and sharing, the algorithms on Facebook and other social channels will notice that people are enjoying your video and place it in more and more people's social feeds.

This outreach requires some effort on your part. Minimally, you should plan to share the video through all of your usual social channels, including web, email, Facebook and Twitter, etc. And you should encourage people you know to share it on *their* social channels. We also strongly recommend sending links to influencers and groups that might be interested, saying, “Hi – we thought you might enjoy this. Share it with your friends!”

The key questions are:

- What **social channels** would best help spread this video?
- What **groups** would enjoy and help spread this video?
- What **influencers** would enjoy and help spread this video?

Sharing the video with people and groups like this is different from asking them to spread the word about your organization. This is about sharing a fun, cool video you think they might enjoy – which also happens to spread the word about your nonprofit. That approach can open a lot of doors. Use simple, friendly language just as you would when sharing with your friends on Facebook: “I like this, and I thought you might, too.”

Pursuing every possible avenue here, however, can be a black hole that consumes all your time and resources, so aim for balance. Pursue the most promising channels and people. Before your launch, identify your best prospects and pre-draft emails and social media posts. Then when you go live, it should only take a couple hours to send and post them. We recommend you vary these and send them out in waves, perhaps once a week for 3 - 4 weeks. Like the paid promotion, it’s good to for people to see your messaging more than once.

As your campaign progresses, you can respond to your favorite comments, retweet your favorite tweets, and post updates like: “Our new video just passed 10,000 views! Thanks for helping spread the word!” or “We just got featured in *Healthy Kids Today!*” As you do this, don’t forget that it’s often a good idea to keep sharing the same video link, rather than posting multiple copies of the video. That helps keep everyone’s attention on one copy that keeps accumulating views, likes, comments, and shares. All these strategies help build momentum and get your video spreading to as many people as possible.

3. Earned Media

Your earned media push is simply using conventional PR methods such as press releases and feature pitches to get media coverage from online outlets, print media, and television. This may take more time and resources than you have available, or your specific video may not have the right hook for earned media. However, with the right video, there is the potential for a big boost in the size of the audience you reach if earned media kicks in.

Coca-Cola, for example, doesn't usually get covered in automotive blogs and magazines, but when we built [a Coke and Mentos-powered rocket car](#), that's just what happened. Blogs about alternative energy had fun covering it, then ABC's evening news jumped in, and People magazine did a full-page spread. So be aware that the right kind of viral video can create opportunities for coverage from blogs, newspapers, magazines, morning shows, late night shows, local programs, and even national TV news.

Even videos that are of interest primarily within a specific community can also get great earned media within that community. Days after [School Nurses are My Superheroes!](#) went online, *Healthy Kids Today* commented, "Great job! We would like to share this in our newsletter." And that got NASN and their message in front of another great audience.

Start by making a list of media outlets that might be interested. Think about not just who would be interested in your organization, but who would be interested in the hook of the video. Think broadly. For GirlTrek's [shoelace video](#), we looked for outlets interested in everything from women's health to Black history to fun fashion and shoes.

Who might be interested in your video?

- blogs and online media
- print media
- TV (morning shows, late night shows, local & national shows...)

Again, use the hook of your video as your lead to approach outlets that might not ordinarily cover your organization's efforts – or use it as a new angle to approach outlets that are already interested in your mission.

[8]

Releasing the Video

Here We Go!

Lock Down Your Content

As you approach your launch date, lock down the final cut of your video, the thumbnail image, all of the images and text for promoted posts or ads, any demographic or geographic targets, and the tags and keywords you'll attach to your posts.

If your campaign will be sending people to a landing page, make sure that page has been proofread, tested, and is up and running.

Lock Down Your Schedule

Have your social media calendar ready, identifying exactly what you'll be posting when, on which channels.

If you are using the strategy of posting one primary copy of the video and then sharing that link across various channels, remember that you're going to be active on launch day, posting the video, then embedding it on your website and sharing the link with your promotion team. And if you're posting multiple copies on multiple channels, you'll need to attend to all those copies.

Now is a good time to review Handling Positive Reactions 101 and Handling Negative Reactions 101, on pages 71 - 74.



