

Great Videos on a Shoestring

You can produce quality training videotapes and stay within a limited budget by following this practical advice.

By AMY S. HARTSOUGH

The proliferation of home video equipment hasn't helped the cause of those of us who fight for training videotape budgets. Now we're more likely than ever to encounter demands for videotape productions on a shoestring budget. The thinking is: Just give us something simple—something that could be shot with a home video camera. How much can that cost?

The guide I am proposing here will help you answer that question and ask one of your own: "Will a shoestring budget really give us the most cost-effective videotape?" Using this guide, you can iden-

Get organized

To determine your budget, review the steps that a videotape production entails. Most of these steps are required for any job, from the simplest production shot at the home video level to the multimillion-dollar productions of Steven Spielberg. You must be realistic about how many of these steps you can handle yourself, how many your in-house staff can handle, and

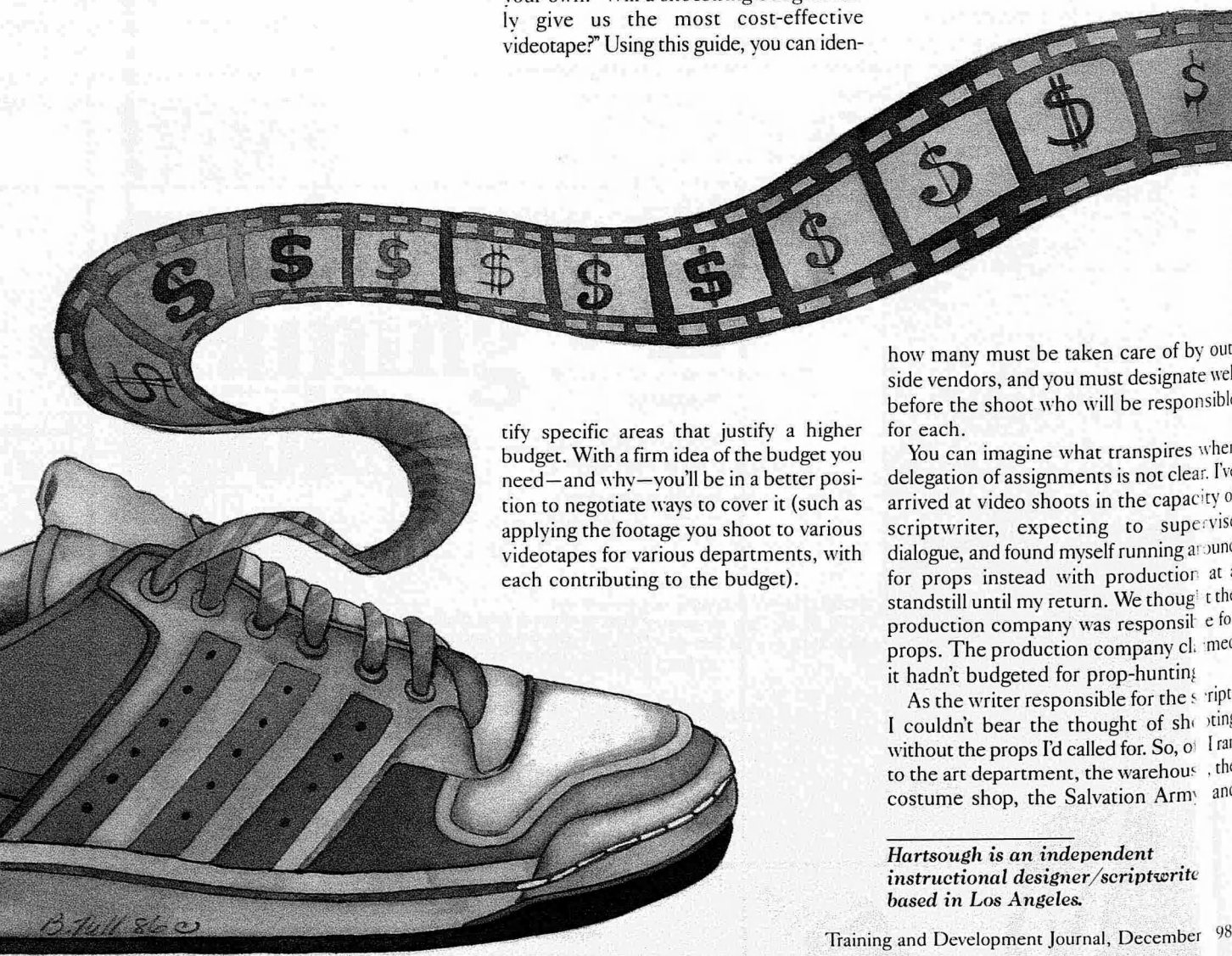
tify specific areas that justify a higher budget. With a firm idea of the budget you need—and why—you'll be in a better position to negotiate ways to cover it (such as applying the footage you shoot to various videotapes for various departments, with each contributing to the budget).

