



David Stone Design

# CENEX



## Directors Treatment





## Bringing the 'real'...

Rural New Zealand, where I live, seems to me to have much in common with the Midwestern USA - an abundance of warm, funny characters; good-hearted people with a strong work ethic and a powerful sense of community. So I feel I have a really good understanding of where we want to go with this project.

For these spots we'll travel to selected towns in the Midwest and discover the heartbeat of these communities – the people who truly embody the character of small town USA.

We'll find out who they are what makes them tick. We'll demonstrate the connection that each Cenex store has with the people in its local community, and honor those outstanding citizens who, quietly and humbly, make the lives of their neighbors a little better every day.

The secret lies in allowing these narratives to emerge organically. The people and their stories exist already, our job is simply to shine a light on them and give them the opportunity to tell their stories - as the real, earthy personalities that they are.

So the warmth, humor and idiosyncrasy of these communities is not anything we'll contrive – rather, it's what we'll reveal.

And discovering that charming authenticity is what makes this project so exciting.





## My Approach.

Making all these narratives feel completely unscripted and spontaneous – and as ‘un-advertising’ as possible - will be the approach we’re after for this project. There’ll be nothing glossy or Hollywood-like - here we encounter real, salt-of-the-earth Americans – we see them as they are, and recognize and applaud them for who they are.

I think we need a strategy for that though - as much as I want the end result to feel absolutely spontaneous and ‘in the moment’, to achieve that will take a smart approach and careful logistics.

For example, some of the best footage will be in those magic moments that fall between the formal set-ups - the ones you don’t normally focus on.

It’s the amused glance off-camera to something that distracts; the thoughtful smile, almost an afterthought, in response to what someone says; the friendship expressed in a warm hand on a shoulder; the laugh at a joke that goes on just that little bit too long - all those typically “b-roll” moments that expose people’s true heart and add so much authenticity.

Collecting those moments in a way which works with the script frameworks we set out to achieve will take planning and foresight, (which I’ll talk about a bit more shortly.).

Structurally we talked about how these might work with a lead or host character - and how we get into each narrative and balance the presence of our host with meeting other people from the locale, and of course including those elements that give us the Cenex touchpoints.

My feeling is that we mix our host both on-camera and as our voiceover, which both frees us up narratively to keep the host present through the spot without having them dominate the visual content, plus is a lot less ‘advertising’ as voice over talent.

I imagine shooting the host looking directly to camera so it feels as unmediated as possible... fresh open and honest, with a twinkle in the eye...



## Tone.

In this campaign, every shot, every character, every small town scene will show what makes these places tick. We're there on the inside... the people, their charm, their quirks, their pastimes, their lives - the highs, maybe a few lows - the dynamics, the friendships, families...

I see the tone as upbeat - meaningful but not sentimental - fresh and open as a mid-western sky...

From a gas station attendant helping an elderly lady pump gas to a farmer heading home on his tractor with flowers for his wife; to older teenagers laughing as they walk to school and a couple of kids shooting hoops at dusk... we'll go in with a cinematic yet 'documentary' eye - and let each scene unfold naturally with its intrinsic uplift, humor and touch of pathos.

The thing about this is we don't have to contrive anything; aside from my own work on films like "Sunshine Cleaning", I think of filmmaker Christopher Guest and his classics "Waiting for Guffman" and "Best in Show" - he portrays ordinary small-town America with all its foibles and eccentricities - sure in his case the characters are often pushed for effect, yet he does it with such affection and an eye for the real people who inspire them that we're completely charmed and drawn in.

And, as real life is full of varied and unexpected events, my shooting style will reflect this. Inside an overarching filmic look, stylistically it's about using different camera moves and modes to match each scene. I'm thinking a lot of this will be handheld, yet some scenes may work better with a locked off camera or some tracking.

Editorially these shots will come together like a patchwork quilt that captures and beautifully expresses the rich and engaging stories of these places.

Finally, the through-line of our 'lead tour guide' takes each story to the right place for us to say farewell to our charming and distinctive small towns.











## Script evolution.

Given the nature of this project, it will be important that everybody involved in the collaboration is kept up to date with the end result we're aiming for.

The guidance scripts written by the agency give us a reference platform; then, together with the agreed must-haves, we have a great basis for further revision and inclusion of a degree of improvisation.

Because of the "documentary" nature of these pieces – that we're talking about real people and their lives – we'll need to stay in close touch as the stories develop and unfold and make sure that information is collectively understood and agreed upon and then transferred into our final shooting scripts.

The overall idea is so clear and strong that I have no doubt we'll be able to work together to create a wonderful campaign on that basis.





## Casting & Logistics.

Thorough preparation is paramount to a project like this. At this early point, I see this process comprising of three key stages, which will to a large extent determine the shape of the final scripts.

1. Initially, we'll work together and review the research and talent selection done by the agency and client. From this we'll select the three locations that best suit the project's overall theme and feel. From Skype calls, audio interviews and photographic images it should be a solid starting point. As well as rapid profiling of our hero Cenex hosts/guides, we will be tasked to look for additional personalities in each location through street casting. If additional research is needed, we've set aside additional days where a scout and casting manager could target specific locations to do more in-depth coverage.

