

The Panhandler

A Short Film

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Version 1.01

"An American Success Story"

Synopsis: A homeless alcoholic experiments with marketing techniques.

***The Panhandler** is a short film of 5-10 minutes. The following describes the general sequence of events in the story, with details to be filled in later.*

The film set is set in the present day in three locations: (1) a street corner near a freeway off-ramp, (2) the cluttered "nest" of a homeless person under a freeway overpass, and (3) a commuter parking lot. There is one main character and several passing characters who are each seen only once.

EXT – FREEWAY OFF-RAMP – DAY

FADE IN.

Somewhere in urban Southern California in the present day, a disheveled homeless PANHANDLER is working passing motorists. He is standing at the intersection of a freeway off-ramp and a major thoroughfare. Motorists coming down the ramp from the freeway have to stop at a red light. When they stop, the Panhandler

plaintively walks up and down the line of traffic with a handmade cardboard sign:
“HOMELESS & HUNGRY – PLEASE HELP!”

At each cycle of the stoplight, the Panhandler has only a couple of minutes to persuade people to give him money before the light changes and the traffic zooms off. It is hard, hot, humiliating work, but every so often a car window comes down, and a motorist hands him a bill or some change.

In a brief montage, we see several motorists hand him money. We don't see the people themselves, only their hands reaching out of car windows. For each donation, the Panhandler says, “God Bless You!”

The first motorist whose face we see is a woman. Her window comes down and she holds a bill in her hand, but she doesn't immediately hand it over. Instead she asks, “How do I know you aren't going to use this for alcohol?”

“No, ma'am!” says the Panhandler. “I'm clean and sober. I just want something to eat. I've tried to find work, but there isn't any.”

The woman still looks skeptical, but the light has already changed and there is no more time to talk. She hands him the bill.

“God bless!” says the Panhandler as the woman drives away.

EXT – PANHANDLER'S NEST – EARLY EVENING

In the early evening, while there is still some light, we find ourselves in the Panhandler's “nest”—the improvised shelter underneath an overpass where he sleeps. The nest is lined with his treasured but worthless possessions—tin cans, soda bottles, a

broken surfboard, stacks of flat cardboard and pile upon pile of used clothing. There is also a decrepit lounge chair, a cracked mirror within sight of it and a makeshift table beside the chair. The Panhandler has apparently been living here for a while and has assembled all the basic comforts of home.

The Panhandler stumbles into his abode, obviously drunk. In one hand he is carrying the sign he used that day and in the other a six-pack of some unidentifiable high-potency alcoholic beverage, in cans. He sits down in his lounge chair and opens a can of beverage. (It goes “Pssst!” as it opens.) From where he sits, he can see himself in the mirror, and it’s an ugly sight. He hasn’t shaved in a while and obviously hasn’t bathed. We can almost smell him!

“You’re a fine specimen,” he says to the man in the mirror, a slur in his voice. “Is this all you were meant to be?”

He looks down at the cardboard sign he used today, “HUNGRY & HOMELESS – PLEASE HELP!” The sign is as ragged and decrepit as the man. The sign has obviously been used for a long time and is almost falling apart.

“You need to improve your image,” he slurs.

He stumbles to the stack of cardboard, pulls out a piece of the appropriate size, then returns to his chair with it. Then he produces a magic marker, thinks a moment and starts writing. The new sign says: “HOMELESS VETERAN – PLEASE HELP!”

“Time to reboot the franchise,” he slurs.

EXT – FREEWAY OFF-RAMP – DAY

Back at the same street corner, the Panhandler is working the passing traffic in his usual way but with the new sign: “HOMELESS VETERAN – PLEASE HELP!”

At first, he gets the same response as before: Most motorists ignore him, but a few hands reach out of windows to give him money. “God Bless You!” he says to each.

Then a middle-aged man pulls up. The window opens, but no cash comes out.

“You know, I was a veteran,” says the man. “What unit were you with?”

The Panhandler doesn’t have an answer.

The man looks skeptical and disgusted. “Did you serve in a war? Iraq? Vietnam?”