how many must be taken care of by outside vendors, and you must designate well before the shoot who will be responsible for each.

You can imagine what transpires when delegation of assignments is not clear. I've arrived at video shoots in the capacity of scriptwriter, expecting to supervise dialogue, and found myself running around for props instead with production at a standstill until my return. We thought the production company was responsible for props. The production company claimed it hadn't budgeted for prop-hunting.

As the writer responsible for the script, I couldn't bear the thought of shooting without the props I'd called for. So, off I ran to the art department, the warehouse, the costume shop, the Salvation Army, and

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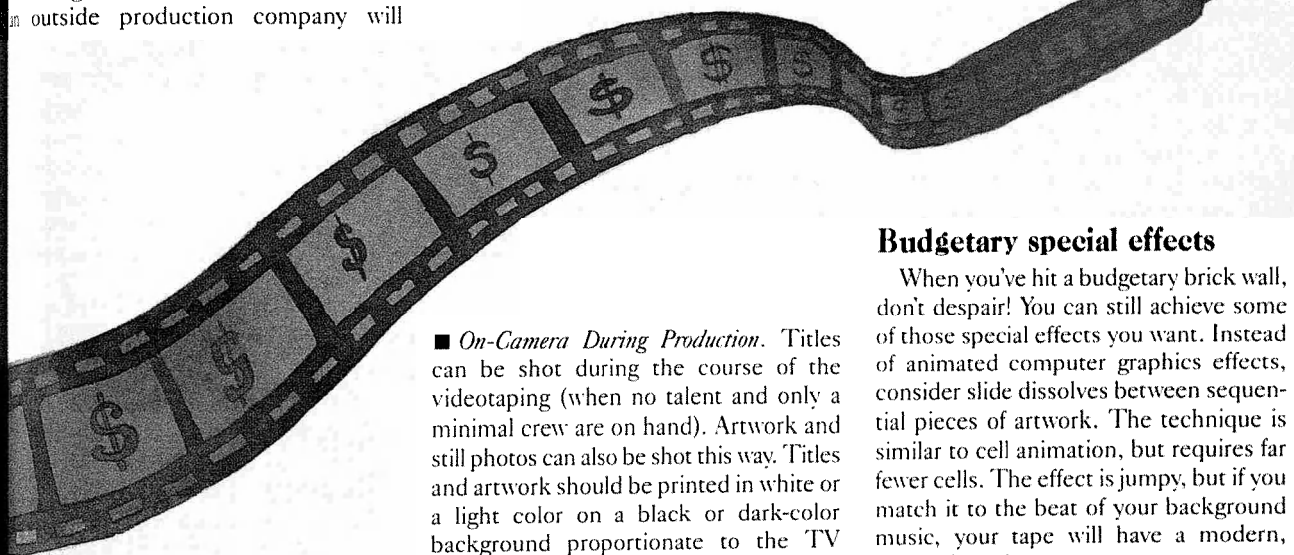
the supermarket. It only takes one day of prop-hunting like that to make a writer enthusiastic about production planning.

The "Who Does What" checklist (see box) was born as a direct result of this kind of confusion. Use this list to assign each of the responsibilities involved in your video production either to in-house staff or outside vendors. This not only helps you determine your budget in advance, but also ensures that all the necessary tasks are seen to *before* the "meter" starts running for expensive talent, crew, and equipment. Don't forget that the number of items that an outside production company will

be disastrous. Scenes that need titles have to be shot with the position of the titles in mind. If not, you may be faced with a choice between obscuring an important part of the scene or leaving out an important title.

