Confessions of a Video Producer

By Peter R. Schleger

I'd like to share with you some of the lessons I have learned during my 10 years as a writer and video producer. Some lessons are simply tips and suggestions I follow. Others are lessons I learned after they caused me problems during a shoot.

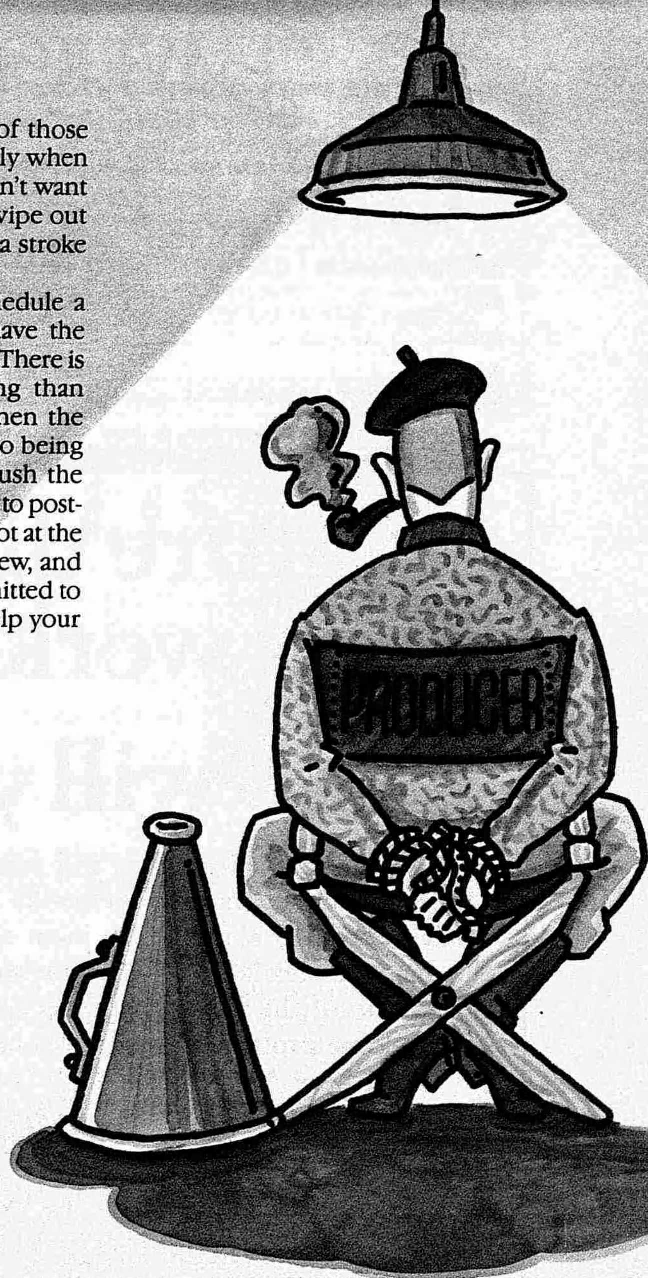
Let's start by examining two realities. First, many projects take longer than you think they will. Second, many projects take longer than they should.

Let me cite a few examples from current projects: A painfully slow secretary cost me two days in receiving word-processed materials needed for reviewing; business matters took precedence over the video project so executives couldn't give me content time as promised; executives changed their minds on content, forcing me to start over on certain parts of a communication package; a computer terminal from which I need manual content was necessary to solve a polling problem with a bank, costing me one day's time; and a lawyer got hold of a video script and made changes—not just legal changes, but changes to the script's design. Nit-picking can add days to the writing process.

General pointers

All of the above are standard operating procedures for any business, so why should I point them out? First, when discussing completion dates with a client, watch for delays and build them into that target completion date. Learn the review and approval process, and find out if any of those players will join the project only when the writing is finished. You don't want a highly placed executive to wipe out a week's worth of work with a stroke of a pen.

Second, I don't like to schedule a videotaping session until I have the final, approved script in hand. There is nothing more nerve-wracking than having a shoot loom near when the scripting process is not close to being finished. You don't want to rush the final script; you also don't want to postpone a shoot. If you do the shoot at the last minute, you'll owe cast, crew, and studio for the time they committed to your project. It also doesn't help your reputation.



