

## cover story branded documentaries



## Brands set sights on big screen ambitions

Psst! Wanna be in the movies? A growing number of consumer businesses are getting involved in a new wave of documentary-style films to communicate their values and engage customers. **By Louise Jack**

With so many marketing messages competing for attention, brands are looking for ways to involve themselves in content that goes beyond simply advertising. Product placement, programme sponsorship and branded entertainment are just some of the methods companies have been attempting to achieve this.

The newest trend is businesses using serious documentaries to help them form a more meaningful connection with their target audiences. Brands and companies are becoming the new commissioning editors – partnering with directors and producers and forging new business models for funding, distribution, outreach and participation.

In the past few months, The Co-operative has backed Burma VJ, a cinema-released documentary following the efforts of independent video journalists to expose the truth behind the 2007 uprising. Waitrose has funded distribution and marketing for *The End of the Line*, a feature-length film about the threat to the world's oceans posed by over-fishing, and Coca-Cola-owned energy drink Relentless has released *Powers of Three*, a surfing documentary.

Other brands have also made documentary-style content, which is more product-led than these previous examples. Kimberly-Clark's Kleenex tissue released a film last year featuring Olympic athletes and hopefuls sharing emotional stories in *Let It Out: The Movie*. It was tied in with the brand's *Let It Out* marketing campaign to coincide with the Beijing Olympic Games. Honda has more recently made a series of short films for a corporate brand campaign called *Dream the Impossible*, featured on a dedicated website. There are a growing number of similar examples.

The developing trend for this new wave of brand-supported documentaries is gathering such momentum that a panel is set to discuss the subject at the forthcoming Edinburgh TV Festival in a slot entitled *New Best Friends: Brands and Documentaries*.

The chair of the session and chief executive of Channel 4's Britdoc Foundation, Jess Search, believes the trend is driven by a combination of factors. One element is the disruption of the financial structure of television by the explosion in digital media, meaning production partners are needed in a way they were not before.

Another, Search suggests, is that with so many marketing messages out there, companies are keen to communicate with audiences in a way that offers real engagement and a connection to their messages. "Documentaries can be authentic – something brands are eternally seeking to be when they communicate their values," she adds.

Search explains that unlike past times when

## CASE STUDY Post-production business model: Waitrose

Waitrose's backing of *The End of the Line*, a feature-length film about the threat posed to the world's oceans by over-fishing, is an example of a brand getting involved with a documentary solely post-production.

The supermarket had no editorial control over or input to the film, which was released in cinemas earlier this year. The company got on board after being invited to a private screening of the finished film. Waitrose senior buyer Quentin Clark explains: "Immediately, we knew the values of the film were ones we could share and the film's message is the one we were wanting to put across."

Waitrose financially supported the distribution of the film with distribution specialists Dogwoof. It was promoted in-store and beyond in a variety of ways. The supermarket was motivated by YouGov data that indicated 78% of respondents didn't try to buy fish from sustainable sources; yet after being given a few key facts, 70% said they were more likely to make sustainable choices.

This research insight formed the basis of Waitrose's media activity, which urged people to watch the film and presented a call to action for consumers to ask where their fish comes from.

Waitrose highlighted the partnership in-store by placing posters and leaflets around its shops. Its fish specialists also encouraged customers to see the film. Waitrose customers were given a sneak preview of the film and offered discounts on both fish and cinema tickets.

There was an extensive internal education programme so all Waitrose staff understood the project. Commentators, environmental organisations and politicians were invited to preview screenings. Regional cinemas held Q&A sessions during the release with the documentary makers and Waitrose staff. At general screenings, Waitrose fish experts were on hand in cinema lobbies to discuss any issues raised in the film.

Online, Waitrose focused on promoting debate among consumers. A microsite was

developed to act as a virtual home for the sustainable fish campaign; influential bloggers and community websites were encouraged to discuss and spread the message, while digital content was also placed on YouTube.

The idea of driving debate was crucial for Waitrose. Clarke reveals: "The content and the tone of the film is challenging and it opens up the debate. When you open a debate, you open a platform. It gave us a way to talk to our customers and we know they are interested in this. We are 4% of the grocery market but we are 10% of the multiples' fish market – that is no accident, we know we are a destination for fish."

