

Production Guidelines for IFE Video - Part I

by Nels Anderson & Steve Brinson



The following guidelines have been drawn up to assist in planning video and film projects. They are intended to provide information for those who are not familiar with the planning, budgeting, and creative processes that occur before production begins and can also serve as a guide and check-list for more experienced individuals. There is also an outline of the basic stages of pre-production, production, and post-production to clarify how a project is structured, from conception through the final edited program.

The actual production medium could be one of a variety of formats of either videotape or motion picture film. The scope of the project itself...and its intended final use will be factors that help determine which medium will be the best one for a particular project. For the sake of simplicity, all formats of film or video will be referred to as "the program" unless there are specific differences that need to be mentioned.

FIRST QUESTIONS

The first questions Clients usually ask about film and video production are: "How much does it cost, and how long will it take to do it?" Unfortunately, there are no quick and easy answers to these questions. It is similar to asking how much it costs to construct a house; there are many factors that substantially affect the outcome. How big is the lot? How many square feet or meters of space? How many bedrooms, etc.? It is difficult to formulate a realistic budget for any film or video production until the project is sufficiently defined.

The project will generally proceed in the developmental stage through one of several different routes, determined by the Client's desired direction:

1. "This is the information I want to communicate. Tell me how I can do it best...and determine how much it will cost to do it that way."
- OR
2. "This is the information I want to communicate. This is the amount of the funding I have available. Design a project that will give me the most effective use of my production dollars."

The purpose of the following guidelines is to assist in identifying those factors affecting the project and its subsequent budget, so answers to Client questions can have real meaning. The production process includes a set of checks and balances that keeps all participants informed about the progress of the program and its budget and provides opportunities for Client input throughout the length of the project.

The costs involved in producing a film or video program—like virtually any other endeavor—are usually related directly to time and materials. The equipment, personnel and other materials utilized in the production process are relatively expensive. The time consumed to take a project from concept to finish may be several months. An industry-standard payment schedule for domestic projects usually specifies 1/3 of the approved budget amount to be paid at the beginning of the project. A second payment of 1/3 of the budget amount is usually due at the completion of the shooting phase, with the final 1/3 payable upon completion of the edit. Projects involving international travel may frequently involve a 50% payment at the beginning. There are great variances in payment schedules. The scope of the project, the time involved, and the pre-existing relationship between the Production Company and the Client are just several of those variances.

DETERMINING THE PROJECT'S GOAL

The best foundation for beginning a project is to clearly identify the answers to these questions first!

1. Who is the targeted audience?
2. What should the program communicate to that audience?

This may sound simple, but in reality it is usually a very complex and difficult task. Many first-time production efforts start with the idea of "it should be all-encompassing to all audiences". The all-things-to-all-people projects are in danger of being directionless and without real communication.

The most successful programs are the ones that accomplish the Client's goals, and defining those goals is the first part of the process. Is the overall thrust to be for Marketing, Training, Promotion, Image-Building, or Sales? Perhaps the Entertainment factor is important.

"Industrials" are usually oriented toward straightforward communication of information about a company's policies, services or product line. "Image" or "Promotional" programs are generally aimed toward generating a targeted emotional or philosophical response from the viewing audience. The success in eliciting this response is usually predicated upon heightened visual and aural impact. The budget required for an "Image" piece normally exceeds what is required for an "Industrial" or purely "Instructional" type of program.

DEFINING THE SCOPE OF THE PROJECT

It is best to get the Production Company involved in the project as early as possible. This generally does not involve any expense to the Client and may be of great benefit in helping avoid a number of pitfalls. There are many complexities to be considered in the planning process, and the Producer can help make the most of the Client's time and effort. After the purpose of the program and the audience for the program have been established, there are several areas to be explored.

1. What is the anticipated useful life of the finished project? How quickly will the contained information become dated or obsolete?
2. When does the Client want / need to have the project completed?
3. What information is the project to cover?
4. What sort of response or action should be generated from the viewer?
5. Are there any pre-established budgetary ranges to accommodate? There's no point in designing a "2-story 4 bedroom house on the lake" if budget restrictions dictate a 1-room efficiency in the suburbs.
6. Is there a requirement for a specific program length?
7. How will the completed program be exhibited or distributed to its audience?
Is the program to be distributed by videocassettes, broadcast or cable, satellite feed,

or theatrical presentation by projection?

8. How many different locations or cities may be involved in actually shooting the materials needed for the program?.

ESTABLISHING A DIRECTION — THE TREATMENT

The answers to the questions presented so far will determine what happens at this point in the project. The next step in the creative process is the writing of a Treatment.

