VIDEOTAPE STORYBOARDS . . . THE EASIER WAY

BY THOMAS W. RICHTER

The show's in the can. It's a *fait accompli*, and from all signs, it's one of the best you've ever done! That could add up to several pats on the back, a handsome raise, and even guarantee your future in the audio-visual department of your company. Who knows how far you can go now? Especially after the review session with the hierarchy of the division for which it was produced.

Ah, the review session . . . the final approval . . . the beginning of acclaim.

Fade In

A videotape review session of a training program on "Work Orders and Production Line Procedures." Present are:

MD (that's you, the media director who put the great show together); CLIENT (the divisional representative overseeing the project); BOSS (the client's department head); CONTENT EXPERT (one of the divisional people with all the answers on the subject, but not the one you've been working with).

Roll the tape, begin 25 minutes of exciting footage right down to the end titles. Stop Tape. Wait for applause. Silence . . . broken by:

CLIENT: Now that's a really great training tape. I think we did a fantastic job.

MD: Thank you!

CLIENT: We should get it into the field as soon as possible.

BOSS: Not bad, but not really ready for the field just yet. Those work-order forms. They're obsolete as of last week. If they weren't so legible, we might have gotten away with it.

CLIENT: True. As a matter of fact, I didn't think they'd be shown in such big close-ups (hearty again) But that can be changed very easily, right?

MD: We had to show them big to explain them. But if they're wrong . . . well, I guess we'll just have to shoot the new ones and edit the scene. Of course, that's going to take time and if . . .

BOSS: (interrupting) And now that I think of it, we could show a little more on the safety aspects of that production line to make

OSHA happy.

MD: (sensing trouble) But that would use up time we need to demonstrate . . .

CLIENT: You're right, Boss. MD can probably find something in the out-takes to highlight safety. We'll just add some narration to cover it.

MD: Out-takes???

CONTENT EXPERT: (very sincere) I really hate to tell you this, but the men weren't following our latest procedures.

MD: (he knows there's trouble) Uh, I know it's not the way they usually do things, but I got them to follow the manual I was given.

CONTENT EXPERT: Oh, great! The reason they don't follow the manual is because we've found those procedures don't work.

MD: (he really shouldn't say it) Then why did . . .

CLIENT: (oh, so confident) Don't worry about a thing, folks. I'll bet there's some stuff in the out-takes to cover that, too. Well, thanks for sitting in, Boss. We'll make those little changes and still hit our next week deadline.

MD: (mumbling under his

breath) I get the feeling this guy thinks we made two tapes and just accidently showed the wrong one. — *FADE OUT*

While it may be an exaggeration, our little scene, or something like it, occurs in company screening rooms from coast to coast. And although the media director's final comment sounds like a joke, it really goes to the heart of the matter.

From the time a script is finalized and approved, two versions are actually being produced, the one the director visualizes in his or her planning and the one the client and his or her supervisors *think* they see on the typewritten pages.

There is actually a third version, and that's what our little scene illustrated. The third one doesn't crop up until the screening of the one the media director taped and edited. It wasn't until the final screening that the boss recognized an opportunity to "show a little more of the safety aspects of the production line to keep OSHA happy." In effect, he added another dimension to the original concept of the program. The other things that occurred in the sketch weren't really concept changes, just a simple matter of up-dated input.

For example, the big close-up of obsolete forms surprised the client, even though the script called for it and the MD saw it as necessary for a clear explanation of how they should be used. Because he couldn't visualize from the typed pages, the client never realized how obvious it would be that the forms were out of date. And since the new forms were not available for taping, he thought the discrepancy could be glossed over.

As for the inaccuracy in depicting production line procedures, it could have been caused by having two content experts. More likely is the fact that inconsistencies between manuals and practices are seldom questioned in script form, but leap out from the screen.

Changes Are Expensive!

Yet the single most important lesson to be learned from our sketch is that, too often, "mistakes" are rarely discovered until the final version is screened. Only then, it seems, when they see it all together, do clients feel they can

actually make "constructive" comments. Needless to say, at that point changes become very expensive.

One way to avoid these costly calamities is to hold virtually endless, detailed, preproduction discussions with everybody who is, or might be, involved in the final approvals. But when all is said, there is little time left for done. Even then you face the prospect of hearing an anguished, *"Gee, that's not how I thought it would look."* The easy way to overcome a client's inability to visualize a script is to visualize it.