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Also, beware of changes in concept. To open one program, I suggested that pieces of a puzzle be placed by on-screen hands into empty spaces on a square board. Each piece would name one feature of the ideal medical plan. There would also be a center piece that would serve as both the title of the video program and the name of the new medical plan my client was introducing.

My client loved the concept. I had an artist render a sketch of the puzzle with its symmetrical, rounded pieces that my client also approved. Then things happened. First, legal said you could not associate the plan name with the ideal features since the ideal features were not exactly in the plan as stated. This removed the center piece from the puzzle. Then the client took a suggestion from the show's director and replaced the on-screen hands with the puzzle pieces appearing electronically. Last, and this was my decision, the blank spaces on the square were the same color as the rest of the puzzle.

The end result was that the puzzle lost the effect of being a puzzle. It seemed simply that letters were character generated into spaces. However, the shapes were still clear. People viewing the frame described the "puzzle pieces" as body organs or pork chops. This was due to the missing elliptical center title.

The puzzle was cut from the body of the program because my client wanted to use the concept somewhere else one day; conceptually she still liked it. Had we stayed with the original puzzle, hands, title, and all, it would have worked perfectly. We went from a good idea to a major flop with a few small changes. I should have had a new rendering after the middle title was deleted and thought through the total visual effect with the changes.

Another rule I try to follow in my projects is to allow all early project meetings with the client to run their course. I don't want to catch a plane in the early afternoon. I also hope the other participants in the project planning session will be equally relaxed for the day. This way we can finish most of the planning in one good shot and be well on the way with a first round of scripts by the second time we meet.

One point to remember as a writer—this is a hard one, requiring lots of self

control—is not to let your ego get involved with business. If the client doesn't like the script, offer with a smile to change it. As a creative person, you should respect the client's business wishes. Of course, the client *should* respect your creative expertise. If ever there occurs a clashing of the two mind-sets, as a creative person you should respect the client's business wishes.

You as decision maker

You need to be an up-front decision maker at all times. What does this mean?

Make your first draft your final conceptual draft. Don't throw in "possible" ideas or alternative scenes that are in the script as trial balloons. Stick to what is strong and relevant. Later, these trial balloons become weaker; but they also become hard to remove because the client has started to think of them as part of the program.

Decide on your final shots as the script is written or as you go over the script with a director. It is expensive to shoot a scene two or three ways, and that expense is compounded when making decisions in the editing room. Trust your first instincts—they're usually right.

> **Nit-picking can add days to the writing process**

If you write an exterior shot, have an effective interior alternative ready in case of bad weather. In a longer production, you may be able to switch locations. For a one-day shoot have that backup ready.

When you start writing, give each character a name. This helps you avoid awkward phrases such as, "The first stewardess turned to the second stewardess." In one script I had two medical types, one I called Doc, and the other I called Doctor. The actor playing Doctor memorized both parts. He was also an upset actor. I could have avoided this mix-up by simply calling one Dr. Smith and the other Dr. Jones.

If you have lots of copy that must be character generated, have your copy ready before the editing session. You may even want it keyed into the system before the edit at off-line rates that are less than the rates in the computerized on-line suite.

Loyalty counts

Try to get your crew committed to you and your project; you need to develop loyalty. There are several ways to do this.

I try to find crew and talent whom I enjoy working with and who will do a good job for me time after time. I'll settle for a guaranteed 80 percent of perfection, because hunting for that missing 20 percent can produce some disasters. I also know their strengths and weaknesses and can relax or tighten the controls as required.

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I have a favorite director. He knows I am fussy on line readings. I am the writer; I know how my lines should be read. (Yes, I do give actors the first shot at doing it right.) If I don't get what I want, I will feed lines to the actors. My director accepts this. When we cast a shoot, he'll warn me about "independent" actors who don't take direction and who don't like lines being fed to them.

I try to explain to both cast and crew as much as possible about the scope and purpose of a project. This gives them a sense of the whole work and its importance to the client organization.

There is also one editor I like. He laughs at the subtle humor I stick into some of my sales vignettes. This is important because it shows he's tuned into the program content. He also knows what a scene is aiming for and will assist in editing decisions accordingly.