The Treatment is a one or two-page synopsis of how the project might be structured.

The purpose of the Treatment is to ensure the Production Company is proceeding in the correct direction...and to assure both the Production Company and the Client that they clearly understand and agree upon their collective view of the project. In this manner the Treatment serves as part of the ongoing set of checks and balances. If the direction of the Treatment isn't satisfactory, a better understanding of the desired end result must be developed.

Whether any costs are experienced in the Treatment phase depends upon how complex the project has become. If the project is reasonably straightforward and the Treatment can be written by consolidating ideas and information that have been gained through earlier discussions, there will be little or no cost.

On the other hand, if the project is more complex and involves several days of research and interviews on the part of an assigned

writer, there may be fees to cover the writer's time and expenses. These fees may range from US \$1,000 to \$5,000 on average. This research time is usually necessary during the scriptwriting phase. Thus any costs incurred during the Treatment writing phase effectively reduce the future costs that would be incurred during scripting.

CREATING A "BLUEPRINT" FOR THE PROJECT — THE SCRIPT

After a Treatment has been written, perhaps re-worked and then finally approved, the next step is to proceed with scripting. As an expansion upon the

approved Treatment, the Script is a very detailed and important document:

1. It determines what information is going to be presented. The amount of information logically affects the overall length of the finished project.
 2. It outlines the creative approach that will be taken in presenting that information. This includes descriptions of how each portion of the project will look, sound, and feel.
- Scripting is usually a cost-incurred item for the Client. The cost

continued on page 40



COMPRO crew (L-R) Steve Brinson, Emily Schattle, and Eric Thornton shooting in New York for Continental Airlines' Arrival/Destination series.

of the Script will be based upon the estimated number of days involved in researching the information (along with any expenses associated with that research) as well as the final overall length of the Script. A very close estimate of these costs can be presented before the scriptwriting phase begins.

NOTE: The Client's commitment to the research and writing of the Script does not necessarily mean they are committing to the actual production of the project. That type of commitment isn't encountered until after there is a Client-approved production budget.

The first draft of the Script is presented to the Client for discussion and comment. This is another step in the check-and-balance process. The desired end-result is to create a Script that everyone agrees conveys the appropriate message in the appropriate manner. One or two re-writes at this stage would not be unusual.

After the Script has been approved, a clearly-defined plan or "blueprint" exists that provides a foundation for an accurate budget; or, if the budget parameters have been pre-established, there is now a Script that reflects what can be effectively produced for that specified figure.

The Script clearly defines:

1. The exact informational content of the program
2. The approximate length of the finished piece

3. The number of shooting days
How many locations and shooting setups are required?
4. The number and type of talent required
 - a. On-Camera sync-sound or Voice-Over narration?
 - b. Speaking or non-speaking?
 - c. Principal or extra?
5. The use of music...original or library?
6. The use of special-effects, graphics or animation?

These factors —as defined by the Script— lead to the development of a preliminary Production Schedule. The schedule is a highly-detailed report on the logistics of the project. This includes:

1. Proposed locations, dates and times.
2. Crew requirements.
3. Equipment needs.
4. Travel and accommodations.
5. Post-production requirements.

TRANSLATING THE SCRIPT INTO AN APPROVED BUDGET

The process of "breaking down" a Script to determine a preliminary production schedule provides the necessary information for structuring a preliminary Production Budget. The budget is a rather complex multi-page document that outlines the costs associated with every aspect of Pre-Production, Production, and Post-Production. The major portion of the production dollars is usual-

continued on page 42



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ly allocated toward the number of shoot days, the size and composition of the crew, and the proposed equipment package. The budget also covers things as minute as the cups of coffee consumed by the crew and the Client.

The preliminary budget is the first quantitative breakdown that shows how the creative direction of the Script...and the various logistical considerations required by that direction...translate into production (and post-production) costs. This serves as a point of departure.

The Client then has the opportunity to analyze how well the proposed budget meshes with the funding that might be available or that might be acquired for that particular project. The script can then be revised in order to bring about any desired revisions in the budget. What follows is a "balancing act" to determine how the required "production-value" can best be maintained while achieving needed cost efficiencies. The Script is massaged when possible...or perhaps re-written to achieve the appropriate balance.

Sometimes seemingly minor changes in concept or direction can result in substantial changes in cost. For instance, the Script might call for a high-angle shot of the Client's facility. The Client and the Producer must first decide how important or desirable it is to have that high-angle shot. If having the shot is considered important enough to keep it, then they can collectively determine HOW the shot will be accomplished.

