

The Golden Trailer Awards showcase each year's best. This site links directly to dozens of excellent examples.



9 Tips

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9 (Short) Storytelling Tips From A Master Of Movie Trailers

Buddha Jones co-founder John Long discusses mini-storytelling principles and the art of modern trailer making.

BY HUGH HART

6 MINUTE READ

"Anybody with an editing system on their computer can take a movie and crush it down to two and a half minutes," says Hollywood teaser man John Long. "But that wouldn't necessarily be an artfully delivered piece. A great trailer is its own mini-story."

Long and other masters of short-form movie marketing enjoy a rare moment in the spotlight May 30 courtesy of the [Golden Trailer Awards](#). Judged this year by *Frozen* co-director Chris Buck, *Girls*, and *Star Wars* star Adam Driver, *Divergent* filmmaker Neil Burger, and other industry talents, the Beverly Hills awards show honors the work of trailer houses including [Buddha Jones](#), co-founded by Long, which is nominated this year in 24 categories.

Long talks to Co.Create about the how to boil a three-hour Scorsese movie down to its two-and-a-half-minute essence, where to find the heart of the Muppets (hint: it's not in the plot), why Clint Eastwood likes to keep things simple and the other tricks of the short-form trade that translate to stories of any length.

START FAST, END BIG

Long believes the lessons embedded in effective movie trailers can be helpful to anyone interested in telling a good story. “The most important thing is that you have to hook people immediately whether it’s a great piece of dialogue between characters, an unexpected jolt of some kind or a wonderful piece of music,” he says. “Then, you need to escalate. If it’s a comedy you make it funnier as it goes along. If it’s horror you have to make things get creepier and creepier. Finally you have to have a great way to end the piece. The way peoples brains are wired, first we remember how something ends, and then we remember how it begins.”



[Link to *The Wolf of Wall Street* Trailer](#)

THE MINI-MOVIE NEEDS ITS OWN HEART

For Buddha Jones’s nominated *Wolf of Wall Street* teaser, Long says he and his team decided “the essence of the movie comes down to the Shakespearean rise and fall of this character. We started our trailer with the scene where Jonah Hill asks Leonardo DiCaprio ‘How much money do you make?’ ‘\$70,000 last month.’ Right away you’re grounded. You’ve now learned all you need to know about the nature of greed and the compelling characters who are going to lead you on this wild ride

of ups and down. For us it was about finding the construction that serves this two-and-a-half-minute mini-story as opposed to the three-hour movie, which is going to have its own surprises.”



Link to *The Conjuring* Trailer

THINK NON-LINEAR

Long and the 100 staffers employed at his company often ditch straightforward narrative by slicing up one pivotal sequence and stretching it throughout the entire trailer. Describing Golden Trailer horror category nominee *The Conjuring*, Long says, “We basically took a single scene and re-created in the most suspenseful way we could.”

They took a similar approach to promote Denzel Washington’s 2012 *Flight*. Long says. “If we’d told the story in a linear fashion, the movie’s one big action scene with the plane going down would have been somewhere in the third act of the trailer. Instead, we intercut it with the story of the pilot, Denzel Washington. This was not the linear story of the movie but a distillation of the experience and an elegant solution to that problem.”

TWEAK THE THREE-ACT STRUCTURE

Long, a former copywriter, got into the trailer business 20 years ago. “When I started out, trailers tended to be heavy handed with Voice of God voiceovers, but audiences are more sophisticated now,” he says. Even today, Long observes, “One of the most conventional ways to create a trailer is the three-act setup where you establish the premise, then you complicate and spin things back around in the second act and finish with a montage-driven pastiche that builds to a dramatic crescendo. But talented trailer-makers take that classic structure and find ways to shorthand it.”

In place of literal-minded synopsis, he says, “There’s a lot more cutting now where you stop down* to a great moment then spin off to other moments and cross cut and inter-cut. The editorial language has become more sophisticated because the viewer has become more sophisticated.”



Kite

EXERCISE BRUTAL EFFICIENCY

An effective trailer usually relies on bits that cram maximum value into minimal on-screen time. “My business as a storyteller is to figure out the moments that do multiple things,” says Long. “You’re looking for a great look or a great line of dialogue that doesn’t just advance the story but is also funny as hell or uniquely scary. That’s where a lot of the art of story construction comes from.”

SEEK THE DEFINING MOMENT

A trailer’s most valuable asset? Originality. “The first thing we look for is fresh moments that you wouldn’t see in another movie because, lets be honest, movies can often be derivative,” he says. “If something worked once, there’ll be four spin-offs of that idea, so there’s a lot of repetition in the marketplace. You want to pick out things where you say, ‘Okay that doesn’t look like 10 other movies I’ve seen.’”



Link to Muppets Most Wanted

PICKING A ROAD

Buddha Jones's nominated *Muppets Most Wanted* trailer demonstrate the importance of a cohesive high concept. Long says: "You develop an eye for trailer moments that are going to be sticky but it's not just picking the funniest moments or best scenes. You have to sit down with a music supervisor, art director, producer, editor, and perhaps a writer and get a common point of view about, 'What is the coolest way to package this stuff?' Everything that goes into the trailer needs to promote that big idea."

In the case of the Muppets franchise, Long says, "It wasn't so much the story that would compel people to see the movies, it was the subversive fun of the Muppets themselves." For *Muppets Most Wanted*, he adds, "You don't have to re-introduce the characters and we're not really going to talk about the plot, right? The real story is about how outrageous these characters are. That really narrows the creative job to, 'Okay whatever we do with this spot has to be smart about reinforcing how we're not taking ourselves seriously.'"



[Link to *Homefront* Trailer](#)

MAKING A BAD MOVIE LOOK GOOD

For its *Hit and Run teaser*, Buddha Jones won the 2013 “Golden Fleece” award given to the best trailer for a mediocre movie. This year, the company’s nominated in the same category for trailering the James Franco bomb *Homefront*. Long acknowledges, “Sometimes we can make a movie look a lot better than it actually is and perhaps seduce or trick viewers into seeing a film they may not have seen were it not for the clever construction of our trailer.”

Long adds, “In a way, it’s about what you leave out, not what you put in. You can introduce people to the vibe of the movie, you find some cool music, you get some interesting dialogue and you don’t try to over-sell it.”

SOMETIMES “VERSION ONE” IS THE BEST

The purest form of expression for trailer makers is what Long calls the Version One. He notes, “When we first make a trailer we don’t say ‘What do other people want to see?’ We ask ourselves, “What would compel *us* to go see this movie.’ The first thing we present to a studio is a Version One.”

Then come the revisions. Input from studio executives, marketing staff, and producers typically result in dozens of modifications.

Every now and then, the braintrust returns full circle to the original concept. Long remembers, “We did a trailer for one of Clint Eastwood’s movies and got to about version seven or eight. Clint watched it and we’re all sitting there waiting for his response and he said, ‘It’s pretty good, boys. Let me see version one.’

When Eastwood watched version one, Long recalls, “he decided that it was cleaner and closer to the heart of the movie experience he was trying to sell. We made a few little changes and basically finished with version one, revised. Sometimes you can overthink the process. In that case, our instincts were right on the money.”

**stop down: to stop the momentum of the action; “all the sound stops, then you fade up from black and something—either a provocative dialogue line, or a look by a character—flips things around and sends it in another direction; or something that makes for a really memorable moment in the piece. That’s what we call a stop down.”*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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