



# TRAILER MECHANICS

A Guide  
to Making Your  
Documentary  
Fundraising  
Trailer

**Fernanda Rossi**

The Documentary Doctor

# TRAILER MECHANICS

A Guide to Making Your  
Documentary Fundraising Trailer

by Fernanda Rossi

  
magafilms

To each and every filmmaker  
whose questions and doubts  
inspired me to find answers  
and ask further questions.

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**A Guide to Making Your Fundraising Documentary Trailer**  
**by Fernanda Rossi**

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**Y**ears ago a written proposal was enough to convey your ideas and beg for dollars, but as technology has advanced, more and more is expected from filmmakers when they ask somebody to help pay for a film. When video became easily accessible, funders began welcoming sample footage. Today, with basic desktop editing systems available on most computers, works-in-progress or trailers are not only welcomed, but demanded. Every funder, investor, and network executive will inevitably ask, “Is there anything we can look at?”

This book will guide you through the process of creating a trailer for those funders, investors and executives to look at. And while much of that process is about story structure and money, it is ultimately also about finding your own voice and being resourceful enough to bring that voice into the world.

You might wonder, how a documentary or its trailer can be structured at all. Aren't documentaries about reality as it happened? Aren't the ideas of “reality” and “story structure” contradictory? Not really. It is true that documentaries document reality, but they also *doc-comment* on reality. And reality unfolds in front of our eyes in a chaotic, unstructured way. It is our minds which select and organize it, so we can process, remember and finally share it with others.

When you make a documentary you systematize the randomness of reality through the scenes you choose, which eventually become the story. You may structure and organize possible scenarios as you film, in the heat of the moment absorbing it all. Or you might choose to do it later like in *verité*-style documentaries, which capture the complexity of the world in one long take as one would take a deep breath. Then in the quiet of the cutting room starts the slow process of selection and organization. Regardless of when you choose to assert your story, the time to do so will eventually come. Then you will need more than loyalty to reality as it happened to make your story engaging. The exploration of structure means freedom, not confinement. And this freedom comes with knowledge and the capacity to make informed decisions about your story.

Once your story and vision are formulated, the next challenge is bringing that story into the world. Most filmmakers connect this challenge with money, and lots of it. No filmmaker ever said to me, “Gee, I had enough money to do whatever I wanted with that documentary.” There never seems to be enough, even if they managed to raise the equivalent of a CEO's salary.

The fact is, not every film with a high budget is a good film. But regardless of how many bad big-budget films we see, we still think that money rules, and to some degree it does. To make good films, particularly documentaries, you need to reclaim the power money took from you. It is not about money but about being resourceful. It is about how you manage to get what you need and how best to use whatever you have. For that reason, in this book, you will not find the latest schemes to become rich overnight, or discuss the latest technology development. What you will find is how to make a documentary fundraising trailer work no matter your budget and gadgets.

Whether you are a first timer or a seasoned filmmaker this book will help you find the principles that will strengthen your criteria and encourage you to become both a critical thinker and savvy artist. Whether you are working with a Super 8 camera or a chip hooked to your eye, your vision and voice should and will remain.

### **Who this book is for**

**B**eginners, who are looking for guidance on how to get started with their documentary film, will find easy-to-follow steps. Experienced filmmakers will encounter a new perspective to old story challenges and expand their working palette and methodology. In order to accommodate everybody, concepts are explained assuming the only thing we share is the English language and not a film degree.

### **How this book is structured**

**T**railer Mechanics is divided into three parts that represent the three stages of every journey: Part I: Tune Up Before You Hit The Road; Part II: Warm Up The Engine, and Part III: On The Road Singing Happily. Each of these parts is divided into three sections, which represent the three elements of every creative endeavor or communication process: 1) the object or message (in this case documentary fundraising trailers) is discussed in Section 1: Understanding Trailer Mechanics. 2) The communicator, (you, the filmmaker) is taken into consideration in Section 2: Oiling Your Creative Gears. 3) The audience or recipient of your message, namely networks, funders, festivals and markets is reviewed in Section 3: Catching The Right People In The Headlights.

#### ***Section 1 • Understanding Trailer Mechanics***

**I**n this section you will discover how to make your fundraising trailer, from testing your idea to making sure you are really finished with your trailer. You will also find tips on how to maxime your resources.

***Section 2 • Oiling your Creative Gears***

**Y**ou can know everything about making a trailer, but if you don't understand your process as a filmmaker the whole endeavor can prove fruitless. All the instructions, guides and magic potions in the world are useless if you cannot get up off the couch.

Many people believe that they cannot accomplish their vision because they do not have the right equipment, enough time, loads of cash—fill in the blank with your excuse. Some obstacles are real, but most of them are creative hurdles that need to be overcome. As I say at the beginning of every workshop, “The worst thing that can happen to a film is a filmmaker.”

The creative process can be daunting if you are not familiar with it. Most filmmakers are so busy with production that they do not take the time to understand their own process. This section sheds light on these obscure matters. Also included are some warnings about common pitfalls and encouragement to go on in spite of all the complications, of which, believe me, there will be many.

