

Xero's Beautiful Video Marketing Story



A Case Study by Wipster

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True Innovation in a Collaborative Age

From its conception in 2006, Xero has created beautiful accounting software that delivers results for its customers. This approach has taken them from a small startup to a company with 1400 employees in 20 offices globally. Their dedication to beautifully crafted products carries through to their marketing campaigns, where they invest serious time and effort in creating fully integrated video campaigns across all facets of the marketing and sales funnel.

Pat Macfie, the Global Director of Media at Xero, manages five teams in San Francisco, London, Melbourne, Auckland and Wellington with over 300 internal stakeholders. The finesse with which these teams collaborate is one of the most cutting-edge processes we've seen within an in-house content creation team. With their innovative workflow, Xero is able to produce 400 exceptionally high-quality videos a year, all developed, shot, animated, reviewed, approved and published in-house – and with turnarounds of a matter of days, not weeks.

In this in-depth study of Xero's video content strategy, we discover:

- How an international team functions as a 24/7 content creation machine
- Why the number of videos Xero produces each year has dropped
- How they keep content fresh when dealing with a service-based product
- The incredible integrated content marketing campaigns that delight their customers
- The marketing tools and solutions Xero uses to take their campaigns to the next level
- The most important thing Xero has learned over ten years of marketing development

Xero excels at delivering content to the right customer, with the right message, at the right time. Here's their story.

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Technology Meets An Online Global Team – The Most Incredible In-House Content Workflow We've Ever Seen

Xero is a 24-hour-a-day content making machine. Creative hubs in their five international offices allow for seamless creation of video and related content – Wellington and Auckland offices can create the concept and storyboards, Melbourne can shoot it, and as the Pacific region heads home for the day, London picks up the animation and San Francisco finishes it off. This means that by the time Auckland and Wellington walk back into the office the next day, a brand-new piece of content is waiting for them.

“We're all one company, we all trust each other, and we come together with our collective knowledge” — Pat Macfie

Their flat internal agency structure allows for fewer approvals, less bureaucracy and faster turnarounds. The Head of Brand and Marketing sits above the Director of 'The Hub' (Xero's internal agency), and then follows Pat as Global Director of Media. Below that are designers, writers, and 'global leads' (producers who are tasked with creating and producing content), all based in each of the offices alongside local marketing teams. And get this – their internal agency costs 5x less than similar services when hired externally.

“A video producer in our world is kind of like a general role that's both creating and producing content. We have producers and associate producers for live-action video content in Auckland, Wellington and Melbourne, in San Francisco and in London. And then we have our merch and graphics teams.”

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“It’s a truly global piece of content,” Pat says. “I see that as a big advantage for us because there are very few brands that have the ability to do that internally. If someone said, ‘Hey pal, let’s make a global video but I need it by next week’ I would say, ‘Sure – I know I can get my team into a creative Hangout straightaway.’ We can discuss the brief and they can do the execution tomorrow everywhere in the world and have that content back to me, 24–48 hours later and have it ready for delivery on Wednesday next week. There aren’t too many companies that can pull that off.”

“Bringing that together cohesively across a large organization, across timezones, is a big challenge but one that we’re getting on top of.” — Pat Macfie

The agility and global factor of Xero’s content machine means they can also keep ahead of the online curve – the internet is a notoriously fickle place that often demands timely and on-topic content before it turns stale and cringey. Their recent ‘mannequin challenge’ video was able to hit the perfect viral video timeframe, in no small part to their ability to turn projects around at lightning speed.

“I got pinged by the Head of Social Media who was like, “I think we should do a mannequin challenge video.” So straightaway I got onto Google Hangouts to see who [in my team] could jump on a creative call with her. Within 40 minutes we had a concept and everybody in Wellington rallied around it. We shot it the next day and it was out on social within three or four days of us having that conversation. That’s what having an international team is all about.”

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We Don't Do Signposts in the Desert – Volume ≠ Success

“We make a big investment in video content and my team is not just creating video but also the creative narrative of the business.” — Pat Macfie

Despite this, the number of videos Xeros created actually dropped in 2016. Not because they can't deliver, but because they're delivering differently. The quality and the timing of the message is ultimately the real power of video. The team believes that volume isn't the metric that matters, it's the engagement. As Pat says, “You can make a beautiful piece of content but if it doesn't get the right engagement with the right audience, it's like a signpost in the desert.”

