

# Choosing a Video Production Company

Finding the right video production company for your needs isn't hard if you know what kind of video you want, ask the right questions, and understand the answers.

By **BOB RISHER**

**D**oes this scenario sound familiar? Your company's marketing department needs a 15-minute video to help train staff members on a new piece of computer software. They want you to write the script and hire a production company to shoot it because you're the only instructional writer in the training department who's used the software before. You know what it does and how it does it. When the marketing director tells you about all of this—"Guess what? You're going to make a video. How soon can you have it?"—you respond with appropriate panic.

Relax. If you know what kind of video you want to make, then choosing a production company can be a simple matter. Set aside a few days to call or visit at least 10 of the production companies in your area, talk to the directors and producers, collect all the information you need, and choose the best one for this particular project. Once you get started, you won't feel panicky at all. You'll probably begin to enjoy it.

## Getting started

First, write the script. It's the blueprint for your video. If you already have it in hand, describing your needs to a video director becomes that much easier. Know the story you want to tell and how you're going to tell it before you call anyone. Many production companies hesitate to

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quote their rates (per hour or per day) until you give them an idea of how complicated the taping is going to be. Next, get the Yellow Pages and make a list of at least 10 companies that produce video. Don't forget to include your local television stations; they often have independent production departments. The number of services they list in their ads will help you determine the three biggest companies, the three smallest ones, and four that are somewhere in between. This should provide you with a variety of prices, experience, and resources.

Whoever you talk to—probably a director or producer—will ask lots of questions. Production people are creative, perceptive, and usually friendly. They will want to know as much about you and your project as you can tell them. If you've written your script, you should be able to handle most of their questions. At least this shows the video director you take your video seriously.

Video directors are used to dealing with customers who know very little about video, so don't worry about asking a dumb question or sounding foolish; they won't laugh at you. Have your list of essential questions by the phone and keep a record of the answers you get from each production house. This may seem inconvenient now, but it will save time and callbacks later. The subjects you'll invariably discuss follow.

## Location

Where will you be shooting the tape? In

your company's offices? At a remote location out of town? On a set you're going to build in a studio? The director will be certain to ask these questions, and, since you're the scriptwriter, if you don't know the answers, nobody does.

Chances are, you'll want to do at least some shooting in the field. The "field" is anywhere other than the production company's studio; it could be your company's factory, a local restaurant—even a real field. Nearly all production companies are equipped to shoot in the field, but you have to ask to find out. Unless the action in your script takes place inside a nuclear submarine (or any other place off limits), you should avoid building sets. They rarely look as good as real locations and they require lots of time and money that could be spent on something else.

There is an exception to this rule. Sometimes you want a set to look exaggerated and unreal, perhaps in a dream sequence where a character finds himself in Munchkin Land. When the video director asks about locations, look at your script. That's where the answers are.

## Format

Most production companies tape in all three of the major formats—1-inch, 3/4-inch, and the new high-speed 1/2-inch—although some companies prefer one over the other, and an increasing number of producers are so impressed with high-speed 1/2-inch that they shoot nothing else.

As a general rule, the bigger—and more

expensive—the tape, the better your picture will look. But this isn't as true as it once was, and format probably doesn't matter as much as it used to. Nearly all serious, high-quality editing is done on a 1-inch tape, so whatever you shoot will probably be transferred to 1-inch, anyway. Later, when you're comparing the different companies, you can try to balance image quality against cost.

While we're talking format, don't forget about the all-important question of compatibility. This great video you're making will be as useless as a fork in a punch bowl unless you can play it back on your company's videocassette machine. Even if the editing is done on 1-inch tape, the program can be dubbed into any format the production company has. Make sure they have the one your company uses.

## Talent

Who is going to be in front of the camera in your video? If you're planning a documentary-type shoot—interviews, footage of real events, or people at work—talent isn't a problem. But if you have short, humorous sketches, any kind of dialogue, or an on-camera narrator, then you're going to need bonafide actors.