As an example, the shot might be accomplished by any of the following ways:

- from a helicopter with a gyroscopically-stabilized remote-control camera mount, using a pilot with feature-film experience, waiting for the perfect weather and sun angle
- from a helicopter with a mechanically-stabilized camera mount, using a good, competent local pilot, during whatever time the helicopter is available
- from a helicopter with a hand-held camera
- from the top of a nearby tall building or water tower
- from a camera crane with an experienced crane operator
- from a cherry-picker
- from a step-ladder
- from standing on the top of a truck with a platform
- from a really tall cameraman

Or, the final solution may be somewhere between these possibilities, or it might involve a combination of these. The main message is that the cost of acquiring that shot could range from a few dollars to many thousands of dollars. The Client and the Production Company will work with the script and the budget until a final script-budget combination is defined and approved. At that juncture the Client will have a full understanding of how the program will be produced and how much it will cost to produce it.

STAGES OF PRODUCTION

The following steps outline the basic stages of the production process.

A. Script and Creative Development.

1. Research
2. Development and conceptualization of creative approach

continued on page 44



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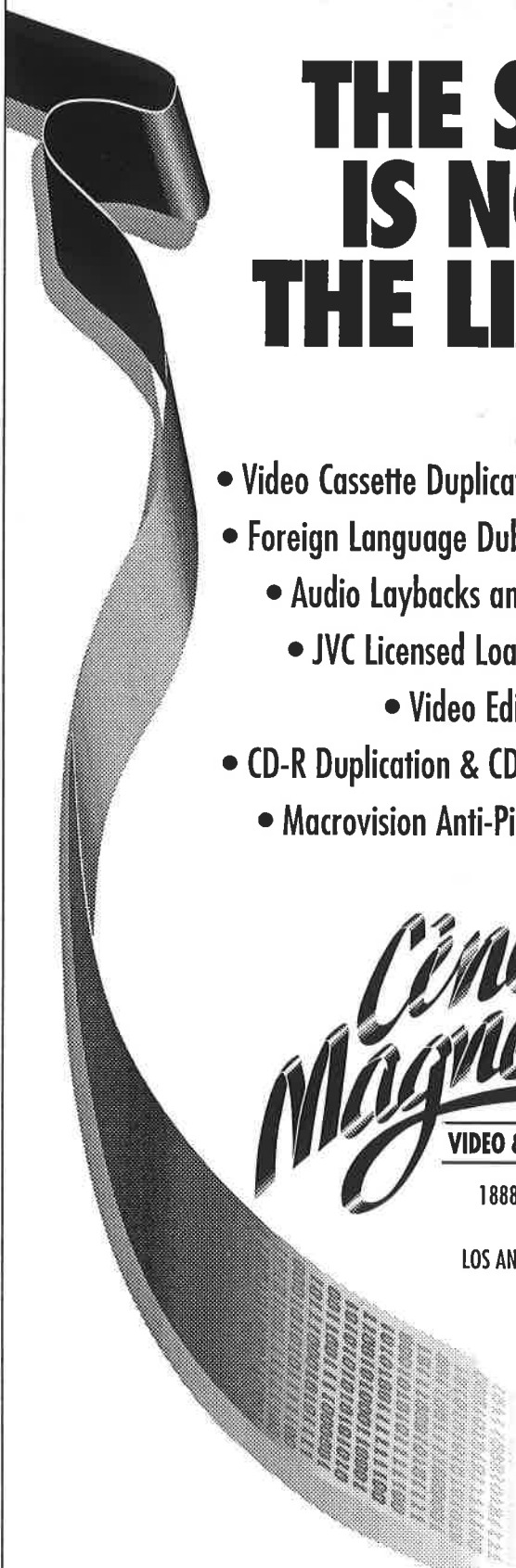
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*Production Guidelines for IFE Video - Part I
continued from page 42*

3. Writing of Treatment (One to five page overview of the proposed creative approach)

4. Scriptwriting: including two to three revisions until final Client-approved Script is completed

5. Deciding which format of film or video best fits the Client's needs

6. Defining and finalizing a Production Budget

B. Pre-Production

1. Location scouting

a. Finding the locale or locales that meet the Script's requirements

b. Checking for electrical power sources, sunlight angles, available indoor lighting, access for vehicles, size of elevators, etc.

2. Logistical planning for all necessary resources

a. Hiring and coordinating crews

b. Booking equipment: camera, lights, vehicles, etc.

c. Acquiring and approving any sets, props or wardrobe

3. Casting and making arrangements for all on-camera talent

a. Professional talent: Voice-over narrator and/or on-camera actors.