“We're producing less work than we used to, but at a higher quality.”
— Pat Macfie

“You really need to understand the customer journey, and the stories need to reflect that. Reflect the problems, the challenges, or whatever the information is that they [the customers] are trying to uncover, or want to get a better understanding of, at every stage of that journey. Our video content strategy matches that.”

One example of Xero's serendipitous integrated content campaigns sends a gift to a customer at just the right time.

These videos play into a larger, more complex content marketing strategy. Using solutions like Marketo and Brightcove, the Xero marketing team is able to monitor the customer journey from the first video viewing, to a blog reading, to the entering of a potential customer's email address. This sounds typical enough but Xero's strength lies in surprise. Their salespeople can pick this information up, see that a lead has watched 60% of a particular video, and structure a conversation around that – or create a seemingly serendipitous experience.

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“A potential customer comes along, they check out a blog, fill out a form, watch a video and then two days later, a package turns up saying ‘thanks for checking us out, thanks for considering us, here’s a little gift’. This serendipitous experience is all off the back of video content. It’s a pretty cool thing to consider, especially if the gift is also highly contextual to the particular content experience that the customer has had. That warms the cockles of the heart of the customer!”

“As much as we want to make beautiful stuff, which we do at scale and around the world, it’s to no end if it doesn’t deliver.”



“We’re a media team that is committed to a narrative and to working with the rest of business to maximize exposure and all that narrative leads to conversions and new customers and products.”

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The Art of Creative Restriction

Pat ensures his team saves 20% of their time for exploring new ways to do video marketing within Xero's brand and positioning. This is especially important as the marketing industry itself is still considering what can be done around video marketing and the strength of integrating video into campaigns.

"I think just generally, video grows in line with the level of understanding that marketers or clients or stakeholders have around how they can use video. A lot of it is down to understanding what they can achieve and how. People will read a thing about social video and they'll just create a video for Snapchat or Instagram.



"But you really need to understand the detail of producing a credible piece of content on those platforms from a production perspective and also from a brand perspective. How are you going to make that content truly unique and truly ownable and truly you? I think if you don't know that then there's not much point in trying to execute on those new and emerging platforms – you have got to have your foundations right."

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Despite this focus on developing new video marketing outlets, being creative day in and day out on the same product does pose challenges for the Xero team.

“We’ve got the one product and you’ve got to keep that creative challenge to the forefront and when you’re approaching the same product, customers, partners, it’s a challenge. Always a challenge. But it’s something that we’re owning and we make most of every project.”

“It always seems easy to do cool stuff for cool brands; we always say, “Aww man, if I had Nike, I’d do this, that, the other thing.” When you face a really meaty creative challenge like a SaaS (software-as-a-service) company, and it’s servicing what’s traditionally quite a conservative customer base, I think the creative challenge is a lot deeper. It can be pretty tough.”

So instead, Pat’s team focuses on finding the magic in every story; always asking themselves ‘how can we make this more magical?’

Part of the magic of having one product – even if the product feels like a difficult one to make exciting content for – is the opportunity, as Pat explains it, to go deeper. When working at an agency, while the creative opportunities are exciting and fresh there is rarely a chance to do more than flit across the top of each creative. Create one advertisement, one brand strategy, and then move onto the next one.

The beauty of working with a ‘meaty creative challenge’ like Xero is the opportunity to get to the deep truth of each customer and exploring how to create content around that experience.

Creativity comes alive through limitations. By focusing on one product and all the minute details of how and why it works for a customer, and the value the customer is receiving, it gives the creative team more opportunity to come up with wacky answers to straightforward questions

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That is where the magic of Xero's content marketing shines and Pat's team grows with every challenge.

“We know what our vision is and we know the level that we want to operate on. And every day it's about closing that gap – that's what we're going after. And we do that by putting ourselves into difficult positions with difficult creative goals – over time it grows muscle. We've got to grow the muscle to be able to use the muscle – then we can get to that vision.”

According to Pat, you don't get to use budget as an excuse for creative restriction. With Xero's startup roots, lacking a budget or resources to execute a vision is only a perceived issue. Money only becomes another opportunity to rise to the challenge and create content, no matter the limitations.

“If you look at your resources and go ‘awww I've only got this much budget’ then you're being a crybaby. We'd all like more budget but there's not limitless amounts of money to pour into videos. If you're a small business then the reality is you have stuff-all money, and you have your phone to shoot on. If you're a big brand you still have a limit to what you can do. Budgets are a constraint but that's the challenge.”



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Honesty is Key – Xero's Feedback Culture

And Pat gets his hands dirty, reviewing 80% of the content produced by their global hub.