During a shoot, I like to provide coffee, bagels, and cream cheese in the morning, fruit throughout the day, and soft drinks in the afternoon. At mealtime we all eat together: cast, crew, and client executives. I pay. First, this promotes togetherness since the success of a program depends on everyone's good mood and good will. Second—a practical consideration—it keeps people from wandering off to different restaurants and returning to the set late.

I try to gather the key players in a shoot to have lunch or dinner before the taping. This includes the director, the client, the executives appearing on camera, and any professional talent that interacts with the executives. We will spend a few minutes talking about the project at the meal, and it serves as a good way to break the ice.

Nobody's perfect

No shoot is ever perfect. How you handle problems is crucial to the success of your project.

Never make any apologies or disclaimers to the client before or after you screen the program. There will always be a less-than-perfect read, inappropriate eyeball movement, an errant noise—things that you may notice only in the editing room. Chances are, having seen the scene many times, you will be tuned to those problems. A one- or two-time viewer, who should be tuned to the content, probably won't notice them.

On the other hand, you should learn the line, "I've seen the scene many times in the editing suite, and I never noticed." Use it when that first-time viewer sees or hears something you never noticed. On one shoot my executive spokesperson, who was from Oklahoma, said the term "weekend admissions." My client heard it as "weakened admissions." We replayed it a few times and I explained that in the context of the message, what the spokesperson was saying was clear. That ended that moment of fear in my heart. In another shoot, the chairman of the client company kept running his tongue over his lips. I didn't notice it during the taping, but it became more pronounced and obtrusive with each screening.

Sometimes a long day in the editing room can dull the senses. It may help to view the final edited program on a small television in another room before the editing session is over. This helps you get a new perspective and sharpens the objective eye dulled during editing. If you then see some major flaws, everything is up and ready to make changes.

Don't let your ego get involved with business

Money matters

Now for some tips about money and budgeting.

Get in writing rates for every expense item you will have on a shoot. I have been surprised by a charge to decorate the set, by time-coding charges, by machine costs for duplicating a protection master (I knew the cost for tape), by the director's preproduction charges, and by the cost of typing prompter copy. Nothing major—but I still hate surprises.

The above has nothing to do with estimating costs of getting a bid for a shoot. It is possible to get fixed bids to shoot a script, but you will pay 10 to 15 percent more in contingency fees than if you paid what the actual costs were. You are buying insurance against a cost overrun. I wouldn't do it unless I'm dealing with a very big, unknown production technique or program subject. It may help to call in a director to estimate the length of a shoot and an editor to estimate the length of the edit. One editor might say he can edit about 10 pages of dialogue in a day. You really can't know if that's true until the script or its concept is put down on paper, and if it's a concept, it must be very well fleshed out.

I prefer to give estimates on the total production rather than give estimates on each piece. I look less silly if my shoot runs long, but the edit finishes quickly. Also, I can borrow from one budget item if I have to for the sake of improving the program. Such flexibility is good to have.

Know your time rules. How long is the crew day? When does the clock start: when the crew arrives at your location or when they leave their facility? If an actor is called for 8:30, is he just arriving at the location or is he ready to shoot at 8:30? Ask. Ask every time. On one shoot I had a makeup person whose day included lunch; she was to be paid for eight continuous hours. Cast and crew were on the set for nine hours, with lunch not being paid. This was a big surprise, and I refused to pay her the ninth hour overtime. She ate lunch with everyone for which I paid, why should I pay her and only her to eat? From now on the agency knows that if they want to book a makeup artist for me, he or she will know they are not being paid for lunch.

I have one client who, to cut costs, won't let me hire a makeup person. However, my director says that, aesthetics aside, an actor made up by a professional will be easier for the cameraperson to light, and that can save time and money.

I once paid an hour overtime on a shoot because the actor had trouble learning a long read. I didn't rent a prompter, and, as it turned out, the cost of renting a prompter and operator for the shoot would have been more than the overtime paid. It is impossible to guess right every time whether I am being penny-wise and pound-foolish. Experience may not come to your rescue, but you do nar-

row your risks when you hire people whose work you know and trust.