At first, you might be tempted to use Gordo, the sales guy where you work, whose ribald stories at lunch never fail to break you up. As soon as he heard about the video he volunteered to be in it. "Gordo's a great guy," you think. "He's natural, funny, and has a lot of presence. He'd be great."

May I offer two words of advice? Forget it. Unless he's had experience in front of a camera, old Gordo is likely to have all the spontaneity of a spring shower in the Amazon rain forest. He may speak in a monotone or just look painfully uneasy. Strange things often happen to normally lucid people when those hot lights are turned on, and there's not much you can do about it. The production company retains professional actors. They may still flub an occasional line, but they won't freeze up on you.

## Special effects

Production houses feel immense pressure to keep up with the latest technology in video special effects. Expensive flights of imagination are no longer confined to movies, commercials, and music videos—they are showing up with increasing regularity in corporate training videos.

Just ask the director, "What kinds of

special effects systems do you have?" The key word here is probably *system*. When something costs a quarter-of-a-million dollars it is no longer a gizmo; it has earned the right to be called a system. And pretty fantastic systems they are, too. This technology has put an additional burden on writers because we can no longer sit around complaining about how many brilliantly imaginative ideas we have that could never be brought to the screen. If you can dream it, these systems and the creative professionals guiding them might be able to do it.

The problem is that only the largest production houses can afford to keep up-to-date in a business where last year's breakthroughs are this year's clichés. This is why many producers will contract out any work they can't do themselves. They will either rent time on special effects systems or hire another company to do the work for them. Either way it will probably cost you more than if you went to the bigger facility to begin with, and the cost is something you'll have to think long and hard about.

An example: The Quantel Paint Box, a computer-controlled digitizer, can make any image as bright and seductive as a neon sign. In conjunction with other digital optical systems, it was used to make *You Might Think*, the award-winning music video by the Cars; the opening sequence from last year's Saturday Night Live, with Christopher Guest using Yankee Stadium for a bathtub; and countless commercials from Levi's to Bubble-Yum. The Paint Box costs about \$500 an hour, plus the operator's fee, and a simple (no animation) 30-second sequence might require eight hours to produce. Do the math and see what you're getting yourself into.

In any case, you may not need any surrealistic special effects; some titles and simple graphics will be plenty. But if you have the money (and you'll need a bagful), it never hurts to listen. Those magic boxes can free you to let your writing spark with imagination.

## Budget

Ask each production company what kinds of budgets most of their clients have. If the director tells you he handles a wide range of budgets, that's a good sign. It means they've worked on big and small projects. To establish a lasting relationship with a video producer, choose one that can tackle whatever project budget and length you come up with, from one minute to one hour.

Believe it or not, some video

producers—though not nearly as many as would like to—have all the business they can handle. They're not eager to drag their expensive equipment down to your office for only three hours of routine shooting when they could be hauling it across town to tape a spectacular song and dance number with 150 ice-skating bears at your competitor's factory.

And yet, there are other companies—perhaps a little smaller, but every bit as well-equipped and talented—who are just starting out and looking to make a name for themselves. These are the ones you should look for, especially if you want to be sure of quality in the vital production stage that comes right after the shoot.

## Production

Making a video is divided into three stages: pre-production, production, and post-production.

■ *Pre-production* is everything that happens before the shooting starts. This includes meeting with marketing, doing your research, writing the script, calling the production houses, and making up a shooting schedule with the director. This is usually the longest of the three stages and also the most important. Write a good script and choose the right director, and you're halfway home.

■ *Production* is the actual video shoot. Usually the shortest of the three stages, this includes transporting the equipment to the location, setting up the camera, lighting the sets, wiring the actors for sound, and rolling those VTRs.