Don't underestimate the cost of titles. The method you choose can make or break your budget. Consult the production company about which of the following methods works into your budgeted schedule most cost-effectively:

To get titles right the first time, choose a medium-weight typeface that will not disappear or run together on low resolution TVs. If the lines of a single title will pop on one at a time, indicate this in the script with the instruction to "build" title. To speed up shooting and editing, organize titles, artwork, and still photos according to the scene numbers on the script.



handle depends largely on how much pre-production and post-production time is budgeted. Items which the production company cannot accomplish in the time budgeted should be assigned to someone at your company.

Cost-effective titles

Dialogue (words that are spoken) and titles (words that appear on screen) are the two aspects of your videotape production over which you have the most control. You may not be an expert on video production, but you are the expert and final authority on any wording about your company and your training. You should expect and demand that all words—in dialogue or titles—be presented exactly as you direct. To get what you want, you should make sure a taping of spoken words is well supervised by in-house staff, and you should know the various methods for producing titles.

Production companies that are used to producing titles on a character generator during editing will tend to put aside any discussion of titles until post-production. We learned from experience that this can

■ *On-Camera During Production.* Titles can be shot during the course of the videotaping (when no talent and only a minimal crew are on hand). Artwork and still photos can also be shot this way. Titles and artwork should be printed in white or a light color on a black or dark-color background proportionate to the TV screen.

■ *Post-Production: Title Camera.* Same as above, but you will incur the additional cost of renting the title camera.

■ *Post-Production: 35mm Slide Transfer.* Titles are typeset in a field proportionate to the TV screen, then reversed on high-contrast 35mm slides. Slides should be glass-mounted for proper framing. Slides are then transferred to video with a title camera *before* on-line editing.

■ *Post-Production: On-Line Editing.* Work performed on titles during on-line editing time includes partial-screen titles, "superimposing" a title over a scene, highlighting part of a scene with a "mask," adding color to titles and artwork shot in reverse, and creating titles on a character generator or computer. Consult with the production company about the editing equipment that has been budgeted. What types of title enhancement can it produce quickly?

If you are considering "animating" important titles (such as opening titles or logos), keep in mind that computer-generated graphics range from simple versions for \$300 per second to the more sophisticated graphics seen on network TV sports shows at \$1000 per second.

Budgetary special effects

When you've hit a budgetary brick wall, don't despair! You can still achieve some of those special effects you want. Instead of animated computer graphics effects, consider slide dissolves between sequential pieces of artwork. The technique is similar to cell animation, but requires far fewer cells. The effect is jumpy, but if you match it to the beat of your background music, your tape will have a modern, energetic style.

Also, when you can't afford much shooting time, see what you can find in existing videotapes and films to get your message across. Try government sources. But be aware that reliance on existing footage may require extensive pre-production time. For one of our videotapes requiring footage from NASA and the military, it took two months of phone calls, clearances, searches through warehouses full of footage, and transfers from film to video masters *before* we could begin editing. The transfers were relatively inexpensive—a few hundred dollars for a few hours of film. We learned that the way to save money in transfers is to avoid a lot of reel changes. So we used as much as we could from a single reel and spliced together short clips of film we needed before sending it to the transfer house.

A practical-minded production company can help you extend your budget. The following suggestions were provided by Verne Pershing Productions:

■ When you can't afford the editing time it takes for split screens, simulate them by shooting two sets side by side instead of creating the effect during expensive editing time.

Who Does What: A Checklist

Pre-Production

■ Scriptwriting and the research involved.

■ Making scene direction decisions, including line-by-line study of script, numbering of scenes, and decisions on how scenes will be shot. (Whoever does these things should be designated as "director" during the shoot.)

■ Listing—by scene in which they will be used in—of talent, locations, sets, props, art, existing footage, and special effects required.

■ Scheduling of when and where each scene will be shot and when and for how long talent, crew, and equipment will be required, scheduling of company execs and company "extras" required for the shoot, and scheduling time at editing facility.

■ Procuring crew and equipment.

■ Procuring locations.

■ Hiring talent and conducting auditions. This requires a receptionist for processing the people and copying and distributing the audition scripts.

■ Procuring materials for sets and building backdrops.

