



Harnessing Visual Strategy: DPs Share Their Philosophies

by Lisa Horan, iCom Magazine

A simple, yet effective, approach is the name of the game for [Edwin de Jong](#). For the [Grand Rapids, Michigan-based DP](#), it's all about story-telling. That's not surprising, considering his seasoned photojournalism background. "I actually got my start at the age of 17 when I landed a job as a photographer for a newspaper," recalls de Jong. "I knew that if there was a way to make a living with a camera, I wanted to do it because it was just so much fun."

After graduating from [California State University/Long Beach](#) with a degree from the photojournalism program, de Jong spent 10 years at a Christian [missions agency](#) as the "all-in-one" media guy. There he traveled to 25 countries, capturing fascinating, and often heart-wrenching footage, and developing skills that he has carried with him throughout his career. "I approach my work as a DP from a photojournalistic, documentary perspective, but not in the traditional 'Nature Channel' way," says de Jong. "Instead, it's based on my attitude that people are interesting and audiences are interested in what people have to say."

As a result, de Jong strives for interesting ways to present people without boring viewers with a succession of talking heads. For instance, the goal of a recent corporate image video that de Jong shot was to show off some of the buildings that a construction design contractor had built. "In a typical corporate video, you'd see the CEO talking about how great his or company is for five minutes, but to be honest, this really isn't interesting, nor is it credible," says de Jong. "I decided that interviewing the company's happy clients would be most effective, but I minimized the face time of these clients by capturing beautiful shots of their buildings."

Much the same, for a piece that premiered at a fundraising event for a Michigan-based organization, de Jong wanted the subjects to have the opportunity to tell their story [in their own words](#). As a result, not one second of narration is used. Rather, the only words spoken come directly from the subjects, who are ex-convicts and the mentors to whom they were assigned following their release.

"The story that these people have to tell is so compelling that I thought it would be best for them to tell it themselves," explains de Jong. "I also felt it was important to leave their faces on the screen a bit longer than normal because I believed it would give the viewer the opportunity to accept each person as his or her equal; that even though that person had spent as many as 23 years in prison, they really weren't much different from me or you."

Another element that de Jong used in the fundraising piece was deliberately-chosen backdrops used to create a specific effect. "We shot many of the interviews with the mentors and mentees outside in the spring, with green trees and chirping birds in the background," says de Jong. "This warm, natural setting really created a friendlier feel than would have resulted had we shot them in a barren conference room."

On the other hand, to create a gritty feel for an independent feature [2morrow's Never Promised](#) tells the rags to riches tale of an urban rap group, de Jong used filters to remove most of the color. "The idea was to create a monochromatic look and take a very minimalistic approach to lighting," he says. "As much as possible, we used existing lighting in the different locations, such as street lights and car headlights. I am opposed to the 'overlit' look, so I really try to look at the light sources that are present and use the least amount of manufactured light as possible." For the opening scene of the film, for instance, de Jong attached additional lighting to a street pole, so it provided the same directionality as the existing light, but generated a better color temperature and provided the appropriate amount of light for the scene, without causing it to appear unnatural.

Another way in which de Jong is able to create a specific look and feel is through the use of various filters, which have become a trademark of sorts for him. "If I can't tweak something with the camera, I'll put a filter over the lens and create the look that I'm shooting for," says de Jong. Strategic lighting techniques are also at the heart of de Jong's repertoire, and he has gone to great lengths to create a lighting set up that is effective for various situations.

"I now specialize in operating jib arms, camera cranes, and remote heads," says de Jong. "It requires a little extra set up time, I'll admit, but there's no substitute for a crane shot." That said, de Jong actually customized the equipment to reduce the amount of set up time that would be required for traditional jib arms. "Being able to move between locations easily without having to tear down the equipment every time is a big plus."

When it comes to capturing movement, de Jong adheres to strong convictions. "It's never made sense to me to plunk down a camera on a tripod and let the subject move across the screen," he says. "I use a Steadicam that provides me with the ability to follow a subject through a scene. Not only does this add a layer of motion to a piece, but I believe it captures what motion pictures are all about to begin with." In addition, other tools de Jong relies on to make his motion shots come to life are his MarzPak harness rig and shock-absorbing CineSaddle bag, which his camera is placed on to capture images from any type of moving vehicle. "I will always try to capture motion by moving with a subject unless there's a really good reason not to," says de Jong. "I believe it adds an extra level of interest, keeps the audience watching, and supports the story. And, it all comes down to telling the story effectively."