



The filming brought new levels of staff engagement

A growing number of coach operators are producing video content as part of their online and social media marketing strategies. Stuart Render headed to Warwickshire to see how one operator is embracing the opportunity, not only to boost website hits, but also as a way of engaging with both customers and staff

Producing video content isn't a new idea. Back in the '80s and '90s, many businesses commissioned videos that showcased their products and services. In those pre-internet days, the opportunities to reach a sizeable audience were limited. The often expensively-produced videos would be used as part of an exhibition stand or at an open day. Far too often, the lengthy production process and the lovingly crafted footage would be reduced to the size of a portable TV placed on a table. It wasn't great, and let's not talk about the licence-free 'library' music that could often bore the viewer at 20 paces!

Today, with the advent of smart phones and tablets, and with every manner of amusing cat, dog and baby appearing on video-sharing websites such as YouTube, everyone is a potential film-maker. The results, as you might expect, range from the excellent and memorable through to the truly awful. It is, of course, a sign of the times that many of those videos that fall into the 'truly awful' category are those that generate most website hits.

However, regardless of the quality, video content – whether it's embedded on a website or Facebook page, or linked to on Twitter – is playing an increasingly important role in getting website hits and generating engagement on social media.

In the last couple of years, a number of coach operators, notably Grey's of Ely, Belle Vue Manchester and Runcorn-based Anthony's Travel, have embraced the opportunities that video-sharing

websites can offer and have taken the humour-led approach to video production. Over in Warwickshire, Johnsons Coach Travel has produced two videos focusing on the coach tour and private hire markets. The videos saw Johnsons shortlisted in the Coach Tourism Innovation category at this year's National Coach Tourism Awards.

"We'd come to the conclusion that video was the right route for us," says Kate Kinson, Johnsons' Marketing Manager. "However, from the very start it was important that we were clear why we were doing it. We also needed to be very clear about the outcomes."

Working together with Marketing Assistant Sarah Johnson, Kate identified three key aims: to enhance the company's credibility as a quality coach hire operator and a quality coach holiday provider; to build the Johnsons brand in the local, trade and business markets; and to show the quality and large range of products available to hire, as well as the quality of the holiday product.

"Our research indicated a number of areas where we felt videos would increase business for us," says Kate. "We are good at encouraging repeat business, but we are also concerned about how we retain our existing clients. We felt that showing them the quality of the product was a good way to reassure them they're booking their coach hire or holiday with the best company."

Kate highlights the challenges of working without a huge marketing budget.

"It can be difficult making potential customers aware of what we offer," she says. "We decided that if we had a great campaign to use

to promote what we have then it would be easier to make potential clients aware of Johnsons in the first place. We have a similar challenge with brochure requests. Just how do we convert those requests into bookings? We felt that a video would act as a conversion tool to emphasise the quality that our clients would receive."

Kate explains that although Johnsons is actively involved in social media activity, on Facebook and Twitter, promoting coach hire and holidays can be challenging.

"We were already using Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) to ensure our website was appearing high up in the website search listings," she explains. "But it was becoming more noticeable how effective video content is for getting your pages and your tweets noticed. Our challenge was to produce something that, in addressing all the aims and objectives, offered a fun but informative message. We wanted to have something that would give us a really good chance to shout about what we're good at."

Johnsons realised that to try and achieve everything that was required, it would be necessary to have two videos.

"Our coach holidays and coach hire products are two different areas of our business," says Kate. "Producing one video would have saved us



Move over Steven Spielberg! Video project team Sarah Johnson, John Johnson and Kate Kinson

some money, but we felt it was important to have two films, with each clearly focusing on what we wanted to achieve."

But there was another element that Kate and the team wanted to explore.

"With a project such as this there's always the danger that we just get on with it, bringing in drivers as they're needed, but not really involving many other people in the company," she says. "Our early idea for the coach hire video was to show that when you hire a coach, you're not just getting a vehicle and driver, you're getting the entire Johnsons team. We took the decision that we would really involve everyone, either through appearing in the video itself, or because we would give them a full briefing about what was happening."

