



Bob Chitester and Candy Mead

An *Insider* Interview

Saving the Republic Starts in the Classroom—One Lesson at a Time

Teaching young students to think critically about public policy issues is no easy task. Teaching it to adults isn't always easy either. Bob Chitester knows a little bit about both. Back in 1980 he produced the "Free to Choose" television series with Milton Friedman. That series was revolutionary because it brought basic economic concepts to a mass audience. It showed not only how free markets work, but also how to communicate those ideas in an engaging way. By creating izzit.org in 2006, Chitester has extended that educating mission to 4th- through 12th-grade classrooms all around the country. Under the guidance of Candy Mead, izzit.org's director of curriculum development, izzit.org provides teachers with high-quality educational videos and accompanying lesson plans on range of topics. These include entrepreneurship, property rights, free trade, global warming, and personal responsibility. Ultimately, Chitester and Mead want to help teachers get their students to think for themselves about the role of government in their lives; they want the kids to always ask themselves: Who's choosing?



The Insider: *Where did the idea for izzit.org come from?*

Bob Chitester: It started out in 1999 when I approached John Stossel and proposed to him that I come up with a way to market his materials to classrooms, and ABC agreed to that. We then began as “Stossel in the Classroom.” In 2006, ABC decided they did not want us to continue doing that. We had developed quite a proprietary database of teacher e-mails and names, and rather than simply forfeit that we decided to move into this business of providing DVDs with teaching units, and ultimately into the daily current events service. We launched in the fall of 2006. We have since built up a library of 19 DVDs that come with teaching units.

TI: *Where does the name izzit.org come from?*

Candy Mead: It’s a derivative of a word—i-z-z-a-t—that means respect.

BC: It’s Hindi.

CM: So our tag line is “Every teacher deserves respect,” or “You need respect in your classroom.”

TI: *And what is it that teachers get from izzit.org that they can’t get anywhere else?*

CM: Our products try to raise questions that might not otherwise be raised. That focus runs through everything we do, whether it’s our videos or our daily current events service. We try to get students thinking critically and to question the conventional wisdom about all of the issues and policies that are out there. We try to get them to look at issues from a fresh perspective. What we’re really getting them to think about is: Who chooses? Who benefits? And who pays? You can look at just about any policy or issue from that perspective. We try to raise questions about what is the proper role of government, and maybe for the first time students might be encouraged to think that there ought to be limits on government. We

get them thinking about the power of incentives and how when you change incentives you often get unintended consequences. Another important theme is how important property rights are to freedom and to prosperity. These kinds of ideas are just not common in other resources that teachers have. There may be a few others out there, but we’re pretty unique.

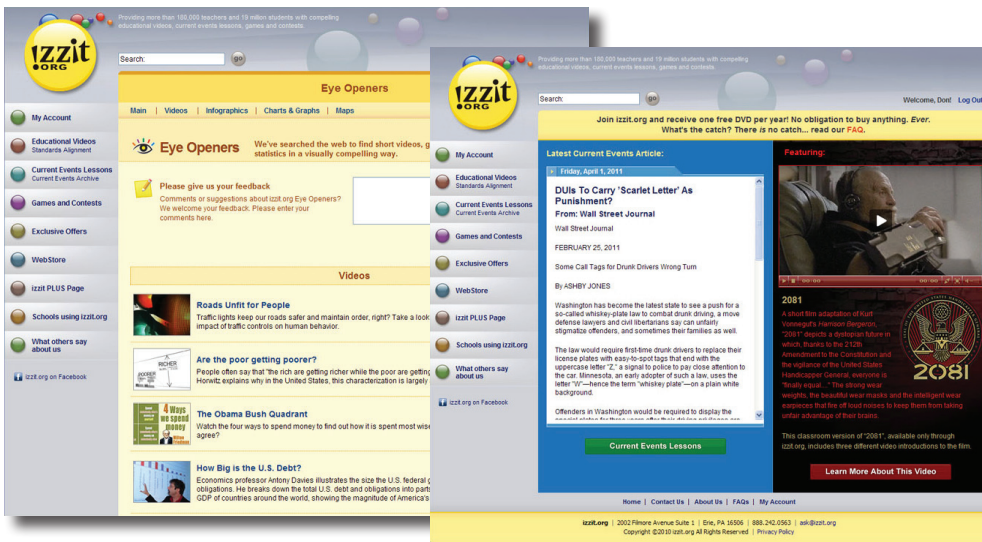
The other thing we really strive for is making things easy for teachers. They just don’t have a lot of time. Each of our videos comes complete with a teacher’s guide with thought-provoking discussion questions, worksheets, and quizzes. It’s really a whole package. Same with our daily current events e-mail: The questions are already there for them. The prep work is done, and they can just grab it and use it and it doesn’t take them a lot of time.