The Coke Zero & Mentos Rocket Car

► Pre-Launch Checklist

- Final launch date is set.
 - Final assets are ready:
 - video
 - thumbnail image
 - video description
 - images and text for promoted posts and/or ads
 - demographic & geographic targets
 - tags/keywords
 - Posting schedule and posts for your top social channel(s) are ready:
 - Facebook
 - Twitter
 - Instagram
 - other top channel(s) for your organization
 - Landing page on your website (if needed) is up and running.
-

Launch!

If all your pre-launch work has been done right, launch day itself should be easy, but may still take time.

Post the video to your key channel(s) and update your website and/or landing page with an embedded copy of the video.

Share detailed link info with your team with quick reminders of suggested tweets or other posts they can use to easily share the video with their friends.

Monitor your web traffic and social channels closely for the first few days, and continue to keep careful watch on active posts for the first few weeks of any major campaign. Respond to comments and engage with your fans about the video. Watch for Internet trolls trying to cause trouble. For tips on all this, see *Handling Positive Reactions 101* and *Handling Negative Reactions 101* on pages 71 - 74.

If positive reactions are off the charts, make sure your site doesn't crash.

► Launch Checklist

- Post the video to your key channel(s).
 - Update your website and/or landing page with an embedded copy of the video.
 - Share detailed link info with your team with quick reminders of suggested tweets or other posts.
 - Watch reactions to encourage the positive with your likes and other responses, while monitoring for trolls.
 - Monitor web traffic, just in case your site crashes.
-

Post-Launch

Continue to monitor your scheduled posts and update them, especially with posts highlighting positive responses and milestones you've reached (e.g., "Our new video has 10,000 views!" "*Healthy Kids Today* just featured our video!"). Adjust the language of scheduled posts as appropriate, based on what's working and what's not.

Look at your basic results (views, engagement, reach) at least once a week to see if your strategy should be adjusted. You may, for example, want to narrow your demographic or geographic targets – or go wider – depending on how your audience is responding or how expensive they are to reach. You may even want to adjust your focus from one platform to another. If you've been focused on Facebook, but people on Instagram are going crazy for your video there, shift your budget and attention to Instagram.

Don't forget: if you've scheduled automatic posts in advance, be ready to cancel or adjust them if something happens in the news.

► Post- Launch Checklist

- Monitor scheduled posts and update as needed.
 - Look at your basic results (views, engagement, reach) at least once a week to see if your strategy should be adjusted.
 - Keep checking to see if scheduled automatic posts should be changed or canceled due to current events.
-

Handling Negative Reactions 101

No video will make everyone happy. Even if your video will only get a negative reaction from 1 in 10,000 people, once you start getting hundreds of thousands or millions of views, negative reactions can come with the territory.

This can happen with any campaign, but because you're reaching out to new audiences in new ways, it may be particularly likely to come up here.

Be Prepared

- Determine who will be monitoring your social media channels for comments, both good and bad. Don't let something go unnoticed. You want to identify a potential problem before it escalates.
- Make sure you know, before you go live, who needs to get involved if a situation escalates. The person monitoring your social channels should know who to contact and how, in case your PR, communications, or legal teams need to step in.
- How will you respond to trolls making inflammatory statements, critics saying your video is stupid, or someone using offensive language? What if a serious concern emerges and you need to take down the video? Have a plan in place.
- How will you keep all your staff in the loop about any situations that arise? You want to avoid having anyone stepping in on their own, trying to help, and ending up making things worse.

What To Do

Whatever the circumstances, step one is to take a deep breath. You want to help put out the flames, not feed them. So your responses should always be calm and carefully considered. No one wins a shouting match here.

Think of your social channel as your living room. What do you do if someone starts causing trouble at your party?

If a troll starts making irrelevant or inflammatory comments, often the best response is no response. Every response just brings attention to the problem. Don't feed the trolls.

If someone uses profanity or offensive language, don't let that slide. This is your living room and you set the tone. Offensive language may warrant deleting a comment and potentially blocking a person from your channel.

If someone raises a legitimate question or concern, however, don't delete it or block them just because you don't agree with what they've said.

Ideally, other people in your community will chime in and help defuse the situation more effectively than you can. If someone says, "This video is trivializing a serious topic!" the best response is someone else saying, "I disagree – yes, the video is lighthearted and fun, but it's not disrespecting the seriousness of the topic."

