

What is a Fotonovela?

Because fotonovelas use conversation and photos to tell a story, they are entertaining and easy-to-read.

A fotonovela is a story told with photos and dialogue.



Dialogue and thoughts are presented in bubbles in comic-book style.



The narrative is presented in captions at the top or bottom of the frame.

A Brief History of Fotonovelas

Fotonovela scholars date the origin of fotonovelas back to post World War II when the photo-booklets were first produced in Italy as a by-product of the film industry. They began as a pictorial summary of Hollywood films and then evolved into their own unique medium. Some of the earlier fotonovelas in the 1950's and 1960's were written by the famous Spanish romance novelist, Corín Tellado. From the early 1950's to the 1980's, Mexico was at the center of the fotonovela and historieta boom. Irene Herner, the Mexican Sociologist and author of the seminal work on fotonovelas, Mitos y Monitos, reported that in

1979 Mexico was publishing 70 million copies of fotonovelas and historietas per month.



Dr. Herner, in her introduction of Mitos y Monitos marvels at the potential of using fotonovelas and historietas to educate the masses. "Why is it that Mexico has allowed this medium to fall by the wayside instead of implementing it with its potential for mass and systematic utilization to accomplish some of its most important educational and social goals?" (1) And indeed, one would have to agree with Dr. Herner, that in a country that suffered from staggering illiteracy rates, there could be so many millions of every day people reading these little booklets on buses, street corners, during their lunch hours and coffee breaks, and at home in their leisure time.

Fotonovelas are an Ideal Educational Tool

Although fotonovelas have been used in Mexico, Ecuador, some African countries and even in the United States to communicate about important health and educational topics, this popular, easy to read and entertaining medium has not been used to its potential.

Literacy Continues to be a Problem

It would be nice to say that the literacy problem has gone away, but unfortunately it hasn't. The United States has some of the highest functional illiteracy rates in the "developed" world. Every day we are faced with the challenge of how to educate the public about a myriad of important issues yet consumer education materials continue to be written at a level that is inappropriate for the audiences they are intended to reach.

Health Literacy or the Lack Thereof

When it comes to a problem that has dire consequences, health literacy continues to challenge us every day. In the area of diabetes alone, health literacy, or the lack thereof, has been blamed for diabetes complications such as loss of limbs, blindness and kidney failure. Many diseases and conditions such as diabetes can be managed and even prevented by good health communications yet, these chronic conditions continue to be a tragic global problem.

The Potential of Using Fotonovelas as Educational Tools

The Fotonovela Production Company™ was established because we agree with Dr. Herner that fotonovelas hold a great potential for reaching out to the masses in an informative and entertaining way. Educators world-wide recognize the problem that literacy in general and health literacy in particular poses for the vast amount of people who simply cannot read well enough to take in information that is written at a level that is inaccessible to them. But even when people can read at high reading levels, they still prefer materials that are easy and fun to read!

Fotonovelas are entertaining and informative. To use social marketing terminology – Fotonovelas are "easy, fun and popular!"

Here are some comments from scholars, librarians and educators...

“As a health educator, I have been motivated by a vision: to provide materials to my people that they can identify with, relate to and understand. This vision has materialized into the work we are doing with Ana Consuelo Matiella on a fotonovela for Hispanic women on diabetes prevention.”

Betsy Rodriguez, National Diabetes Education Program, Centers for Disease Prevention and Control – Atlanta, Georgia

“There is an urgent need to communicate about Alzheimer’s disease and other dementing illnesses to Latinos...Fotonovelas are a great tool for educating caregivers and family members about this devastating disease.”

Dr. Ramón Valle, Professor Emeritus – San Diego State University (2)

“Do you have fotonovelas in your library? If not, why?...These small paperbacks will increase your circulation and bring a whole new cohort of readers to your library, at a very small financial cost to you.”

Robert Logan, Librarian – Round Rock, Texas (3)

“...Fotonovelas in the United States serve as a cultural bridge between an impersonal, unfamiliar and often alienating environment and the more familiar heritage of the readers.”

Loretta Carrillo and Thomas A. Lyson – Clemson University (4)

“Both the comic book and the fotonovela have been considered by development communications planners as important media to be used in the information process. They are popular, effective, timely, and with a flexibility which allows a variety of thematic and message adaptations.”

Susan Leibtag and Hugh Rigby – Johns Hopkins University (5)

Steps in Producing Fotonovelas

Step 1: Planning

- Define who you want to reach and how you are going to reach them. Pinpoint your primary audience as clearly and specifically as possible. Conduct demographic and epidemiological research.
- Get to know your audience: their values, needs, barriers, desires, and motivators. Qualitative research techniques such as focus group interviews are great tools to get to know your audience.
- Zero in on your message. Ask yourself, “What do we want our audience to do as a result of reading this fotonovela?”
- Start working on your distribution plan, which should be part of your overall marketing plan.

Step 2: Story and Storyboard Development

- Decide on the four essential elements of a fotonovela: storyline, characters, dialogue, and settings.
- Use a variation of the classic entertainment education storyline structure: the main character who is not doing the desired behavior learns from the character who is the model of change. Your qualitative research, i.e. focus groups or individual interviews, will give you insight into who your characters should be. Ask your audience, “Who would be the best person to learn this from?” That will start you thinking on who your main character should be.
- Dialogue. Keep sentences short and to the point. Use words that are familiar to the audience. Avoid the use of jargon.
- Settings. Use familiar settings that help the reader identify with feelings of home and comfort. Place images in your set that your audience holds dear.
- Check popular magazines and other publications directed towards your audience and don’t be afraid to emulate.

Step 3: Field-Testing

- Field-test!
- If costs permit, field-test a galley with the actual lay-out with photos and dialogue. The next best thing is to field-test the script to make sure that your audience understands your message. Build questions around content, literacy, design, colors, characters, believability and attractiveness.

Step 4: Printing

- If the fotonovela is going to be printed in color, ask for a color proof to approve before printing.
- If you are going to post the fotonovela on-line, use the correct resolution.

Step 5: Distribution

- Incorporate questions about distribution when you do your formative research. Ask your primary audience, “Where would be the best places to distribute this fotonovela?”
- Integrate the fotonovela into your marketing plan. Use the fotonovela as one of your strategies.
- Remember, your audience has to see your message 7 times before they remember it!

“The production of comic books and photonovels requires a high level of technical expertise. It may be advisable to employ a commercial production and distribution system.”

Susan Leibtag and Hugh Rigby – The Johns Hopkins University

The Fotonovela Production Company™ - is the only fotonovela production firm in the United States solely devoted to the production of educational fotonovelas.

Ana Consuelo Matiella, CEO, is the most experienced

fotonovela producer in the United States. She has been writing, developing and producing fotonovelas for 25 years. For more information on how The Fotonovela Production Company™ can help you reach your audience, call 505-466-8817.



The difference between a fotonovela and an historieta is that an historieta is illustrated and a fotonovela is photographed.

References:

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 - (4) Carrillo, Loretta and Lyson, Thomas A. “The Fotonovela as a Cultural Bridge for Hispanic Women in the United States.” Journal of Popular Culture. 1983: Vol:17:3
 - (5) Leibtag, Susan and Rigby, Hugh. “Photonovels and Comic Books for Family Planning”. Overview Packet 12:1989. Johns Hopkins University – Center for Communications Programs.
 - (6) Parlato, et al. Fotonovelas and Comic Books: The Use of Popular Graphic Media in Development. 1980. Agency for International Development, Washington, D.C.
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