

The Power of Storytelling

An Interview with Ben Mankiewicz, Partner and Host,
and Andrew Jameson, Managing Partner, Path Content Group

EDITORS' NOTE Ben Mankiewicz is the host of Turner Classic Movies and has interviewed such luminaries as Jerry Lewis and Quentin Tarantino. He also serves as Founder, Commentator, and Co-Host for The Young Turks.

Since 2007, Andrew Jameson has produced over 100 episodes of prime-time television for networks including HBO, E!, Spike, MTV, Starz, Sundance, and TBS.

COMPANY BRIEF The mission for Path Content Group (pathcontentgroup.com) is simple: to provide high quality, premium storytelling content for individuals, networks, and brands.

What led to the creation of Path Content Group?

Mankiewicz: Ultimately, the great movies we show on TCM are stories – and likewise, Path Content Group is storytelling – a way for individuals to preserve their legacies through broadcast quality video production. I come from a family of storytellers – my grandfather Herman wrote Citizen Kane, in addition to a number of Marx Brothers movies and others. He was known in Hollywood as one of the great raconteurs. It was also true of his younger brother Joe, who wrote and directed *All About Eve* and won four Oscars in two years.

Turner afforded me the opportunity to do what Robert Osborne established – to tell these stories before the movie.

As I started growing with TCM, I got the opportunity to interview some great stars and people I instantly connected with like Angie Dickinson, Tippi Hedren, Eva Marie Saint, and Ernest Borgnine. I loved hearing their stories, and the challenge I undertook with these people, who are used to being interviewed and telling stories in a certain way, was to get something more.

I didn't want it to be a contrived effort to elicit emotion. I didn't need them to break down, but I wanted them to think differently about their lives. I wanted them to get a little bit uncomfortable in the chair. Sometimes, it was no more than following up a question, but mostly, it was about forming a connection.

Preparing for these interviews was nerve-racking because there was always more to learn about the individuals, but I liked being



Andrew Jameson and Ben Mankiewicz

ready, and they were always surprised by information I would share with them.

This led me to want to interview more types of people, like company leaders, who are less eager to self-promote. This required getting them to recognize that they also have a compelling story to tell.

Jameson: Lew Wolff (Chairman, Wolff Urban) and I have been friends for several years. I'm a television producer by trade, and I would show him a trailer from an upcoming series that I was producing or a pilot, so he became familiar with the work I had done. He called me recently and said that he was turning 80 and wanted to document his life. He wanted me to produce for him an interview that would feel like Charlie Rose.

I immediately called our partner Bryan Stratte, who is our production supervisor, and we decided to build a set and bring in the crew from a series we did on TBS.

It took three brief pre-interviews, then we shot for about five hours and delivered the finished product to Lew in four weeks. He said that he loved it. He wanted to go into business with me and Ben because he felt there was a real interest there for people to tell their stories in this manner. He wanted to help people in this way.

It has been inspiring to work with clients who have entrusted their life stories to us.

How do you build awareness for this, and how big is the market?

Jameson: We had a meeting with the head of TCM recently, and she congratulated us because she said we have actually found a business and product that is defining an all-new segment in many ways.

Word of mouth from clients that have worked with us has built awareness. Part of the challenge for us is making sure the quality of the product is such that, as we expand and do more of these, our brand will continue to grow and gain notice from people who might want to come to us.

Over the past few months, we have built out our teams to handle the demand for this without sacrificing quality.

To hear people get into telling their life stories and creating a lasting documentary for future generations is exciting.

Will you take me through the process, and do clients have say over the final product?

Jameson: They have say over the final product. In many ways, they are the broadcast network for their own films.

We recently did an interview for a gentleman who needed several hours more than our usual timeframe. We did three pre-interviews with him; we then shot for seven hours over the next month – normally it's around four hours.

We gave him his first cut 30 days after that. He then wanted to add to it. We did some more shooting and, a few months later, we delivered the final product to him.

Mankiewicz: It's nice to be able to customize the journalistic standards in this regard. Whatever they don't want to talk about, we don't talk about. We're working for them, and we want to make sure they are comfortable with all aspects of the stories they are telling.

How critical is it for these interviews to be authentic?

Mankiewicz: We're trying to bring out authenticity, but it's almost more important here. For example, when we're talking to a celebrity, the audience may already know a lot about them, but our audiences for these films are private and personal. Even for those of us with close relationships to our parents, there are still things we don't know.

We want to bring out the soul and essence of our subjects, so the interviews have to be a conversation that would never happen with them just talking to a camera. If we can create a conversation where they forget there is a camera there, it will be more honest. That's exactly what we do.

We also spend more time than a normal interview, and people go over a lot. I will frequently go back to dig deeper if I think there is more to a topic.

From a cost perspective, is the market limited?