■ *Post-production*, sometimes called editing, begins when the script you wrote and the videotape the director shot combine—if you've been smart and lucky—into a living, breathing movie. This process includes cutting the individual shots into sequences, adding the music, adding narration, using a character generator (a sort of video typewriter) to make titles and graphic screens, and doing everything else you can think of to make your video special, different, effective.

As with special effects, production houses also have a huge investment in post-production equipment. They may have computerized editing systems, character generators with a hundred different font styles and sizes, and libraries full of copyright-free music. Your script determines how much post-production work you'll need. I've worked on short videos that were edited and titled in less than an hour; others, more complicated

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and creative, took dozens of expensive hours in a production company's editing suite.

### Rates

Save the question of fees until later. Price is not the most important factor at decision time because you're probably going to find that the difference between the most and least expensive will be fairly small. In my latest survey of local video producers, the highest rate for 3/4-inch shooting was \$160 an hour; the cheapest was \$110 an hour. Of course, in one eight-hour day that could add up to a savings (or additional expense) of \$400, right?

Wrong. If you are going to shoot for at least six hours, you can ask to be charged the daily rate. There was even less of a difference among daily rates in my survey: at the high end, \$695; at the low end, \$650.

Similarly, post-production charges appear to be fairly standardized. Even the largest production companies have to fend off competition these days from dozens of young upstarts with the same equipment and lower prices. Most post-production—editing only with character generation and graphics extra—in my area averages \$70 an hour.

When comparing costs, remember that you can have one company shoot the video, have it edited somewhere else, and add special effects at yet a third place. This is not usually a good idea, however, because having the same company plan, shoot, and edit your project ensures some small measure of continuity.

### Demo

Ask if there is a demo tape you can see; the answer will determine whether you keep talking or strike this company off your list. Any good production house will have a short videotape, usually about 10 minutes long, showing off their best work. If they don't, thank them for their time and hang up. Nobody ever hired you as a writer until they saw samples of your writing. Neither should you seriously consider hiring any video production company until you've seen what they can do.

If it's at all possible, ask to see the demo tape at their offices. Not only does this get you out of *your* office for awhile, it also gives you the opportunity to see their facilities and meet the staff. They'll probably give you a tour, during which you should pay close attention. Do the producers, directors, and editors look happy, or do they seem overworked and irritable? If the company is understaffed, you can

bet they'll see your project as just another rush job to be gotten out of the way as soon as possible. Try to meet the people who would be working on your video.

As you watch the demo tape, keep in mind that the company is trying to make the best possible impression. If you don't like the tape, you're not going to like anything else they've done either. Here are some things to look for:

■ Is the video on the demo sharp and clean? Does it look too bright (a common complaint)? Video has come a long way in the last couple of years. It still doesn't look as good as film, and probably never will, but it is less flat-looking and more realistic than before.

■ Ask the director what format the scenes were originally shot in. Were they originally on 1/2-inch then edited on 1-inch, or was it all done on 3/4-inch?

■ What was the budget for the projects these scenes came from? Make a note of the clients they have worked for. If you know someone at those companies, you can call and ask whether they were satisfied with the production company's work.

■ What is the style of their work? Do they have a sense of humor? Do they seem up-to-date or old-fashioned? Is there a mix of both documentary and fictional styles? Are they willing to take chances with unusual music and new approaches to potentially boring subjects?

■ How does the demo make you feel? After you've seen it, you should be excited, inspired, and very eager to start work on your own project. If you're not, ask yourself why.

After you've asked all these questions, collect the information (if it helps, design a comparison chart) and start puzzling it out. It will be easier to make your final decision if you remember that it's not an irrevocable one. You can always change your mind—and your production company—if things don't work out.

Also, your first choice may not be right for *this particular project*. If your video has any special needs—animation, for instance—try to match it up with a company that offers them. Above all else, as Obi-Wan advised Luke Skywalker, trust your feelings. Everything else being equal (or at least close), go with the production company that has the demo tape and that you like best.

When it's over, and you've delivered a tight, effective program that's fun to watch, you just may want to do it all again.