For any real issue that comes up, assess how serious it is.

- Is the community taking care of it all by themselves?
- Does this issue need to be resolved or does it just need to be acknowledged with an empathetic response?
- If it needs to be resolved, can it be resolved directly or should the conversation be private with the person raising the issue.
- Is this a true wildfire that requires an extreme reaction like taking the video down and apologizing?

If you do have to address an issue with a particular person, it's often best to have that conversation in private rather than in a public forum, so you can have a direct, personal conversation without fanning any flames in public. With many issues, drawing continued public attention in any way can inadvertently turn a small issue of concern to only a few people into a larger fire that will be harder to put out.

When you start that private conversation, whenever possible, thank the person for their thoughts. Thank them for caring enough to share those thoughts. Let them know you have heard them. Keep taking those deep breaths to avoid escalating the situation. State your opinions clearly

and calmly, and if a resolution is not possible, keep that disagreement respectful.

The best responses are personal, calm, and authentic. Just like a tough situation with a friend in your living room, try to say: we like and respect you; here is how our opinions differ; and we hope we can talk further and still maintain our friendship.

Finally, if a true wildfire does break out, it's rare, but yes, you may want to take the video down and apologize. Hopefully, your team would have noticed anything truly offensive or problematic in the video before launch, but even global brands can make mistakes. Just look at the reaction to Pepsi's 2017 [tone-deaf commercial](#) featuring Kendall Jenner walking into a crowd of protesters and seemingly solving all their problems by sharing a can of soda with a policeman. The ad truly trivialized important issues and the reactions online were swift and overwhelmingly negative. Pepsi was right to take it down and apologize.

That's rare, but be ready for anything from a small criticism to a big problem. Throughout it all, stay calm, don't overreact, and be authentic. Stay on message, but allow your brand to be human.

Handling Positive Reactions 101

From comments to web traffic and earned media coverage, you want to be ready for the positive reactions that a viral video can bring.

Be Active on Your Social Channels

Who will be watching your social channels regularly? Make sure someone will be attentive and ready to take advantage of positive reactions.

Particularly in the early days of a campaign, check the comments frequently and gently encourage the positive. Click "like" or "love" on a great comment. Thank people for sharing the video. Reply to commenters who write nice thoughts.

Don't overwhelm the conversation, just help it along. The best way to encourage people to like, share, and comment is to be active and responsive.

Be Ready If Traffic Explodes

Who is monitoring your web traffic? If the reaction to your video is massive, it could crash your site. Your video will most likely be hosted directly by a social channel like Facebook or YouTube, so if it gets a million views, those channels will likely shoulder the burden of most of the traffic. But if your video turns into the next [Ice Bucket Challenge](#), don't let your site crash just when things are going so well.

What If Something Great Happens?

Whoever is monitoring your social channels should know who to contact and how, in case your video gets shared by a celebrity or an inquiry comes in for an interview or press appearance.

What if Ellen DeGeneres or Jimmy Kimmel shares your video? You may want to spread the word about that or start monitoring additional online conversations.

What if a blogger, local media, or national media calls? They may ask for anything from a personal appearance to permission to show your video to their viewers. Who will handle the inquiries, interviews, or appearances? Different videos have different potential for earned media, but be ready if that local morning show calls or that national talk show wants to do a spot about you and your video.

All these efforts can help spread your message further and maximize the impact of your campaign.

Gathering the Results

Your promotion team should provide you with a report on the effectiveness of your campaign. The various metrics and the ways they are gathered are constantly changing, as are the industry standards for “good results.” Here’s what to look for:

- **Awareness:** which measures all the eyeballs that caught a glimpse of your campaign. While not the most important metric for a viral campaign (awareness is the weakest form of engagement), it’s still good to have people becoming aware of you, even in passing.
- **Views:** from partial to complete. Look at how many people watched (both paid and earned views), as well as how well the video held their attention.
- **Engagement:** likes/reactions, comments, and shares. In particular, you want to see people sharing this video – that’s the viral element you’re looking for, where paid views lead to sharing and earned views. Take a look at the engagement rate:
$$\text{(reactions + comments + shares) / views}$$

That’s measuring what percentage of the people who watch your video like it enough to click on the like button, write a comment, or share it with their friends.
- **Your following:** Are you gaining fans, followers, or subscribers?
- **Web traffic:** Is there any change in your web traffic? Are people visiting your landing page for the campaign?
- **Call to Action engagement:** Are people taking that next step and doing what your call to action asks? Are they sharing, clicking, signing up, taking the pledge, calling the hotline...?