A side note on street casting: I've done a lot of street casting in my work and I understand how to make it transition into more authentic performances. Especially for a project like this, I suggest we make the casting brief about digging deeper than usual to show the real people of these places, including a mix of the faces that make up our modern demographics. I'd suggest pushing the casting on this so it reaches beyond where we need to be, so that we have lots of options to fall back on.

2. In the second stage, we will refine the shortlist of preferred talent using the information our team has gathered. From this we will outline a cohesive narrative the will show how our story will come to life. The result of this collaboration will be an agreed platform for shooting scripts, cast and locations that embraces our vision and goals.

3. The third stage is the shoot itself. While we'll have a clear plan encompassing both logistics and shooting schedule, this will be a creative process that will still embrace some degree of fluidity. We need to take into consideration unplanned opportunities. I think by bringing a nimble approach to production in the crew size and efficient preproduction, we will have a platform for taking advantage of these creative moments.





## Cenex Personalities.

The scripts centre around our Cenex owner/manager/guides, so obviously we'll make it our priority to find these characters, and will look to Cenex for initial assistance in this.

We see the towns through the eyes of these people, and as they'll speak to us directly to camera, it's vital to do a rigorous casting job here.

It might be good to find a wide range of ages/genders/races to choose from, and we'll be able to balance each spot out as we go. Clearly the guides must be personable, down-to-earth and friendly, which is of course the Midwest personality so it shouldn't be a problem! A sense of humor, a look in the eye, and the ability not to take themselves too seriously will be what we're looking for.

Their greatest characteristic might be their empathy – their ability to see beyond the surface and into the heart of who people really are. In this way, we'll show the Cenex store and its operator playing an important role in the fabric of small town society. And the trust the townspeople feel in the Cenex manager reflects the trust they can feel in Cenex itself.

Along with our guides, our star performers will need to be great on camera too – comfortable, calm, open. One of my strengths is my ability to put people at ease and I'll make sure that the shoot feels relaxed and casual. I think coming over from New Zealand will be a big advantage because it won't feel like a bunch of big city ad people rolling into town, but more like people they can relate to and be interested in who we are as well. That's a great platform for creating empathy and dialogue, and I think in turn will help our cast feel free to be truly themselves and give us a great result.



## Cinematography.

This is about being contemporary and unadorned: images that are perceived as authentic and grounded, so they always feel real.

At the same, there's an aesthetic to them, a beauty that's natural and easy - a cinematic look built around using available light (or at least a style that always looks naturally or practically lit) and is very ambient and unforced.

In terms of a dynamic, be assured that this will primarily be shot with a hand-held camera. The camerawork will breathe, painting these portraits with a natural, casual feel. It will all be driven by the content, with the priority being that we allow the heart of each situation and personality to shine through.

My cinematographer, John Toon, is a master at this kind of work - especially shooting hand-held - and is very excited about the project. John has the pedigree to match: aside from shooting my features he recently won the 2014 Australian Cinematographer of the Year at ACS National Awards and Best Cinematography Motion Picture for the Hugh Laurie feature film, Mr Pip. I know he will create extraordinary images for these films too.

John will be with the team on our scouting missions and working out his shooting plan as part of the pre-production process. I'd also like to give John an open brief to capture as many extra details that occur during the process as we can. These are the unscripted gems that happen naturally in interactions between people, but also improvised moments, plus the ideas that we'll definitely have on set, so we have all the possible material we need to build a great edit - one that achieves a level of observation and total authenticity.











## Sound.

Again, this is real life and we want to collect all those ambient sounds on location that will be useful to a sound mix. So we'll record a lot of audio a and b-roll to cover all possible eventualities in the edit, in addition to all our dialogue that is a natural part of the scripts.

## The bigger picture...

I can see us gathering a lot of material on this shoot - more than enough to do longer edits for online use or other applications. I'd be fully supportive of this and open to shooting this with an eye to other uses - for example it may be that we shoot extra footage of our host characters at home or at work with an eye to an extended online versions or more detailed profiles of specific characters. More than happy to talk more about this.





## Final thoughts...

This is a great chance to tell a truer kind of story. One with authenticity, a good marbling of humor and a lovely human quality.

Part love letter, part thank you note, 100% watchable and engaging.

I think the honesty and realism will draw us in to these films for Cenex - and more than just being reportage or a passing ad-land window into their world, we are put in their shoes and we realize how unique and grounded and real these townsfolk are.

To me, this is where the success of an idea like this sits; in the honesty, real humanity and genuine entertainment value of small town folks.

This is not one of those formulaic projects created in a big city office and worked up on a computer. This is a trip to heartland America, a window into who they really are, peculiarities and all.

Without it being overplayed, there's a lovely subtext that aligns Cenex with the idea that these communities are caring places to live. Through sunshine or rain, good times and bad, the Cenex stores are part of the fabric of life in these towns. And that matters a lot.

Many thanks,  
Christine