The Client is usually asked to participate in and to approve the selections.

b. Employees: Those who will be seen on-camera and will need to be available at a certain place at a certain time.

C. Production

This stage of the project's development refers to the shoot days where the camera crew goes to the location and/or studio to videotape or film the different scenes in the Script, utilizing the resources arranged in pre-production. It is usually necessary that the Client have a representative on hand during production to ensure that any concerns over visual content are addressed. For instance:

1. In an industrial situation, are all necessary safety procedures being followed?

2. Are there any things in camera view that will be a problem?

3. Are product samples being properly displayed?

The time to solve these types of problems is before they are recorded on film or tape. Having to re-shoot material at a later date because of a content problem discovered after-the-fact can be a needless expense. Having the available visual material limited because of the same type problems impinges upon the ultimate quality of the project.

The responsibility of the on-location Client representative is to "sign-off" on material as it is shot.

D. Post-Production

1. This is the editorial phase. Activities involve:

- a. Reviewing the raw (unedited) footage
- b. Selecting takes or shot sequences
- c. Designing graphics
- d. Creating character generation (words on the screen)
- e. Recording sound effects
- f. Selection of library music or...
- g. Composing, arranging and recording of original music
- h. Editing all the final visual and aural elements together to create the final program
- i. Duplicating cassettes for distribution

For projects edited on videotape, it is frequently desirable to have the Client representative present during certain portions of the edit. Again, this is a procedure designed to eliminate the possible expense of additional re-editing.

During the edit, selected material from source tapes or field-master tapes is precisely positioned and re-recorded onto an Edit-Master tape. Audio and video can be edited simultaneously or separately. Music and sound effects will usually be edited in at a later time after the video edit has been completed and approved. The elements going into each edit event will be positioned and controlled by a computerized edit controller, which permits rehearsing or previewing each event before it is actually committed to the recording process.

Creating a film or video program should be an exciting and rewarding experience for everyone involved in the process. The responsibilities of a Production Company are usually well defined, and a competent one can fill many of the gaps presented by a novice client. A much better scenario, however, comes about when the Client plays an informed and involved role, and the final product reflects that harmony.

In Part II of this article, AVION will cover a great many aspects of IFE video production that apply specifically to shooting on and around aircraft. Also to be explored will be some of the responsibilities of various airline departments—including project checklists.



STEVE BRINSON – PRODUCER / DIRECTOR-CAMERAMAN

Steve Brinson's organizational talents as a Producer and his creative talents as a Director-Cameraman have earned him domestic and international kudos. His reel includes projects for Coca-Cola, The Mead Corporation, Delta Air Lines, AGCO, IBM, The Ford Motor Company, Continental Airlines and others. His computer-assisted, down-to-the-minute planning has facilitated projects ranging from multi-camera live television broadcasts to hopscotching two full film crews through an incredible number of off-hour setups in a major international airport.

His camera work has regularly been seen on all major television networks in the US, as well as such European networks as the BBC, ITN, ZDF, ARD and Dutch Dream TV. Steve also handles many special photographic needs including Steadicam and Underwater cinematography. An Emmy and Telly Award winner, Steve was the Chief Cameraman for WXIA-TV, the former ABC affiliate in Atlanta, prior to being a founding partner of COMPRO Productions where he now serves as Vice President.

Steve has gained 35 years of experience in the various aspects of film and video production following graduation in Broadcast Journalism from Florida State University in 1965 and a tour of duty as Technical Director for the 3rd US Army Soldier Show.



NELS ANDERSON – DIRECTOR/CAMERAMAN

Nels Anderson is an Emmy-Award-winning Director/Cameraman. His artistry as an image maker and his long list of awards have earned industry-wide respect both in the U.S. and abroad. Coca-Cola, Delta Air Lines, The Ford Motor Company, Georgia Pacific, and IBM are among the many Fortune 1000 companies that have utilized Mr. Anderson's tremendous knowledge and talents for their corporate communication projects.

In addition, his directorial and camera expertise involving broadcast syndication, commercials and feature films has garnered cinematographic credits on ABC, NBC and CBS, as well as the BBC, ITN and French, German, and Australian television.

Nels' 30 years of experience in film and video production is predicated on his stint as an advertising agency Art Director. After 14 years as Chief Cinematographer for WSB-TV, then the NBC affiliate in Atlanta, Nels helped launch COMPRO Productions, and he now serves as President of that firm.



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