With the details of the campaign coming together it was time for Kate and Sarah to take it to the boss, Commercial Director John Johnson. We know that we're the best in the area, both for coach holidays and coach hire," he says. "But we're facing stiff competition in some areas, especially from industry brokers. Although video sounds like a nice thing to have, it was vitally important that we knew what we were aiming to achieve. Kate and Sarah put together an excellent marketing plan and convinced me that we needed to do it."

Johnsons is very much a family-owned and family-run business, and Sarah, who is John's daughter, was very aware of the challenges that this brings.

"Kate and I knew what we wanted to do, but I also knew that my father had very clear ideas about some of the elements of the project," she says. "In some companies this might prove problematical, but for us, we all worked together as a team. I feel that it worked because we'd taken time to really drill down to why we were doing it."

One of John's early ideas for the coach holiday video – inspired by the famous line in the Monty Python film *Life of Brian*: What have the Romans ever done for us' – was to call the video 'What did Johnsons ever do for us?' Over the planning period this became 'You Never Told

me', a light-hearted story of a husband and wife going on a coach tour. The wife isn't looking forward to the trip, but then, from the door-to-door pick-up, right through to the end, she expresses delight at the service she's receiving.

The coach hire video, which runs for three and a half minutes, was given the title 'Look What You Get'. It uses clever editing to feature a customer being met by the engineering, cleaning, administration, booking, driver and courier teams all getting off the coach when the potential hirer comes to see it. The message is clear: When your hire a coach from Johnsons you get much more than just the vehicle and driver.

The planning process

Sarah Johnson was given the task of project managing the two videos. Planning started in July 2014," she says. "There's a video production company based locally that happened to call at the right time. We sat down with the director, Jonathan Trace, and briefed him on what we wanted."

"To reduce the disruption to the day-to-day business activities, and because we wanted to involve as many of the 250-strong Johnsons



Sunshine on location at West Midland Safari Park's Spring Grove House. Note Johnson's 'SeeMore' loyalty club mascot 'perched' on the camera

team as possible, as well as keeping costs down, we wanted to see if we could complete each video in a single day.

"Our biggest challenge was identifying the best time to do the filming. It needed to be the shoulder season, when we had a coach and driver available, and when fewer of our staff were on holiday. But we couldn't leave it too late otherwise we would have lost the late summer light. After much deliberation we chose a date in early September." Jonathan Trace was given a full briefing and produced two scripts. "There was some tweaking required, but in general Jonathan had done a fantastic job of writing the scripts and we were very pleased with the results," says Sarah.

For the coach holiday video the script called for two actors to play the husband and wife. It also called for a group of appropriately aged holidaymakers. We needed the husband and wife to look the part," says

'You Never Told Me'

The five-minute video shows a couple getting ready to go on a Johnsons holiday for the first time. The husband knows what to expect, but the doubting wife is pleasantly surprised at the level of service and quality they receive. The video can be seen at www.you-never-told-me.co.uk

'Look What You Get'

The three-and-a-half-minute video shows a client contacting Johnsons for coach hire and discovering the level of service and attention he would receive. The video can be seen at www.look-what-you-get.co.uk

> The Johnsons YouTube channel can be seen at www.youtube.com/user/johnsoncoaches

Sarah, “so we turned to a professional casting agency who found us our two lead characters ‘George’ and ‘Rosemary’. Our ‘passengers’ were real customers. While we could have chosen real holiday customers, we decided to choose from our private group clients. With a tight filming schedule, we wanted the passengers to be chatting away. Because they already knew each other, they were chatty from the start. It certainly helped to make the scenes look more natural!”

The coach holiday video, which runs for five minutes, tells the story of George and Rosemary’s short break. With just a day to complete the filming, Sarah had arranged for Spring Grove House at West Midland Safari Park and Brockencote Hall Hotel near Kidderminster to be the main locations.

“Time restraints meant we couldn’t use our usual tour hotels,” says Sarah. “But with the excellent help from West Midlands Safari Park and Brockencote Hall Hotel, and with good weather, we were able to complete the filming on schedule.”