BC: The approach we take is to offer materials that are very modular. We offer single-issue, supplemental material. We don’t intend to provide teachers with what one would describe as a comprehensive curriculum. We’re giving teachers little nuggets—video presentations and a daily current events e-mail. And we provide them with a broad enough variety of these that the chances are pretty good that a teacher will find something in the DVDs that we offer that fits somewhere in their curriculum. And as a result we feel we get a higher degree of participation than we would otherwise.

CM: And the creative teachers—even if they are math or science teachers—if they want to, they will find a way to fit one or more of our videos into their curriculum.

BC: There’s a philosophical perspective behind our strategy. It’s not just that—like a Moore’s Law in reverse—every year the attention span of citizens in our country decreases by 50 percent. The strategy certainly reflects that, but it also reflects the reality that the average person has no meaningful incentive or rational reason to take the time to fully understand these issues.





Izzit.org wants to get students thinking critically about public policy issues. Founded by Bob Chitester of the Free to Choose Network, izzit.org offers educational videos about a variety of topics, including free trade, entrepreneurship, poverty, Communism, and global warming. Teachers, including homeschoolers, who teach grades 4 through 12 can get one free video per year. Each video comes with a lesson plan, discussion questions, and quizzes. Izzit.org also offers a free daily e-mail providing a current events lesson based on current news.

As long as they're making a decent living, they're happy and content; and as a result they have a tendency to not understand issues in a deep way. They're being bombarded by 30-second messages that often lead them to act in the political arena in ways that are contrary to their best interest. And we are trying in the classroom to counter that with equally short and pithy—not 30-second, but 10- or 15-minute—videos in which we try to just weld into these students' minds some very simple concepts that will help them sort their way through all this nonsense they are exposed to.

TI: *How many teachers use your products?*

BC: Our current events service has 56,000-plus teacher subscribers. Those 56,000 teachers get a daily e-mail from us that has a current events article indicated and discussion questions to go with it.

We have now shipped close to 300,000 DVD teaching units, and the number of teachers using our teaching units is in the range of 215,000. According to the audit that we do once a year, the average teacher shares our teaching units with between two and three other teachers. The average teacher shows the DVD to 100 students. So we are reaching millions of students with these teaching units.

I think we're very close to being at a breakthrough in terms of extremely wide brand recognition within the schools. Teachers are recognizing that izzit.org stands for high-quality, stimulating supplemental material that gets students involved in the learning process. Last year, of the 1.7 million middle- and high-school teachers in America, 440,000 teachers visited our Web site. This year, the number of teachers—unique teachers—who have visited our Web site will be well in excess of a half-

million. So it's looking like about one out of every three teachers in middle or high school will have visited our Web site this year.

TI: *What videos are your most popular?*

CM: *Pennies a Day* is extremely popular.

BC: The most popular piece we have is a one-hour piece we did with David Robinson on character and personal responsibility. It fills a felt need in schools all over this country,

or who have content they think is appropriate for the students and want to figure out how to get it to the classroom?

CM: I have a particular wish. Bob mentioned that we partnered with Reason—with the Drew Carey project. We partnered with the Acton Institute using their *Call of the Entrepreneur*. We used one segment of that about the Michigan dairy farmer—with his Dairy Doo. And that's been really popular,

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which is that students really need to hear from people who are very strong character models. Teachers want to have an authority figure like, in this case a sports star, tell their students what it means to be a responsible adult. That DVD was one of the two we offered the very first year, so it's been available the longest period of time. And I think we've shipped something like 40,000 units of that.