On all these metrics, how does your new video compare to your previous videos? How does the engagement rate compare to other videos with similar view counts?

Some nonprofits have a devoted fan base that is highly engaged with their regular online content, so their average engagement rate may be relatively high, because their core audience is liking, commenting on, and sharing that content.

But when you expand beyond your core fan base to a larger audience, your engagement rate may not always stay as high. That's why you want to compare the engagement rate of your video to others that have a similar view counts, to get a more apples-to-apples comparison. Look around to see how your video compares to similar videos with similar view counts from other organizations.

Few campaigns will score well on every metric. The key goal for a viral campaign is to see high engagement, particularly sharing, among a larger audience. If you can get people sitting up and sharing your video with their friends, you've gotten them to actively participate in a valuable way. The more you can build on that active, positive emotional connection, the better.



[*School Nurses are My Superheroes!*](#)

[10]

Next Steps

Where Do You Go From Here?

Think about how you can expand the people you're reaching and deepen your connection with those you've already reached.

- What aspects of your campaign were most successful? Build on those! How can you do more of that in the future?
- How can you take this overall approach into your regular social media efforts?
 - What content will appeal to your fans, even if it isn't all about you?
 - How can all your posts follow the Four Rules of contagious content?
 - ◊ Be True
 - ◊ Don't Waste My Time?
 - ◊ Be Unforgettable (You can't do this every day, but keep aiming for it!)
 - ◊ Ultimately, It's All About Humanity
- How can you repost this video in the future for added benefit? Is it evergreen or are there specific times of year you should think about posting it again?
- If your campaign was successful, are there other viral campaigns you can follow up with to build on your momentum from this one? Or is there a completely different angle it suggests?
 - A sequel?
 - A variation?
 - A different side to your organization or mission?

Your campaign may have gotten a lot of attention for your organization or expanded your fan base. How can you build on that? Look for ways

to deepen engagement with your audience and move them from being viewers to being active participants.

Remember, the goal of viral video is to create an emotional connection. More than telling people about the features and benefits of your programs, that's the bigger goal of any advertising campaign.

We hope that viral videos and the principles behind them will give you new ways to connect with people, grow your organization, and fulfill your mission.



[The Extreme Diet Coke & Mentos Experiments](#)

Notes

For a deeper look at the Four Rules and why they work, along with lots more examples, see our book [The Viral Video Manifesto](#).

For more about the effects of television on the brain and about what gets people sharing, we recommend starting with:

- Robert Kubey and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, “Television Addiction Is No Mere Metaphor,” *Scientific American*, February 2002
- Jonah Berger and Katherine L. Milkman, “What Makes Online Content Viral?” *Journal of Marketing Research*, vol. 49, no. 2, April 2012, pp. 192 - 205

And we’d love to hear from you with your questions or comments, to expand the conversation about how viral video can help nonprofits spread messages for social good. Email brent@eepybird.com or visit EepybirdStudios.com for more information. Thanks!

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Stephen Voltz and **Fritz Grobe** are the co-founders of Eepybird Studios, which has been a pioneer in creating viral videos for global brands since 2006.

From their classic video featuring the explosive combination of Coke and Mentos, which *Advertising Age* called “the most important commercial content of the year,” to their viral campaigns for brands like Disney, OfficeMax, Coca-Cola, and McDonald’s, Eepybird Studios’ videos have been seen over 150 million times. They have received two Emmy nominations and four Webby Awards for their viral video work, and Eepybird was voted “Game Changer of the Decade” on GoViral.com.

Stephen and Fritz have appeared on *The Late Show with David Letterman*, *Ellen*, *The Today Show*, *Mythbusters*, and more. They have performed in Las Vegas, New York, Paris, London, Tokyo, and Istanbul.

They come by their rigorously analytical approach to Internet video honestly. Stephen has a law degree from NYU and practiced as a trial lawyer in Boston for 20 years. Fritz studied mathematics at Yale University until he dropped out of school to become an award-winning circus performer.

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