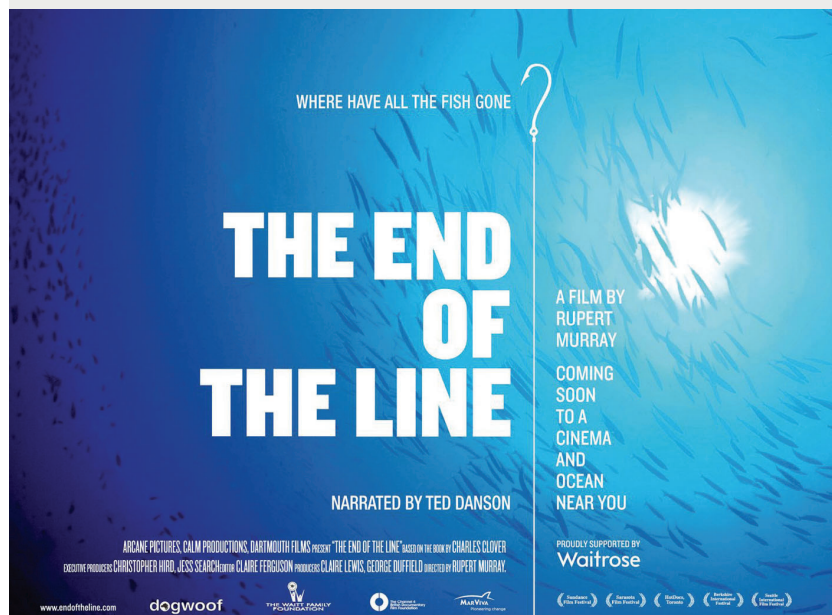
Of course, online debate can often include some less-than-convenient contributions from participants. As one blogger quipped: "Waitrose supporting this film is a bit like a butcher sponsoring the film *Babe*."

Clark is not afraid of such criticism and unashamed of any commercial benefit Waitrose might reap. Unsurprisingly, it is one of the objectives that lies behind the initiative. He says: "We do want to sell fish, but not at any cost."

Clark continues: "We want consumers to ask where is my fish coming from? If people find the answer is not from sustainable sources, then it creates a point of difference for us. We are part of a solution. Quality and sustainability – that is our position."

Waitrose claims to be very satisfied with the results of its first foray into documentary content. Clark says its fish sales grew 15% in the four weeks following the film's launch in June, compared to the same period in 2008, with frozen fish sales up 21%.

So as well as spreading a message that has some altruistic motives, the return on investment in this project can also be seen in terms of hard financial gain. Clark is unequivocal about the possibility of other documentary projects. "We'd definitely do it again," he says.



**Just the beginning:**  
The success of *The End of the Line* pleases backer Waitrose





**London life:**  
Fictional tale Somers Town had the backing of Eurostar

▷ TV broadcasters or film studios controlled all access to the world of documentaries, this barrier to brands taking control no longer exists. While TV stations might still want companies on board to provide funding, the brands no longer need broadcasters. "Anyone can become a content producer and distributor; they don't need those gatekeepers."

Not only do brands not need broadcasters as "gatekeepers", but by avoiding television they can side-step the complex regulatory landscape of broadcasting, which prohibits how involved companies can become in editorial content.

In terms of distribution routes, Search says that although television and cinema are still important for documentaries because they convey an assurance of quality and trigger press coverage, that is changing. She says it's easier for films to garner attention online. Short films flourish in a digital environment, she suggests, due to their ability to be passed easily from user to user.

There are a number of ways brands can get involved with the documentary trend but three main types of business model seem to be developing. One is to back a film that has already been made and become a distribution partner, as Waitrose did with *The End of the Line*, a film about the consequences of over-fishing (see box, page 15).

Waitrose senior buyer Quentin Clark, who was responsible for the tie-up, says: "We had no input to the film. We committed ourselves to put our resources into promoting it and we got a credit at the end of the film."

Waitrose leveraged its involvement in a plethora of ways and though there was a very tangible 15% increase in fish sales in the four weeks following the film's launch, Clark appears to be completely genuine in his concern for the issues raised in the film. He says: "I know it sounds trite but we wanted to help drive attitudinal change. If Waitrose is part of a solution then that's where we get the return on investment; but in a way, that's a spin-off."

The second model is for a brand to get involved from the start and effectively produce the content. Coca-Cola-owned energy drink Relentless did this with the surfing documentary *Powers of Three*. The brand had total editorial control of the content (see box, above right).

Comparing these first two methods, Search says: "If brands get involved when a film is finished, they know what they are getting so to some extent, there is less risk."

"As anyone in films will tell you, the earlier you get involved with a film, the greater the risk

## CASE STUDY Editorial control business model: Relentless

Relentless, the Coca-Cola-owned energy drink brand, had full editorial control over its involvement with surfing documentary *Powers of Three*. The 34-minute film is the story of three friends surfing in the depths of winter in Ireland and was released earlier this year.