Jameson: We worked hard on the model, and we thought a long time about what kind of a widget we wanted to make. With our partner, Lew Wolff, we set about trying to figure out how inexpensively we could make these films without sacrificing the quality.

When we produce an hour of television, typically the budget is around \$400,000. The challenge for us was to figure out how to deliver the same quality of production with a crew of 15 specialists, a soundstage facility, a best-in-class editor working around the clock, and color correction and sound mix – all at a much lower price. To help with this, we composed a time lapse video that shows what goes into assembling the set and customizing the production entails.

Where we are different than anyone else out there is, once people understand what the process is, the cost is normally not an issue because they realize there is a small army of people devoted to them. This is network-caliber, broadcast-ready film development. Because of the legacies we are recording, the value of our end product is really priceless.

What we have in common with other higher-end luxury products is that our product becomes an heirloom that a family and their kids and grandkids can enjoy.

We're excited that all of our clients have loved the process and the final product and are telling their friends about it.

Mankiewicz: In every interview, we cover topics like life lessons, which they may have repeated to their kids, and it made them roll their eyes. My dad lived a pretty public life, and he had plenty of interviews for me to still see him in. However, he wasn't talking about his life and, in a way, I can't believe I didn't get him to do more of that.

When I interviewed my father for TCM, it was a different experience than when I normally talked to him. I asked questions a thoughtful interviewer would ask, and then he talked about things he usually didn't talk about. The father/son relationship didn't make it appropriate for me ask him certain things. The nature of the conversation was different in that interview and would not have happened over the breakfast table.

How did you come up with the name?

Jameson: The process through which we vetted different names was interesting. Lew wanted it to be one that reflected the journey everyone was taking in their lives.

Each one of these stories is reflective of that journey, and no two are alike. The name "path" reflects that nicely.

We look at our process as a way to shape people's stories and get a sense of their individual path in life. We educate Ben on what that path has been, and Ben digests this and presents it in a manner that puts someone at ease. Not everyone finds it easy talking about their lives, but no matter how reticent someone may be, after about 30 minutes of looking around the set and seeing pictures of one's family or their favorite golf club, and after Ben starts a conversation about their life, they become more relaxed and ease into a flow.

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It may be difficult for a person to know the right time to do this. Is there a window that makes sense?

Mankiewicz: Our range is from age 53 to 83. People may have a sense they have a lot of time left, but everyone has a story to tell. By that age, they have already accomplished a great deal, and their kids already want to learn about it.

We also fully expect that those who do them at an earlier age will be back later with more stories to tell.

Jameson: One of the things that people talk about when they complete the interview is a sense of relief, because it's a very cathartic process. It's that feeling of, no matter what life throws at me going forward, my loved ones will have this. One of our younger clients didn't know if he was at the right age, but once he went through it, he was so glad he did it. He felt that, in a worst-case scenario, his family would have it, and he could also update it.

What makes your partnership work so well?

Mankiewicz: Andrew connected with Lew over baseball, and so did I. I'm an Oakland A's fan.

I was at the Telluride Film Festival where TCM was a sponsor. This guy standing in front of me was wearing an Oakland A's jacket, so I decided to talk to him. I introduced myself to Lew, and he said he watches TCM all the time.

We spent the weekend talking about movies and baseball and then kept in touch. A year later, he connected with Andrew and kindly invited me to be the interviewer.

Jameson: The three of us really love doing this together. It's a lot of fun.

Having produced television for the past 10 years, there are projects I look forward to showing up for and those I dread. It's been so special watching the people we've interviewed going through this process. They show up on set for the right reason – because this is important to them. The energy on set is always great. I enjoy working with Ben and Lew.

We're all excited and happy to have the opportunity to work together on this and see it grow.

Do these conversations make you think about the legacy for yourself?

Mankiewicz: I hope that there is nothing my daughter is afraid to ask me as she grows older. At some point, when she looks at my career, I would like her to be able to see more than just a bunch of interviews I did – I'd like to be able to leave some of the same things we are addressing in these interviews with her.

There is a seriousness about our process and a unique quality to it. It's really important to people. At the same time, I love talking about trivial things. For instance, the legacy of classic Hollywood may matter to someone because they love *From Here to Eternity*, but it's special to know that their mom or grandfather may have loved it too.

There is a connectivity with TCM that is so much more than nostalgia. There is a visceral and emotional connection to where we came from, and that is not dissimilar to what we try to accomplish here at Path Content.

Jameson: Anyone who gets into television or film enjoys the process of creation, but they also love the thought that what they created will be around forever and will outlive them. As a parent, legacy is always a part of one's life. It's ingrained in our DNA to make sure that the information we want to pass on gets passed on. With this opportunity to do an interview, our clients have the opportunity to present the best possible version of themselves. As time passes, valuable information could be lost. The process we offer helps preserve it. ●