Costs and challenges

The total cost of the project, including production of the two videos (filming and post-production) and the fees for the two actors, came in

3,000 views,” she says. “But what has been equally important is the fact that the whole company got involved. It was a chance to show every team how they play a part in the coach hire business

“The coach holiday video, while not involving the majority of the staff, highlights just what we as a company are delivering, and the role that everyone plays in delivering a high quality service day in and day out. By promoting the video online and offline our staff are proud of their participation. We always hoped that engaging staff in the process would be beneficial, but I’m delighted to say that it has helped unite the workforce better than expected.”

Johnsons set up two new web domains for the videos that helped the company promote the URL web addresses through social media posts, e-shots, direct mail and a promotion in Christmas cards. Stills photos taken during the filming days were used in a 2015 calendar and on mousemats sent out to new coach hire customers encouraging them to click on the video.

Looking ahead

Kate Kinson is clear about the role of video in the future. “Video is moving from being a ‘nice to have’ to being a ‘must have,’” she says.



‘George’ and ‘Rosemary’ were played by professional actors



Filming on board a coach presents its own challenges. ‘George’ does his bit



Engineering staff were given an opportunity to feature in the private hire video

around £4,000. The videos have a life-span of around two years.

“Where we could, we tried to ensure that we didn’t film anything that might date the content,” says Kate Kinson. “But our messages will need refreshing, and the locations and coaches might change.”

Sarah Johnson highlights some of the challenges the team faced during the process.

“In the days leading up to the filming, I had circulated a full briefing document to all Johnsons staff,” she says. “We tried to involve as many of the staff as possible, especially in the coach hire video. It was important to engage them in the process, explaining what we were doing and why. It helps to motivate and enthuse them. It’s also something very different from the normal day-to-day activity. Many of the staff found the whole thing very amusing.

“However, even though we’d issued the drivers with a full briefing, and gone the extra mile to try and ensure that everyone knew what was happening, and why, somewhere down the line communication failed and some turned up not knowing what was really going on. We also realised too late that our lead actress, ‘Rosemary’, came back off holiday wearing the same clothes she went away in!”

Johnsons factored the costs of keeping a coach off the road for two days into the planning process.

“You really do need buy-in across the business to achieve success with this type of major project,” says Sarah. “In the weeks leading up to filming I became aware of a private hire booking coming in for one of the filming dates. I had to talk with my colleagues to remind them that, on this occasion, we needed the vehicle!”

Outcomes and achievements

Kate Kinson is clear about one of the major benefits of running the initiative.

“Across YouTube and Facebook, the coach holiday video has received around 2,500 views, while the coach hire video has received around

“While it undoubtedly has a role to play in helping us generate online content, its role in helping us engage with our own staff is of significant importance. Since we produced the two main videos we’ve started to take our own in-house films using our own cameras, one showing our Christmas departures, another using aerial shots to show how we helped a radio station transport people to an event. We’re now sharing content across the various digital platforms, including our YouTube channel.

John Johnson says: “Our business is 24/7. There’s so much going on and we can all be sucked into the day-to-day challenges and problems we face. That means we end up focusing on those problems, but it’s important to capture the good things. It’s all about recognising what we achieve each and every day. It’s all about celebrating our success.

“Having said that, it can be harder for staff to buy into that success. It’s not so easy to get staff looking at the bigger picture. Kate, Sarah and the whole team have done a first class job with these two videos. Completing the whole shoot for each video in just two days was remarkable.

“I feel that the whole business has been enthused as a result and we’ve learnt more about the way in which video content can help us engage with customers, staff and suppliers. But what remains important, and it’s my message to other coach operators thinking of doing something similar – it’s vitally important that you know why you’re doing it, and what it’s going to give you.”

COACH MONTHLY SAYS

Johnsons’ foray into video production has produced two excellent films. The coach holiday video in particular combines humour with a strong message about the benefits of coach touring. Involving the entire staff has also brought dividends. It is a route to market that other coach tour operators may wish to investigate further.