

Free Spirit PRO - Client-based Work as Pedagogy at Free Spirit Media

Rafi Santo - New York University

This case example explores what client-based work looks like at Free Spirit Media, where youth are involved in the production of films and promotional videos for community-based clients, exploring issues around balancing youth development with client needs.



Free Spirit PRO describes itself as “a social enterprise of Free Spirit Media (FSM),” a youth media organization based in Chicago. On its website, it states that the project is an “Emmy Award winning video production team that specializes in social impact storytelling, documentaries & PSAs, and special event coverage.” But something else makes it different from other for-hire film production studios. Free Spirit PRO employs young adult media makers ages 18-25 who collaborate with professional staff to produce high quality films for paying clients. In doing so, Free Spirit PRO acts as an early professional and economic opportunity for youth from non-dominant communities, especially black and brown communities that have historically been under-represented within media, film and television industries.

Free Spirit PRO aims to meet three goals: (1) create professional level projects for paying clients, (2) generate a sustainable revenue stream to support the broader programs of Free Spirit Media, and most importantly, (3) create real-world learning experiences that develop the skills, identities and professional pathways of young adults from Chicago.

The client-facing Free Spirit PRO website states that, “By hiring Free Spirit PRO for your production needs, you will be investing in both your organization and the youth of Chicago,” and it features a range of past clients that include a well-known fashion brand and a range of Chicago-based non-profit groups and philanthropies. Fundamentally, Free Spirit PRO aims to meet three goals: (1) create professional level projects for paying clients, (2) generate a sustainable revenue stream to support the broader programs of Free Spirit Media, and most importantly, (3) create real-world learning experiences that develop the skills, identities and professional pathways of young adults from Chicago.

Managing Projects and Youth Production Teams

The everyday work of producing films for clients involves coordination among a small group of FSM staff. These staff engage with new clients, scope potential jobs, put together teams of Free Spirit PRO youth, and manage the production process. The lead producer for FSP, staffer Chad Rispalje, describes the process:

A lot of the projects come through word of mouth. Jeff [FSM's Executive Director] has a lot of connections. So, it's either they know Jeff, or they know Free Spirit Media...He connects them with me, and we talk about budget, timeline, and what we have to do to to make a project happen.

Chad will then have an initial back and forth with clients to determine scope and price, negotiating to a place that works for both groups. After that, he assembles a team from the existing youth that are part of the FSP cohort.

We have a crew of young adults, maybe twelve. I'll usually send an email to the group with the filming schedule and to gauge whether anybody is interested.

Sometimes it's just one or two people who are available. Other times, it's almost the whole group.

In order to figure out who from the Free Spirit PRO cohort will be involved, he considers the needs of the client, the complexity of the job, and the level of talent needed.

If it's a single camera back of the room, I'll take somebody who hasn't worked with us as much because that's kind of a low risk. Or if I know it's a slower paced day, such as when we are filming b-roll, then it's also easier to take someone with a little less experience because we can be a little more over the shoulder and help them get the shots. But if it's a shoot that's really fast, we need our A crew. For the last one we did, I called Yarnome and Josh, who have worked with us a lot and know how to set up the camera. I could say, 'Can you go film b-roll in that room? Then we'll set up the lights and do the interviews here. Come back when you're done.' I could say that and be pretty confident they were going to come back with the footage that we need.

Chad considers many factors when putting together a youth team, including balancing the demands of the project and the nature of the learning experience for the young professionals from Free Spirit PRO. For example, he notes above that projects that have a slower pace might be opportunities for someone less experienced, since he can be more involved and provide deeper guidance and technical mentorship.

But he shares that sometimes the mix of project demands and who's available might require him to step in and directly engage in filming:

There are times, where... it could be a fast paced, big project, but only less experienced people are available, but that's ok - this is our mission. It might mean being a little more over the shoulder, but we find a way to make it work. I try not to be on camera [filming], unless it's a tough shot with little room for error. If this happens, the [youth] can be the production assistant, but generally, we try to have the youth take the lead as much as possible. .

Another consideration for Chad is thinking through pedagogical impact. For a given project, should he aim for a deeper impact with fewer participants, or should he extend the opportunity to a greater number of youth, even if the experience for each will be less extensive?

In the ideal project for us, young adults are involved in pre-production, production, and post-production. But this approach limits the number of youth who are involved. For example, in one project, we kept just three people on the entire project because of pre-shoots. But another option could've been to have two people with pre-shoots, two new people with production, and then two more people on the third day that we filmed. In that case we could have had six people instead of three people working on it. So, I try to balance that trade-off. Is it better to have someone see it all the way through, or is it better to give more opportunity to more people?

Balancing Client Needs with Youth Interest and Skill Development

In doing client-based work, Chad has an additional consideration: balancing the needs of the project and its client with the need to create learning opportunities for young professionals. In the above case, he shared that having young adults involved in every phase from pre-production to production to post-production is ideal, but it also means that those youth need to have a baseline of skills associated with all of those phases. He shared that there are often more youth that are able to engage in the production phase, filming, but there are fewer who have the editing skills required for post-production, or client-focused and project-scoping skills required for pre-production.

Another example of this kind of tension has to do with the question of youth interest. The core of Free Spirit PRO's work is producing documentary and PSA-style films, but often youth are interested in developing independent projects on issues they care about or ones where they have more creative license and direction. Yarnome, a young adult who's been part of Free Spirit PRO, reflects on this tension:

It's a different thing when you're making your piece and you're driving it. It's what you want it to be. But in the work we do [in Free Spirit PRO], the client can come back and say, 'Oh that's not quite what we wanted. Can you do this instead?' So you're kind of giving up on what you wanted to do to please them, and it's such a different approach. It's something you gotta learn to deal with.

Yarnome sees this not just as a small tension, but also as a learning experience as a young professional, understanding that working with clients often means being able to understand and work with their perspectives and needs. As she says, "It's something you gotta learn to deal with." Another Free Spirit PRO participant, Josh, sees the technical skills that he developed in his client work as something that's transferable. "When it comes to doing independent work," Josh says, "all that knowledge and learning that I've gained with PRO, I'll have it."