“Vietnam,” says the Panhandler.

“Where in Vietnam?”

The Panhandler is stumped. Clearly he never served in Vietnam.

The man in the car shakes his head. The car window goes up with no money given, and the car drives off.

In a quick montage of scenes, from the motorists’ point of view, we see the Panhandler give different answers to different people about where he served...

“Iraq,” he says to one motorist.

“Afghanistan,” he says to another.

To a third, he says, “Well, I didn’t actually serve in a war. It was between the wars.

Some people give him money, and some don’t, but we can see the Panhandler is ashamed of what he is doing.

EXT – PANHANDLER’S NEST – EARLY EVENING

Again, the Panhandler stumbles into his home under the freeway overpass. He is drunk, as usual, carrying a six-pack of his vile brew. He sits down in his lounge chair, opens another can (“Pssst!”), then looks over and sees himself in the mirror.

“What a sorry man you are,” he says to the man in the mirror. “What a fake! You’re no veteran. You never fought for anything.”

He looks down at the sign he used today: “HOMELESS VETERAN – PLEASE HELP!”

“Who am I kidding?” he says.

Then he goes over to the pile of cardboard, retrieves another piece of the appropriate size and returns to his chair. He starts writing with his magic marker, but we don’t see the words just yet.

Only when he gets back to the street corner the next day do we see what he has written....

EXT – FREEWAY OFF-RAMP – DAY

Back at the street corner, we see a close-up of the Panhandler’s latest sign: “WHY LIE? NEED MONEY FOR BOOZE.”

At first, all the cars seem to pass by him, but then a few hands reach out with the usual donation.

“At least you’re being honest,” says one motorist, handing him a bill.

EXT – PANHANDLER’S NEST – EARLY EVENING

Back in his nest, sipping his evil brew, the Panhandler reviews the signs he has used over the past three days. He has the three signs layed out on the table beside him.

As we see a close-up of the first sign, “HOMELESS & HUNGRY – PLEASE HELP!”, we hear a cash register sound (“Cha-ching!”), and a title is superimposed on the screen: “\$36”.

Then we see a close-up of the second sign, “HOMELESS VETERAN – PLEASE HELP!”. We hear “Cha-ching!” and another amount is superimposed: “\$55”.

Finally, we see today’s sign, “WHY LIE? NEED MONEY FOR BOOZE,” Cha-ching, and the day’s tally: “\$32”.

The Panhandler ponders silently what we understand implicitly: He made the most money by lying, but he still made money when he told the truth. In a split-screen of three parts, we see all three signs and the dollar amount for each: \$36 - \$55 - \$32.

The Panhandler goes to his pile of cardboard and retrieves a new piece that is bigger than all the others. He places it on the table, on top of the other signs. He thinks for a moment, then sets to work on his latest creation.

We don’t see what he is drawing until the next day...

EXT – FREEWAY OFF-RAMP – DAY

Back at the street corner, we see a close-up of the Panhandler's latest sign. It is an elaborate one with some attention to detail. The words say: "DONATE TO THE BEER & POT FUND?" The sign is decorated with drawings of a beer can and a marijuana leaf.



The response looks good! Lots of hands come out of windows to hand him money.

"That's very funny," says one amused motorist, as he hands him money. "But you really don't look the part of a pothead. You look more like a beer man to me. Maybe you should change your image."

EXT – PANHANDLER'S NEST – EARLY EVENING

Back in his nest, sipping his evil brew, the Panhandler looks at today's sign. We hear "Cha-ching!" and see today's haul superimposed on the screen: "\$67".

The Panhandler looks at himself in the mirror and thinks for a moment.

"You don't look the part," he says to the man in the mirror.

He then starts rummaging around in his nest, energized with a new mission. He goes through piles of clothing and pulls out various pieces. He finds a bowl and a razor. He digs out the surfboard. He has a new idea!