■ Procuring props including hand props, props that make up the sets, and devices used for special effects.

■ Procuring costumes (other than change of clothing that talent can bring).

■ Writing titles and obtaining artwork.

■ Manipulating cue cards or prompter scroll or keying script into video teleprompter.

■ Copying and distributing scripts for the shoot to director, production assistant, teleprompter operator, talent, and client. All scripts should be numbered by scene the same as director's.

Production

■ Reviewing checklists before and after production.

■ Reviewing dialogue, pronunciation, and emphasis with talent.

■ Determining best takes and when to wrap on a scene.

■ Catering for talent and crew on days of shoot.

Post-Production

■ Procuring existing footage and special effects (including music).

■ Making decisions about where to use special effects (wipes, etc.).

■ When you can't afford freeze frame editing equipment, simulate it by shooting with camera and subject still for the required amount of time.

■ When you want several angles but shooting time is limited, avoid lengthy resets and readjustments of camera and lighting equipment by moving the talent and the set instead.

To save money on crew and equipment, Media Learning Systems offers the following tips:

■ Be aware that production companies that are signatories to union contracts are required to charge the higher rates dictated by unions. Production companies involved in broadcast productions are usually required to be signatories to unions.

■ Take advantage of nights and weekends to make the most of equipment dollars. Equipment rented late in the day can be used that night, the next day, and the next night, all for a one-day rate. Equipment rented late on a Friday can be used all weekend for a one-day rate. If you are on location at a place of business, shooting off-hours also gives you greater production freedom.

Overtime decisions

When budgeting time for talent, crew, and equipment, prepare in advance for the inevitable decisions you'll have to make about overtime. Clarify

■ how many "days" are budgeted and what a "day" means (how many hours) for talent, for crew, and for the equipment (it differs for each);

■ when "time and a half," "double time," and "triple time" begin for each, and when extra meal allowances are required;

■ how much has been budgeted for overtime charges, whether the budget includes contingency money for unexpected overtime, and if this will be an additional charge to you.

Beware of production companies that underestimate the time required to shoot or to edit. Generally, a shoot requires two hours of set up time, two hours of break down time, and travel time—all in addition to the estimated shooting time. Realize that the more you cut down the size of the crew and the equipment, the longer it will take to accomplish what you want (a reason *not* to go the "home video" route).

Production companies that don't face this fact may find themselves so much over budget after production that they won't proceed into editing unless you get additional funds approved. They've got you where they want you: If you don't come up with the money you need to get the tape

edited, all the money you've spent so far is wasted. Avoid this situation—and any legal battles it might ignite—by thinking twice before choosing a production company solely on the basis of lowest bid.

When the inevitable decisions about overtime come up, note the following considerations:

■ *Overtime charges versus bringing talent, crew, equipment back.* If you choose to come back the next day, the charge will be for a *full* day. Generally, it is cost-effective to pay overtime. But be realistic: If there is so much left to do that it will require double time and triple time, it is more cost-effective to start again the next day.

■ *Production time versus editing time.* Generally, you can save money by having talent and crew do things that reduce total production and post-production time. (Remember Verne Pershing's first suggestion above?) Reevaluate how much this will save you if talent and crew are into expensive overtime.

Rewards of low-budget TV

Low-budget TV doesn't have to be bad TV. In fact, it can be *better* than more expensive videos. But to accomplish that, you'll need to compensate for your lack of funds with better planning and greater creativity. And that means giving the project your full attention or assigning someone from your staff to attend to it full time. Make it your "baby" and treat it as such. If you leave it to the production company to handle alone, you can't expect it to become what *you* want. So be there to guide it and take care of its needs.

There *are* rewards from low-budget TV, for the scriptwriter, the sponsoring company, and the production company. The rewards come from successfully meeting the challenge—on little more than your creativity—and then seeing your solutions work successfully in your training program. And if these satisfactions aren't enough, you also have chances to be recognized for your creativity in annual competitions such as those held regionally and nationally by the International Television Association (ITVA).

Of course, the greatest reward of well-produced low-budget TV is the passport it gives you to do more of the same, to leave it behind for higher budgets when your management becomes so impressed with your work that it allocates substantially higher amounts for videotape training.

Just a dream? You'll never know until you try!