We have another one on global warming titled, *Unstoppable Solar Cycles*. We are coming very close to having shipped 40,000 of those. Another one, which Candy mentioned, *Pennies a Day*, is about micro-lending and Muhammad Yunus. And that's a very well received one. We've done two different teaching units with Reason.tv and Drew Carey, and those have been reasonably popular. I think in the range of 15,000 teachers are making use of those.

TI: *Do you have any advice for think tanks that want to develop content for the classroom*

especially among middle school students. The reason might be the title of the piece—*From Poop to Profits*. That got their attention. I would very much like to see us partner with Heritage and do one or more teaching units based on the *Index of Economic Freedom*. I think that would be really powerful.

So my advice is work with us. We have the pipeline into the classroom. Teachers already know about us.

BC: I have been in the media business now for a very long time—50 years or so. I have been a producer at all levels. I used to think that you can produce effective media pieces for pennies. I have done that. I have produced one-hour discussions with Nobel laureates for the cost of a cheap airline ticket and maybe \$400.

But I have learned from experience that media cannot be approached on the cheap. I have said to the heads of freedom movement organizations—think tanks—that have spent,

say, \$20,000 to \$25,000 to do a video that it was a complete waste of money.

Media has one primary characteristic: It is a tool for reaching a mass audience. And if you're going to reach a mass audience—by which I mean millions of people—you cannot reach them on the cheap. They are acclimated to a very high standard in terms of the quality of media they are willing to watch. So even in the classroom where we have a captive audience, our approach is to work to raise the money and to spend significant amounts on producing videos that are not only strong in terms of the message they communicate but are highly entertaining and appealing to students. We want videos that a student at home would voluntarily take the time to watch.

In surveys we've done of teachers asking them to evaluate our product, 80 percent of the teachers surveyed rank our videos as superior to any other available to them. And furthermore, we get reports from teachers that students approach them and ask them: Would you please play the video again?

So the message we carry to the think tanks is: Let's partner; we have a pipeline.

But for a 10-minute, 15-minute piece, you cannot do a decent job consistently without spending \$200,000 to \$250,000; and if you're going to do an hour-long program, you're looking at budgets in the range of \$600,000 to \$800,000 per hour of programming. Anything less than that we have found you so often fail to reach the mark.

TI: *Are you concerned that some teachers will look at your materials and say: "Well, they're just pushing an ideological view of American history and government?"*

CM: We have a really broad appeal. We don't try to tell students what to think, we just try to get them to think. And we have such a variety of topics. We appeal to teachers across the spectrum. They all—most of them—value

getting their students to think critically.

BC: We're very sensitive to designing the product in a way that raises questions, but does so in a way that's reasonable. Because we create these little "nuggets" and they are not part of a comprehensive curriculum, we leave it open to the creative thinking of the teachers how the videos can be used in a variety of curriculums. So the range of courses in which our DVDs are used is very broad, despite the fact that you would generally categorize them as social studies—and even more narrowly as political science or economics.

One of our Teacher of the Year award winners was a fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-grade music teacher who selected a teaching unit we did about the Estonia Piano Company. The unit was initially intended to—and it does—illustrate why free trade is important to wealth development.

Yet this teacher got it, because she was out looking around for some videos that she could show her children about how musical instruments were made. So she asked for this teaching unit, and she got it and played it, and she was very happy because we have some great shots in there of how you make a grand piano. But the content of the piece is about Communism. It's about the workers in the plant talking—one of them about how his father was shot by the Communists.

The video talks about free trade. It's talking about the success of the Estonia Piano Company; but at the same time it is providing a history lesson—one that is often ignored in classrooms—of the Communist atrocities. At the very end, the father of the piano maker who bought the company makes this very passionate statement about how valuable freedom is. This teacher still shows this video every year, and they talk about those issues as well as how the piano is made in a music class.

CM: That's my favorite video, *Freedom's Sound*.

