

A Textbook Example: Lessons Learned about Visual Content Used for an Agricultural Communications Textbook

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Abstract

This professional development article details lessons learned during the process of providing visual content for a new agricultural communications textbook. Textbook authors thought they had all of the visual content approved, but learned late in the textbook-writing process that many visual materials (photographs and videos) needed multiple levels of approval. Some specific “lessons learned” include being cognizant of what is in the backgrounds of visuals; knowing who owns visual content; making sure that any co-sponsor of a communications piece must approve its use, even if the lead organization approves; and receiving approval from second- and possibly third-generation visual sources. This article is important to visual communicators, in light of the move at many universities to provide content – that for many years had been provided free to clients – for a fee.

Keywords

video, photography, copyright

In 2009, fellow University of Florida professor Tracy Irani and I approached a textbook publishing company with an idea to write an agricultural communications textbook that would appeal to faculty of upper high school students (juniors and seniors) and college students. Each of the 17 chapters in *Agricultural Communications in Action: A Hands-on Approach* (publication date 2012) covers a different topic related to agricultural communications. The book includes topics such as news writing, business writing, research methods, photography, Web design, new media, media relations, video production, risk and crisis communications, campaign development, and public speaking, among others. Irani and I wanted to provide a framework to help improve the communications skills of high school and college students as well as professionals because the content covers much of what ACE members, Extension agents, and other agricultural communicators do on a daily basis.

However, what started as a way for us to instruct others evolved into our own learning experience. What follows are some of the things I learned along the way about providing visual content for a textbook, which is a commercial venture. Because much of what ACE members write and produce are for educational purposes, some readers of this article may wonder about the applicability of the content to ACE membership. However, given much material — such as bird or plant identification

manuals or curricula and educational materials — ACE members produce now are sold, at least as cost-recovery items, the line between “educational” and “commercial” may be blurring.

As someone who comes from a video production background, followed later in my career with newspaper reporting, I thought I was fairly adept for having an “eye” for visual content that could get my media organization into trouble. For example, when dealing with visual content that has children in it, I knew always to secure signed release forms from the children’s parent or guardian. I thought I had “covered my bases” in the materials provided for the textbook. I was wrong.

I had gotten release forms for people who were featured in photographs in the book and in videos that accompanied the textbook in the instructor’s supplemental materials. I also received approvals from companies that had materials — brochures, news releases, newsletters, graphic designs, and other visuals — included as examples in the book. But what I did not anticipate was that because of a litigious society, American textbook companies have become extremely careful about all visual content. My publisher’s representative said the publication company once got into trouble for including a photograph with a tractor in it from a particular farm equipment manufacturing company without getting an approval from the equipment company prior to publication.

What I have learned in publishing textbook content has drastically changed how I frame video and photo shots and has caused me to rethink my “eye” of what I see in the viewfinder. Reading the following “lessons learned” when providing visual content for a commercial (for-profit) venture may cause you to consider how we, as communicators, collect and disseminate visual information.

Lesson Learned 1: Backgrounds matter.

One of the “extras” for the textbook is a DVD of 15 videos that feature professional communicators who discuss varying topics, ranging from public relations tactics to framing messages for various audiences. One of the videos was to have included interviews I shot in 2005 with two University of Florida faculty members who discussed research they conducted related to crisis communication following the devastating 2004 hurricane season that struck Florida. As a videographer, one of the standard backgrounds to use with a researcher when you do not have a background that pertains to the topic is a bookshelf lined with books. So since I did not have a background that pertained to hurricanes, I used the fallback background: books on shelves. The publishing company liked the video but said the video could not be used in its present form due to the books on the shelves. The titles on the spine of the books, such as *Webster’s Dictionary*, could be read in the video’s frame. Because the books were not in the publishing company’s “family,” the video could not be used because we would have had to get approval from all of the books’ publishers and because we would be promoting other companies’ books.

What I learned from this is to check my backgrounds. Now, I look for titles I can read and logos I can see clearly in my viewfinder. And if I see golden arches, book titles, or content that can be associated with or that brands a company, I will reframe my shot to eliminate the commercialized visual, even though I may only be shooting the video for an educational purpose. As a rule, I no longer use bookshelf shots.

Lesson Learned 2: Content ownership matters.

As previously mentioned, I thought I had received release forms or the proper approvals for all of the visual content in the textbook. I had releases for all of the photographs and had approvals for the visual examples (brochures, newsletters, and graphics). However, what I learned is even though

you may have approval, it might not be the correct approval. Following are some examples of what happened in the area of “content ownership matters.”

Lesson Learned 2a: All co-sponsors on a communications piece have to approve its use, even if the lead organization approves.