Having total influence over the project was considered vital by the brand. Relentless' senior brand manager Steven Ruhl explains: "Retaining creative control of the project has paid real dividends, allowing Relentless to clearly communicate what it stands for as a brand and differentiate itself."

If Coca-Cola had any fears about getting involved in a project so far from its core business, it can only have helped that the documentary was written and directed by someone who knew the brand intimately. This was Ross Cairns, creative director at Erasmus, the agency that helped create Relentless for Coca-Cola and retains a stake in the brand. Cairns says: "I was not about to make a bad film for the brand."

But while he might have known the brand well, Cairns says the film itself tries to offer something unexpected. He claims: "It is not the expected way for an energy drinks brand to communicate a surfing story. It was a bit of an experiment to see how it worked for the brand and it massively exceeded everybody's expectations."

Cairns claims what drove *Power of Three's* success was not the end execution but the story that underpinned it. He expands: "Community building is such a massive part of what marketing is going to be about in the future; really, it's what successful marketing has always been about."

"Successful brands are built through communities, so if you're going to tap into that then you better be bringing something of value and authenticity to them."

Relentless initially brought the film to its target communities through a media partnership with Britain's high-profile surfing magazine, *Carve*. It was distributed on DVD with the title's May issue. Well received by this core community, it spread from there largely by word of mouth.

Cairns says: "We very much recognised with digital that it's no longer about having our own destination – although we do, because its important you have a place that acts as a kind of online cathedral to what the

brand stands for – but really it is about fragmenting and making sure you'll be all over the internet."

To that end, Relentless formed a partnership with Mpora, an online action sports community. This helped the brand trailer *Powers of Three* for several weeks before the cover disc went out with *Carve*. Cairns says there were several million views at this stage, which created a bit of anticipation to the main content. Cairns likens this activity "in a relative scale kind of way" to the way major film studios build excitement prior to the release of a film.

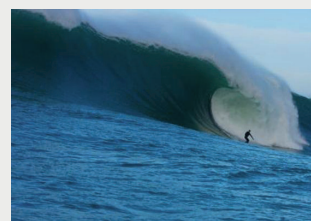
A dose of credibility for the project was also received when Kelly Slater, the nine-time Association of Surfing Professionals world champion, ended up referencing the film on his Twitter feed.

Cairns says that in terms of the money spent on the project, it still gets a "bigger bang for your buck" than more traditional marketing approaches. He summarises: "Branded content is not a cheap option if you're going to do it properly; but if you do it properly, and spend properly, you can expect some excellent results."

Although coy about sharing actual figures, Relentless' Ruhl claims: "*Powers of Three* has been a great success for Relentless, helping not only to drive general awareness levels, but also other key brand perception metrics to a level comparable to, or better than, the market-leading competitors within the energy drinks sectors."

He says that taking a multimedia approach with the *Carve* tie-up, a showcase on the Extreme TV channel and online seeding has "driven reach and interaction levels comparable to a large television campaign".

But despite the lack of a revealed return on investment, the biggest sign that the experimental project has been judged a success by all involved is that a larger, more ambitious film is already in production.



**Crest of a wave:**  
Relentless has full control over *Powers of Three*

because you don't know how it will unfold," she notes. "But potentially there are greater rewards; brands are effectively the producer and have total control."

Ross Cairns, the creative director from Erasmus – the agency that helped create Relentless and which retains a stake in the brand – wrote and directed *Powers of Three*. He says: "There are two ways to approach branded content – you can put the brand in it or you can let the brand surround it. We take the latter view, rather than corrupting the content; others may take a different view."

Cairns says getting involved in



## CASE STUDY

**Mixed business model:  
The Co-operative**

The Co-operative has been involving itself in documentaries for years on every conceivable level. Marketing director Patrick Allen says: "Our involvement in film goes much deeper than a product placement promotional tool. That is not what this is about."

"We don't have a CSR department; it is a philosophy that runs throughout the business. We are not using film to convey a message but to actually get people to do something; it's a call to action."

The company's most recent foray into documentaries is its backing of Burma VJ, a film showcasing footage by independent journalists who risked their lives to document the Myanmar uprising, led by Buddhist monks, in 2007.

Allen says: "It's a very powerful piece of film that you can't help be motivated by. Our involvement in it is about mobilising people and getting to the core of our social goals agenda."

He explains that as well as sponsoring the film's release, his team put together an integrated campaign online and across social media, which attracted the attention of celebrities Richard Gere, Yoko Ono and Stephen Fry, whose word of mouth helped build momentum very quickly.