An important part of getting it right, Pat explains, is having a creative culture where every member of the media team is encouraged to speak up and provide open and thoughtful feedback. When so much of your team works overseas and their part of the 24/7 workflow depends on being in regular contact and trusting each other to make the right decisions, it's important to give the right feedback regularly and honestly.

With 400 pieces of content a year, old-school feedback methods of email chains, phone calls and the occasional video meeting no longer make the cut. That's where Wipster, a solution for pre-publishing review and approval of video content, came in.



“We need to be able to take the feedback that people give us and that we give each other as creatives and understand that we're all on the same team. We're all heading in the same direction. We trust that we're the best at our game and we've executed this to the best of our ability.”

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“When you're building a world-class brand and world-class product it's all about tough conversations and that can be hard in a creative environment. You have to foster a culture around straight talk and Wipster has certainly helped with that.”

“Wipster lets us maintain and actually enhance quality, that's why we use it.”

— Pat Macfie

“When we're close to the final product and need that extra 15–20% of tweaks to get it right, we plug the video into Wipster so I can get to the crux of it really quickly. If it doesn't look like it should, is not telling the story like it's suppose to, or if there are any little things like the voiceover is a bit off, Wipster is just brilliant for that quick feedback, where we all know we're pretty close but it still needs polishing.”

Wipster enables a cutting-edge global video team to connect, provide feedback and publish with exceptional speed and focus. Xero were early adopters of Wipster when it first became available for review-and-approval in 2013, and their relationship has grown in line with the success and quality of Xero's video content.

‘Breaking It’ – The Year Ahead

What's in store for Xero in 2017? Pat wants to focus on getting even more efficient and effective at creating video content that further supports the company's sales process – making more charming and serendipitous experiences for their customers.

“I talk to other apps and SaaS companies in the ecosystem and I know their teams face similar ROI challenges when being able to get buy-in from throughout the business. I think it's one of the things we're very fortunate to have here at Xero – a level of understanding and buy-in when it comes to creating video content.”

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“We just need to get more effective in how we use video to drive sales and convert sales – that’s always 101. We have to do that better every single day.”

And then there’re the opportunities in the kinds of video content Xero will produce. “I see some big opportunities that we’re going to be able to take advantage of inside channels like YouTube,” Pat shares. “Collaborating with incredible content creators wherever they may be in the world to help us tell our stories, that’s one thing I’m excited about.”

“Beyond that, we just need to break more stuff really. Just try stuff and break it. My old boss used to come up here and the first thing he always asked was, ‘What did you break this week?’”

And Xero *does* break stuff. One recent video lead campaign released on social media didn’t quite hit the right notes within the team.

“We made a series of video ads that attempted to use a bit of humour, meshed with dream sequences and a side of various elements that were trending in social media at that time. Then to top it off we tried to produce it with a really small budget.”

“We ran the campaign and it actually performed pretty well. But when we reflected on the project internally, to be honest, while it was kind of endearing, it was also more than a little weird and not as well executed as it should have been.”

From this experience, Pat’s team learnt that even when exploring creative ideas, there still needs to be a little voice in the back of their minds that looks at the process with a critical eye. When you’re caught up in the buzz of production, it’s helpful to have someone with a level head who calls things as they see it. It also taught them not to be afraid to throw things away – if at delivery time you’re not 110% satisfied that a project is up to the mark, it’s okay to bin it and start again.

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“Breaking things is about the challenge, about exploration and innovating and breaking convention in an effort to find ways to do things more creatively or efficiently. It's also about finding the edge and sometimes falling over it so you know how not to do it next time. It's how we grow new muscle in our team and find creative fulfillment in every project.”



Conclusion

While coming from humble startup beginnings, Xero has grown and pushed the cutting edge of not only their product but their marketing efforts. As any startup knows, the strength of your product often relies on the strength of the people around it. Their tenacity, their creativity, their agility, and their passion to help the customer succeed.

Xero's global media machine is the culmination of people who are dedicated to the success of the customer journey and the quality in which it's delivered to them. There are no restrictions, only challenges, feedback is honest and timely, and collaboration is across oceans and timezones.

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Xero shows us that video marketing doesn't have to be a slow, expensive and outlier venture, it can be integrated into every part of your customer's journey and a point of difference among a sea of competitors.

Throughout our conversation with Pat it was clear that Xero's international video marketing team is a window into the future of content marketing. And we're excited to see what they 'break' next.

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Wipster

Want to chat about your future with Wipster?
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