One of the examples I wanted to use was a nicely designed brochure from Florida Dairy Farmers Inc., the state’s dairy association. I had requested and received approval from the communications director and the executive director to use the brochure. I thought my job was done. My publishing company representative loved the brochure, but asked if I had gotten approval from all of the organizations whose logos appeared in the brochure. The brochure was of the 3-a-day program that Kraft Foods co-sponsored. So, in addition the Florida Dairy Farmers’ logo, the brochure included a logo for Kraft and two other dairy-related organizations. The publisher said although I had approval from FDF to use the brochure, all co-sponsors of the brochure had to agree to the brochure’s inclusion in the textbook. I had to pull the brochure and replace it with a different example because I could not get approvals from all the organizations.

Lesson Learned 2b: Visual content previously approved for a different purpose does not mean you have approval for your purpose.

I planned to use a newsletter from Florida Dairy Farmers as an example of good newsletter design. Again, I received approval from FDF representatives, and again, I thought I had done everything I needed for the newsletter to be included in the textbook. Again my publisher’s representative loved the newsletter, but (again) a problem arose. The newsletter featured photos on the front page of a National Football League player at a school to promote dairy consumption in elementary-age children; he was photographed with several children at the school. The publisher’s representative said even if FDF had received photo release forms from the NFL, the player, and the children’s parents to use the photograph in the newsletter, the release form did not extend to the newsletter’s inclusion in my textbook. I used a different newsletter example instead.

Lesson Learned 2c: Second-generation approval may be needed.

Because one of the target audiences for this book is high school students and college students, I wanted to include materials that would appeal to that age range, so I asked for examples from the state’s 4-H and FFA offices. I received materials that showcased 4-H exhibits and highlighted the Florida FFA Convention. I received permission from the 4-H agent and the state 4-H office for the 4-H content; I received approvals from the graphic designer and the Florida FFA executive director. The publishing company was pleased I had gotten approval from the state agencies, but the representative wondered if I had gotten approval from the national organizations, since 4-H and FFA both have national logos. I had not contacted the national offices. In this case, I was able to track down the correct persons at the two national organizations and received approvals; however, in one case, it took almost three months to get approval. In this particular situation of approvals, I was pleased the publishing company pushed me to get the approvals from the national level because 4-H is very strict about use of the 4-H cloverleaf emblem. According to the 4-H website (USDA, n.d.), every unauthorized use of the 4-H emblem carries a penalty of \$10,000 and potential jail time. I had used the 4-H emblem four times in my book. My publisher does not cover liabilities such as this, so if I had misrepresented the 4-H emblem, I could have been penalized as much as \$40,000 for the four times the emblem was used.

Lastly, every video I created as supplemental materials was equally scrutinized. In one video, I had used a photograph provided by the interviewee. Because the interviewee did not know who the person was in the photo, I ended up having to cut the photo and reedit the video. In another example, which happened to be the same video that featured the two faculty members interviewed in front of bookshelves, I received hurricane footage from another state; however, because it could not be determined if the footage was from the state agency or was file footage from a commercial media outlet, I could not use it. As a result of this and the “bookshelf” problem, I ended up pulling the entire video from the supplemental materials; it was impossible to redo the interviews, since one faculty member had taken a job at another university, and it was too difficult to reedit the video.

What I Learned

Writing a textbook is an extremely time-consuming and lengthy process. Irani and I started the process in 2009 and saw the finished product in early 2012. College students may complain about the price of textbooks, but from going through the textbook-production process, publishing companies spend a tremendous amount of time and effort to ensure the content is accurate, the design is appealing, and the material is approved properly. This last point has taught me the most valuable lesson.

The bottom line is for a for-profit venture, everything related to visuals matters. My situation may have been extreme, but my experience may be becoming the norm, rather than the exception. From what my publishing representative told me on multiple occasions, publishing companies are becoming more leery about where content comes from because of the possibility of a lawsuit for material not authorized or approved by all responsible parties. Content I thought had been approved properly ended up not being acceptable content.

As has been noted, this process has made me rethink any visual content is in my viewfinder before I shoot video or a photograph. I am involved in two projects that, although instructional in nature, have the capacity for being offered for sale in the future. I am being extremely careful because I do not want to go through more “lessons learned” by having content I would have to go back through multiple hoops to get approved. My recommendation for photographers and videographers would be to take a second look for your shot composition so you are not including any commercialized content.

I also have become more conscientious about the content of materials I am provided. Just because I have approval from an organization, I have learned second- and sometimes third-level approvals must be attained before the material is truly “approved.” This may be the area where professional communicators will need to become more aware, especially as it pertains to for-profit materials.

As shown, getting approval from an organization may only be a first step; more approvals may be necessary before a visual can be used. As state agencies use more shared content as a cost-cutting measure and with the availability of more online content, communicators will need to be even more diligent to consider every aspect of a visual element — such as logos or photographs of people embedded in other content — before publishing the material for instructional purposes, either for free or for for-profit ventures. Consulting legal counsel or a publishing company representative may be necessary if any question arises about the appropriateness of using certain visual materials.

About the Author

ACE member Ricky Telg is a professor in the University of Florida’s Department of Agricultural Education and Communication.

References

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