EXT – FREEWAY OFF-RAMP – DAY

Back at the street corner, we see a whole new Panhandler! He is dressed as a surfer! His face is cleanly shaved and his long hair has been combed straight. He is wearing a Hawaiian shirt, cargo shorts and flip-flop sandals. A surfboard is propped up on the lamppost behind him. In his hand, he is waving an ornate, multicolored sign in a flowery 1960s style. It says: “PLEASE HELP - DONATE TO THE SURFING AND POT FUND!”

We hear “Cha-ching! Cha-ching! Cha-ching!” as one hand after another comes out of car windows with donations.

After each donation, he says, “Hang loose, Bro!” or “Hang loose, Sis!” and gives the “Hang Loose” sign with his hand. He is totally playing the part!

In a montage of scenes at the street corner, we see the Panhandler over the course of many days as he transformed from a bum into a street performer. His signs and costumes get more clever and elaborate. We see him dressed as a clown, as a sultan with a turban. We even see him nearly naked wearing a thong bikini, dancing.

We hear “Cha-ching! Cha-ching! Cha-ching!” as people give him money for their two minutes of entertainment.

Finally, we see the Panhandler as a businessman. He is wearing a business suit and he is remarkably well-manicured. He is cleanly shaved and his hair is cut and combed. In his hand, he is holding a neatly printed sign: “OUT OF WORK BANKER – PLEASE HELP!”

“Cha-ching! Cha-ching! Cha-ching!” the donations come in!

EXT – PANHANDLER’S NEST – EARLY EVENING

Still dressed as a banker, the Panhandler enters his abode, not yet drunk, carrying his sign and his usual six-pack of vile brew.

He sits down in his lounge chair and sees himself in the mirror. He looks amazingly good this time, not like a homeless person at all!

“You’re a handsome fellow,” he says to the man in the mirror. “If only you could make something of yourself.”

He opens a can of brew. The can goes “Pssst!” as it opens.

He starts to bring the can to his lips but he stops before it gets there. He pulls the can away from his mouth and looks at it, thinking.

Then he slowly turns the can over and dumps the contents on the ground. He opens all the other cans and dumps them out too.

He crumples the final can in his hand and throws it against a distant concrete wall. We hear it ricochet off the concrete.

“You’re a fine specimen,” he says to the man in the mirror. “Now you have to play the part!”

FADE TO BLACK.

A title fades up in the black screen: “Two Years Later...”

EXT – FREEWAY OFF-RAMP – DAY

We're back at the same street corner, but the news seems disappointing. The Panhandler looks just as disheveled and unkempt as the first time we saw him. He is holding a crude sign: "WHO AM I KIDDING? I'M A BUM AND ALWAYS WILL BE".

He works the traffic the same way he used to: By pathetically walking up and down the line of traffic as it is stopped at the red light. Some hands come out of windows to give him money, and he says, "God Bless You!"

One motorist says: "Man, you need to get a job!"

"I know," says the Panhandler. "I've tried to find work, but there isn't any. No one wants to hire a bum like me."

The motorist shakes his head but hands him some money anyway.

At the end of the day, the Panhandler takes his sign, leaves his street corner and crosses the busy main road. Then he makes his way to...

EXT – PARK AND RIDE LOT – LATE AFTERNOON

The Panhandler walks into a commuter parking lot across the street from his panhandling corner. He goes to one car, an expensive-looking convertible. He looks around warily to see if anyone is watching.

Then he takes an electronic key out of his pocket and clicks on the Unlock button. The car chirps in response. The locks open and the convertible top starts retracting.

He puts today's sign in the back seat, where we see there are a lot of other signs, including some fancy and elaborate ones. We also see a number of costumes, including a business suit in a transparent laundry bag and some colored wigs.

The Panhandler sits down in the driver's seat, then he unbuttons his soiled shirt and takes it off. He puts on a brand new, clean, brightly colored Hawaiian shirt.

He reaches into a cooler in the back seat and pulls out a bottle of.... pure mountain spring water! He opens it and enjoys a sip

He turns the ignition and as the engine comes to life so does the stereo. It is blasting classic 1970s surf music!

When we last see the Panhandler, he is cruising along the palm tree-lined streets of Southern California, music blasting, enjoying the American Dream.

He drives off into the sunset.

FADE OUT

THE END