Don't skimp on cast and crew, but don't hire more people than you need. If there is a major job to be performed on the set, hire someone to do that job. If one person tries to do two jobs, something may not get done well or may not get done at all. Work with the director on this, but use your own good sense about the need for having lots of extra grips or production assistants. For example, the more lights you need to light a set, the more crew you'll need to move the equipment. A good producer soon becomes a logistics expert. Likewise, if you know you'll need extras or bit players to round out a scene, hire them instead of hoping to corral them from somewhere when the scene is ready to be filmed. Even client executives who have volunteered to be in the film may find sudden business problems prevent them from being available.

Many budgetary matters depend on the type of production you are doing. Low-budget, in-house work has its own guidelines: two people may be doing six major jobs, but that comes with the turf. If you are spending many thousands of dollars on a major production, simply add one more thousand to pay for extras, prompters, grips, or whatever to help the shoot go well. That added thousand serves as insurance that the other thousands will be maximized.

Before we get to my final suggestions, let me offer what I consider to be the one tip I feel is most important.

Proofread your prompter copy far enough before the shoot that you can still make changes. There is nothing sillier than rehearsing the scene and discovering the prompter copy is missing a paragraph. Correcting that flaw is worth at least 30 minutes of time.

There is a second advantage to proofreading: You can make any final changes in language. You should read the prompter copy out loud to an associate who is following the script. Style problems and awkward reads will jump out at you. You can make changes of a few words neatly on the copy and write out by hand major revisions and neatly cut and paste them into the prompter copy. Proofreading prompter copy gives you a fresh look at the script just as screening the edited program away from the editing suite gives you a fresh look.

Some final suggestions

Now for a potpourri of items that may help your project go more smoothly.

■ Get all scheduled times in writing from cast, crew, studio, and editing facilities. If you are using a location, confirm with the person in charge when you are coming and what and who you are bringing.

■ Radio microphones can be a problem in an urban area. We lost two hours on a shot of three people with radio mikes walking down a hospital corridor. The hospital's in-house paging system interfered with the audio recording.

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■ Try to avoid writing a shot of three people walking down a long hospital corridor or other such difficult setups. They may be aesthetically correct or interesting, but they also may not be worth the time they take. Can the shot be staged more simply? Is the content message still the same?

■ If a sentence is hard to read break it up into two sentences.

■ Bring a travel iron to the set.

■ If you think something will be a problem, solve it before it has a chance to materialize. I could write a book on this one point, but let me relate one example. I cast an actor who lived two hours away to be in one program. It was winter, and he was in a play each night in his hometown, so he had to leave my shoot by 5:00. He was going to drive, but what if it snowed? We checked into the airlines schedules. What if our shoot ran long? We spent a lot of energy figuring out all the travel contingencies. My video was not *Hamlet*, and he was not Olivier, so we cast an equally fine actor who lived in town.

■ When writing a script use numbers and symbols such as $25 or 80%. An actor reading from a prompter can use those visual signposts to catch up with the copy if he's behind.

■ Ask your client if there are any corporate logos or end credits that you must place at the end or start of a program. Many big organizations have legal departments that worked hard figuring out that the name must be just so or it's illegal. If something is wrong an executive will get upset and send the program back to editing for correction.

■ For programs to be used in house I never put names of individuals involved with the production—not cast, crew, or executives—unless, of course, the client wants his or her name on the silver screen for specific political purposes.

■ Don't trust anyone, even at the risk of being a pain. Double and triple check everything, especially since your objective is assembling lots of expensive pieces in one place at one time. I once asked a studio carpentry shop to make two apple stands for a scene. The director, set designer, and I made sketches, looked at the script, and we left the meeting feeling comfortable. The day before the shoot, I went to the shop to see how they looked. I saw how *it* looked, and asked when the second one would be ready. "What second one?" was the set designer's reply. Fortunately I had caught the problem in time and with no consequence other than I reaffirmed my credo of double and triple checking.

One last thought

As you go about gathering your production experiences, write them down: your mistakes; the mistakes of others; things to do better next time; things that made you unhappy; comments passed along by cast, crew, and client; and anything else relevant from that shoot that can benefit future productions. Read them once in a while. They could keep you from repeating mistakes and save your energies for the new mistakes.

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