Allen claims that while his involvement with the documentary was purely for the brand's social agenda, one unanticipated benefit was greater audience interest in the Co-op brand and its other works.

He says people emerged from screenings of the film wanting to know more about The Co-operative, rather than solely Burma. He enthuses: "By proxy, that helps a number of causes, not just Burma, so it works for us in a way that promotes our whole social goals agenda, not just this one campaign. That was quite surprising."

In terms of business models, The Co-operative is involved in documentaries on several levels. This ranges from funding distribution and sponsoring screenings, as with Burma VJ, to commissioning its own films such as *The Vanishing of the Bees*, which is released this autumn and is about the declining bee population. This is part of the company's overarching Plan Bee, which aims to address the plight of the honeybee.

The company is also involved in the Tipping Point Film Fund, a not-for-profit organisation that funds documentaries. And it is heavily committed to young film-makers, showcasing



the work of under-19s in The Co-operative Young Film Makers Festival and backing the British Youth Film Academy.

Clearly at the forefront of the trend of brands and documentaries, Allen agrees that perhaps the company does not "shout about" its activities enough.

He concedes: "That is something that has been symptomatic of the whole group for a number of years. If I had a criticism of us in the past years, we've not been good at integrating our social goals messages with our retail outlets, but we're getting a lot better at that."

He continues: "The real power in all this is the critical mass we now have as a business. When you are a £14bn organisation with 128,000 employees across a diversity of businesses, people start listening at that point."

Allen says that by "turning up the volume" in its use of social media, The Co-operative will aim to become far more visible in its future film making and producing efforts.

Although The Co-operative has a fundamentally different business model from many others getting involved with documentaries – social goals policies mandated by its members and no shareholders who might scupper expensive initiatives – Allen concedes the business is financially aware. Its film activity is not purely altruistic.

He says: "It does have a commercial benefit too. We stock the right range of Fairtrade products and sustainable fish; we know that's what our customers want."

He hopes that the commercial and social effects of the documentaries will continue to build The Co-Operative brand and promote its causes. If the strategy ends up pushing sales in the group's high-street outlets too, it's fair to say Allen will be counting it as a triple win.

**The co-operative  
good for everyone**

The **co-operative** presents the award-winning film *Burma VJ*, the story of the brave new breed of young video journalists (VJs) who risked their lives to tell the story of the 2007 Saffron Revolution in Burma, a nation characterised by fear and poverty, despite its wealth of natural resources.

Help us **free the Burma VJ political prisoners** by signing and returning the petition or texting "FREE THE VJs" to 87103. To find out more visit [www.burmaymovie.com](http://www.burmaymovie.com)

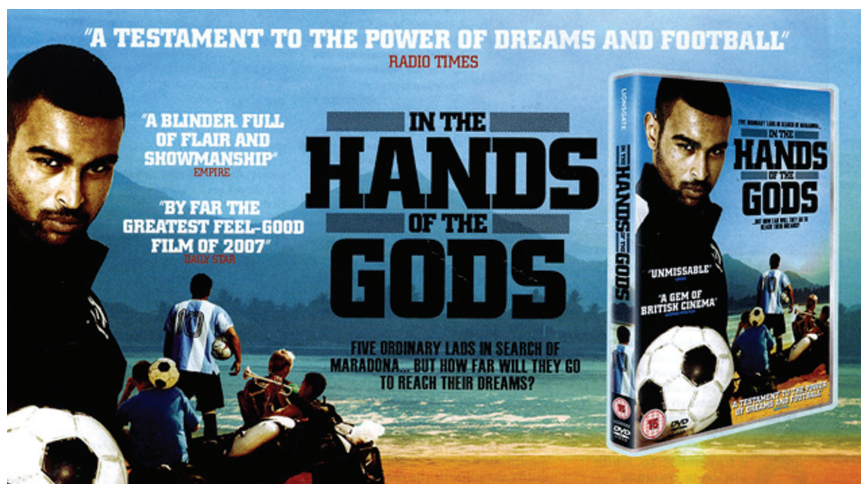


**In with a shout:** The Co-operative is aiming to be more visible in its future film-making efforts



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**Own goal:**  
Nike-backed  
In the Hands  
of Gods did  
not set box  
offices alight



▷ documentaries is not for every business. He says that it only counts where a brand has authenticity in a particular area or the message of the film fits the corporate philosophy. He adds that if brands are contributing to creating the content "you really have to have something interesting to say".

The third model involves a brand putting money into a production but remaining at arm's length from the editorial. Search says: "I think this is going to be a really interesting area of growth."

