The business of video production

Numerous career opportunities exist for people with video production skills. Careers range from production studio positions to TV news operations. This guide gives a basic overview and then some practical tips for anyone interested in starting your own video production business.

TV news and programs

TV programming and news divisions need anchors, reporters, producers, photographers, audio engineers, video editors, studio camera operators, floor directors, production studio technical directors, and writers. Here are brief rundowns on these positions:

- *Anchors* are the faces of the news department. Usually they start in small markets as reporters and weekend anchors. News directors and newsroom consultants want someone who is comfortable on camera, credible, and authoritative. Anchors have to ad lib with ease and deal with last-minute script changes, dropped live shots, and production miscues. Most anchors write some or all of their copy, including rewriting story lead-ins.
- *Reporters* cover the news. Most do one or two stories a day. They do research, conduct interviews, work with photographers to get needed shots, write scripts, record voice narrations, and work with video editors. They need to be comfortable on camera, particularly during live shots and stand-ups. Many have broadcast journalism degrees and most typically get their start in small markets and work their way up to larger markets. Those who work in small markets generally also shoot and edit their own stories.
- *Producers* set the order for a news show, decide the length and general approach for stories (voiceover, live shot, feature-length, etc.), write some copy, and oversee the actual newscast in the control booth. Good news judgment is critical. They need to be able to make decisions on the fly, manage several live remotes, and keep a sharp eye on the clock. Some producers get their start working as assignment desk assistants; others jump into the job right out of journalism school.
- *Photographers* (aka *shooters*, *photogs*, and *videographers*) shoot the news. They work with reporters to ensure they get the right shots. They have to lug around a heavy camcorder while sometimes sprinting to get a shot or dealing with angry individuals who would rather not show up on the news. They usually are expected to set up live shots. Few small-market stations have photographers (reporters handle that task). Photographers in medium markets typically do video-editing as well. A good demo reel may help you move quickly up to a large market.
- *Audio engineers* set up mics, hold boom mics, and monitor audio levels during shoots. These jobs exist mainly in large markets and on network news, where crews work as trios: reporter, shooter, and audio person.
- *Video editors* edit video by using nonlinear editor tools such as Adobe Premiere Pro CS6. Larger markets generally have a few video editors who supplement editing done by the shooters.
- *Studio camera operators* run the cameras during the newscasts. When the news is not on the air, they usually do double duty by handling commercial production, talk shows, or other studio work.
- *Floor directors* make sure the on-air talent are cued to the right camera, give them hand signals to count down to sound bites during on-set voiceovers, keep things on an even keel during the show, and signal the show close. While the show is on the air, the producer can talk to the talent via their earpieces. During commercial breaks or while a story is playing and the studio mics are off, the floor director relays information.
- *Production directors* and *technical directors* are the two types of studio workers. The production director calls the camera shots and decides when to roll tapes, add supers, cue the talent, and other production items. The technical director or assistant runs the production control board—switching the newscasts (or sporting event or talk show)—and works with other hardware. Production control boards—switchers—typically consist of rows of buttons connected to studio cameras, tape machines, graphics processors, audio gear, and other equipment. Technical directors use switchers to change cameras, apply effects, make transitions between cameras or videotapes, apply color correction, and work with chroma key shots. Newscasts and other programs generally use a minimum of three cameras, several tape machines (although computers are beginning to replace tape), graphics hardware, weather computers, and audio equipment. Production directors cue the operators of that gear

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(the technical or assistant directors). Production studio workers must be able to work under pressure, deal with rapidly changing circumstances, understand the technology behind all the production gear, and respond quickly to show changes. Assistant and technical directors frequently help set up supers and graphics and work on lighting and set construction.

- *Writers* run the gamut from sitcom scriptwriters to documentary producers. Local TV stations have little call for writers. Most work for the networks or for production companies that provide network programming.
- *Other*: The following narrow niche jobs generally don't require a background in video production: *cue card person*, *teleprompter operator*, *make-up artist*, *production assistant*, *grip*, *lighting person*, *set designer*.

Video production

Depending on the market size, production companies can be one-person operations or full-service studios with sound stages and all the latest technology. The trend is to move away from hardware-laden studios to virtual companies that call on freelance workers to handle a spectrum of assignments.

The few production companies that have a staff of full-time employees usually handle chores such as tape archiving and conversions (from VHS to DVDs, for example) and do some corporate production work. Most have some field gear, such as camcorders, mics, and lights, but a fair number rent equipment as the need arises.

What is common to most production companies is that they all work with software for post-production. A few companies still have video-production hardware switchers and audio mixing boards, but most rely on products such as Adobe Creative Suite 6 Production Premium.

Production companies work with photographers, video editors, graphics designers, text animators, audio studio engineers, and writers as well as the whole list of jobs in the other category noted earlier.

Many people get into the video-production business as wedding and event videographers, often working solo. Top-end event videographers do three-camera shoots. It's an easy market to enter but very competitive. To find out more about this industry, visit the Wedding and Event Videographers Association International website at www.weva.com/.

How to start a video production business

Thanks to successful video-production studio owner, Sam Prigg of White Rabbit Productions in Salt Lake City, www.whiterabbitproductions.com/ for the following tips.

Sam's shift from TV news photographer to production company owner had a few rocky moments. He learned some lessons along the way and shares them so others might not make the same mistakes:

- Educate yourself about business: insurance, taxes, bonding, business plans, advertising, equipment purchases or leases, office space, phones, faxes, furniture, marketing, pricing, invoicing, bad debts, good demo reels, production schedules, contracts, the IRS, accounting, hiring and firing freelance workers, security, and credit. It's no surprise starting a business is difficult.
- Partnering with someone else to start a business might help you get started sooner, but be aware of the ramifications. Put your expectations in writing, spell out each partner's role and where the money will go, and review the contract frequently.
- Market yourself to multiple clients. The time to do your marketing is when you're busy with your current project.
- Figure out what kind of video production company you are. Discover your niche so you can focus your marketing and purchase the right equipment.
- Create a demo reel that represents who and what you are. It is your most valuable marketing tool and needs to make a favorable impression in the first 30 seconds. Gear your reel for your target audience and demonstrate your core values quickly.

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- Educate your clients. Help your clients identify their target audience and the audience members' attitudes about the subject. Then outline the dozen or so steps involved with most productions: concept, writing, storyboarding, casting, location scouting, crew, equipment, production shooting, narration, editing, graphics, and music.
- Don't burn a client. If you make a mistake with some clients—bad lighting, poor composition, arriving late, faulty equipment, dead batteries—they might forgive you once. TV networks are less forgiving; one mistake and they won't come back.
- Adapt to change, because things will change. Stay up on the newest trends in equipment and technology. They can change the way you do business. Subscribe to technology magazines and join an industry organization such as the International Television Association for its conferences and seminars.
- Consider working for someone else. Start with the kind of company you would like to become while you perfect your techniques and broaden your knowledge. Once you understand the market and find your niche, you can branch off on your own.

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