***Section 3 • Catching the Right People in the Headlights***

**T**railers, films and art in general do not happen in a vacuum. Someone has to be the recipient, whether that is your family or the entire planet. Since you want to raise money with your trailer, your goal is for a lot of people to watch it. Although I am a big believer in discovering the film you want to make before you find the audience, there is also a healthy level of “audience awareness” needed to raise funds. In order to get you closer to who is out there, what they want, and how they want it, I interviewed a variety of grant-makers, network programming and developing directors, and market and festival organizers that have work-in-progress screenings. Use these interviews as guidelines, not immovable facts. Let them encourage, rather than curtail, your creativity. It is not what these people say, but how you use what they say that will make the difference between a successful trailer and one that sits on a shelf.

## How to use this book

Inspiration, unfortunately, does not come with a manual on how to materialize that great idea into something tangible to share with the rest of the world. Hopefully that brief moment of creative bliss will have the power to give you the motivation to look for the necessary tools to make your dream a reality. This book is one of those tools. Rather than using it as a recipe, take it as the starting point, a guide to a process. As with any tool, the more you use it, the more you will find new ways to take advantage of it. I encourage you to explore the pages of *Trailer Mechanics* and reinvent it to suit your specific needs.

This book is structured to resemble the non-linear creative mind. You can get on board at any page and jump around, as you need to. You can read it chapter after chapter, or you can read only Section 1 in Part I, II and III, and then proceed to Section 2. Because I am counting on your creativity, some pages are designed to be torn out so that you can create your own book or books. As you read this book and participate in it you will create your own text with your own experience and knowledge.

## Reading vs. Doing

Documentary filmmakers do not scream: Action! at a shoot. But in this case, please do so. Take action with this book. You can only know if the methodologies and suggestions work for you by trying them.

Reading it is a necessary step, of course, but to get the full benefit of this book do not leave it at that. I encourage you to revisit this book regularly. Come back, re-read and do the work, whether it is a simple exercise or a week's worth of thinking. Some things will work right away; others will work when you are more confident or may never be right for you. That's OK; only you can tell what is useful to you and your film—after you give it a fair chance. Everything is acceptable as long as it is an action towards the making of your documentary.



**PART I**  
**TUNE UP BEFORE YOU HIT THE ROAD**

## Chapter 1 The Trailer Defined

**A** fundraising trailer is the first step towards making a documentary. It is a dress rehearsal, a test run, and a great opportunity to learn about your film and yourself. It is also one of the most important elements of your fundraising strategy. It is the best business card you can hand out as an introduction to your documentary. If one image is worth a thousand words, then 24 images per second are worth...well, you do the math.

There are no rules or formal conventions for what a trailer should be or even what it should be called. Anything goes, which can be a good thing at times, but it also can be overwhelming when you need direction. Use the following definitions as guidelines, but remember your creative work is unique and can become the successful exception to the rule.

### **Trailers and their cousins**

A trailer is a five to ten minute piece that represents scenes from your future documentary. It is a visual pitch for your project and used mainly for fundraising purposes.

**T**hroughout your career you probably have heard the terms: trailer, fundraising trailer, work-in-progress, work sample, demo, demo reel, show reel, teaser, featurette, EPK, rip-o-matic, preview, movie trailer and promo. Some people use all these terms interchangeably because they are all short formats with similar purposes, but their differences are meaningful. Understanding these differences will help you to know what people in the business are talking about, but that does not mean you need to have one of each for your documentary.

#### ***Demo, Reel, Demo Reel or Show Reel***

All of these terms are interchangeable. They refer to a compilation of segments from films that showcase the work of industry professionals. Basically, it is an audiovisual resumé.

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A Guide to Making Your Documentary Fundraising Trailer

**Fernanda Rossi**  
The Documentary Doctor

In order to raise money to make a documentary, it is essential to produce a trailer that will capture the imagination and confidence of grant-makers and investors. *Trailer Mechanics* guides the filmmaker step-by-step through the entire process of making such fundraising trailers.

- Story structure templates are presented in easy-to-follow steps, steering the filmmakers through the process of creating their own trailers while allowing their individuality to shine through.
- The creative process is thoroughly explained and explored with exercises that enable filmmakers to remain focused, motivated and efficient from start to finish.
- Interviews with leading industry professionals, grant-makers, network programmers and film festival directors provide crucial insights into what grabs their attention and what gets tossed out.

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"*Fernanda Rossi, the Documentary Doctor, has written the perfect prescription for your documentary doldrums. Trailer Mechanics—soon to become the bible on this topic so long ignored yet so central to the process of creating and funding your documentary.*"

*Morrie Warshawski author of Shaking the Money Tree: How to Get Grants and Donations for Film and Television, [www.warshawski.com](http://www.warshawski.com)*

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FERNANDA ROSSI is a writer, filmmaker and story consultant who helps filmmakers craft the story structure of their films in all stages of the filmmaking process. She has doctored over 100 documentaries and fiction scripts.

Along with her private consultations, she gives lectures and seminars nationwide, such as *Doctoring your Doc* and *Trailer Mechanics*. Ms. Rossi has also served as Juror for the *Chicago International Film Festival* and a grant panelist for the *New York State Council for the Arts* and *Latino Public Broadcast*. She pens the monthly column *Ask the Doc Doctor* for *The Independent Film & Video Monthly*.

Her work as a story consultant, workshop leader and filmmaker has been featured in *Filmmaker Magazine*, *The New York Times* and other publications. She has a degree in Film Production from the University of Buenos Aires.



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P. O. Box 717 • New York, NY 10028-0044  
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