She points to the example of Eurostar's backing of Shane Meadows' film *Somers Town*, which although not a documentary is an example of this kind of funding. Search says: "It's more risky for brands but it is where the really interesting territory lies. If you want to communicate authentic messages, you have to let the film maker do his job independently of the brand because that's when you get the most potent results."

Search points out that charity WWF put money into producing the over-fishing documentary *The End of the Line*, but that the message remains the film-maker's. "I think that's going to be the step for brands – when they can say we didn't influence that piece of work, it is a film-maker's piece of creativity and we are proud to be stand behind it and be associated with its messages."

The Co-operative has been involved with documentaries for many years on numerous levels, including funding distribution, sponsoring screenings, commissioning work and encouraging and financing young film makers (see box, page 17). The Co-operative's marketing director, Patrick Allen, says the company uses film not just to convey its messages but as a "call to action" for causes it believes in, as part of the brand's social goals agenda.

So far, so good. But what about potential pitfalls? As Nike found to its cost, being associated with films remains a risk. The sportswear company backed the football documentary *In the Hands of the Gods*, which opened in cinemas but the film did not appear to set box offices alight.

Search acknowledges: "Welcome to the film business! The risks and rewards are exaggerated and you need expertise to navigate it, which brands won't have in-house."

Search also flags up a danger if brands – anxious about investing so heavily in documentaries – try to control the creative process too tightly. This can kill the creativity of the project. The most successful of these projects appear to rely on the brand having trust in the project; not only does the film-maker have full

rein but the brand receives maximum credibility.

Some in the business have other reservations about producing these new-wave documentaries; they wonder if real-life content sits comfortably with corporate funding. Twofour Broadcast managing director Melanie Leach says: "We make a lot of advertiser-funded programming but not in the documentary space, that tends to be the most problematic."

Twofour is responsible for *Big Chef Takes On Little Chef*, a series that followed Heston Blumenthal's quest to revamp the Little Chef chain, among many other light entertainment programmes.

Leach says branded content seems more "straightforward" when it is understood that it is a light entertainment proposition where you can clearly introduce the product or service and be upfront about what has been paid for. She says: "I think it becomes slightly murkier in the world of documentaries and that makes it more complicated."

Leach suggests that perhaps what is needed is an education process, where audiences better understand the growing relationship between brands and content in the UK. In the US, advertiser-funded programming has been the model that has always underpinned American broadcasting and audiences there understand the relationship perfectly.

For brand marketers, however, a more pressing snag in getting involved in documentaries is the difficulties in demonstrating return on investment. With heightened scrutiny of marketing spend, film-makers are going to have to address this if they are to succeed in securing funding from brands. Until now, ratings have been the chief metric for assessing consumption of media, but these new stakeholders are likely to have other needs for measurement and evaluation.

Once measurement is convincingly up to scratch then many brands will be able to look at new-wave documentaries as a realistic option, which can affect audiences in a way that few other types of advertising can achieve. As Andy Whittaker, chief executive of *The End of the Line* and *Burma VJ* distributor Dogwoof, reveals: "It isn't really so much about just getting publicity; it's more about getting belief."

"If one person sees *The End of the Line*, gets passionate about it, and tells ten friends, then it does a more deep-seated job than any other form of marketing can achieve. Even if the brand is only there by association, it adds to that brand's story." ●

## checklist

Should your brand get involved in branded documentaries? Follow this checklist to find out.

- Great brands have heritage and values. Does your brand have a story that could move you into the world of content?
- Embrace the broad range of creative thinking that sits outside the advertising industry. It will give you a new perspective.
- Making films or programming requires fundamentally different ways of working for marketers more used to briefing advertising agencies. Make sure everyone understands the goals of others involved; collaboration is paramount.
- Look at that CSR strategy you always mean to adopt but never quite get round to. How could it become a big factual content idea that captures the nation?
- Digital content distribution opens a conversation between you and your audience. Think of content creation as a dynamic way of engaging through entertainment.
- Plan the distribution and marketing of the content to audiences just as you would any other communication. The content is the starting point, but the supportive marketing around it is where you can make your brand central to everything.
- If you're thinking about investing in content that is looking for a UK broadcaster commission, be aware that there are still very strict regulations regarding the interplay of brands and programming. Work with specialists and seek advice early.
- Be honest about your involvement and respect editorial integrity.
- If your first thought is 'how can I get my logo in shot?' go and make an ad instead.
- First of all, entertain. Second, advertise the entertainment.

Source: Mark Eaves, managing director, Drum PHD