Because it gives the effect of motion and provides for the addition of a sound track, the *video storyboard* helps you and your clients see as well as hear something approximating the finished production. Equally important is the fact that a video storyboard can be turned out very inexpensively and relatively quickly.
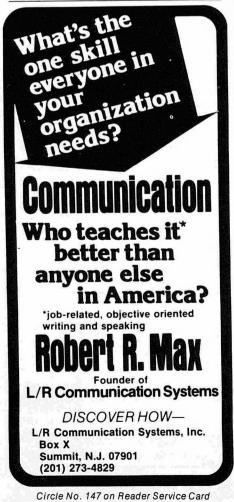
But even though the media director need use only the roughest visuals and scratch track, he or she should exercise the same care taken in developing the finished program. Otherwise the media director defeats his or her own purpose . . . to elicit constructive comments, spot inaccuracies, and generally give the client an opportunity to actually see and hear what he or she couldn't in the typewritten pages.

As for the materials comprising storyboard visuals, they can come from a variety of sources. In most cases, stills or slides of a proposed subject are readily available. Where art is called for, loose layouts will suffice. And if all else fails, clip art and pictures from books, magazines, encyclopedias, company publications and even newspapers can be used to illustrate just about every subject conceivable. The value of video storyboards can best be illustrated by some actual examples of how they have been used.

Our Employee Relations Department wanted to develop a program to explain employee benefits. The client was convinced that direct reproduction of the pages of a handbook would tell the story

clearly enough for everyone to understand. The only way to "unconvince" him was to show him the tables from the handbook and then modified by a video technique.

By using magic markers, simple line art and some cut-outs from a handbook, a video storybook was made in short order and at very little expense. After seeing both versions, the client readily agreed that the video technique hit home more effectively on the major points he wanted emphasized. Equally dramatic was the fact that the script had been approved by several people in the Employee Relations Department. It wasn't until the figures appeared on the screen that some errors were discovered. The changes were easily made, without ruining an entire production, and when the final version was screened, it was approved the first time around.

In addition to eliminating those dreaded last-minute changes, video storyboards can also be tremendously helpful in making creative decisions.

Our merchandising department was about to execute a very comprehensive and expensive point-of-purchase program. It was still in the developmental stages when they asked for a dealer presentation package. One of the principal requirements of the presentation was to show dealers how effective use of the displays would help increase their sales. This was especially important since the dealers would have to pay for the package.

A video storyboard was produced from sketches, line art and layouts of the P.O.P. pieces. At the screening sessions, a free-for-all discussion erupted concerning which retail outlets should be used for locations, and exactly where in those outlets the P.O.P. should be displayed. What had happened was that the video storyboard started the merchandising people thinking through some things that should have been analyzed before initiating the P.O.P. program and asking for a dealer presentation.

The outcome was a very selective pinpointing of exact locations to be used and the most effective placement of P.O.P. in each. Since dozens of locations had to be filmed in a matter of five days, a lot of hours were saved once the actual production was under way . . . and before any real money was spent. Seeing the video storyboard also helped decide whether or not the P.O.P. program should even be executed. It was . . . and it was successful.

Video storyboards can really be helpful and save a lot of money even when the script is virtually finalized, particularly if the script calls for an exotic and remote location. This was the case in a program describing a production operation in Trinidad.

The client had what amounted to a shooting script and a box full of slides from previous trips to the site. By matching specific shots in the script to slide scenes, the director virtually choreographed his entire shooting expedition before seeing the first actual location. He really did his scouting by looking through the slides.

A video storyboard was made using the slides and a scratch track

to help time the scenes. The client was able to approve the production before one travel dollar had been spent.

A peripheral benefit emerged from this use of the Trinidad storyboards. When the director got to Trinidad and set about working with the native crew which had been assigned, the video storyboard was shown to the crew. In pictures worth thousands of words, they saw what was being called for and worked more efficiently. This enabled the director to shoot footage for a 35-minute program in under 10 days, less than half the time originally budgeted.

Realistically, nothing we know of can totally eradicate postproduction changes. But the concept of video storyboards can be compared to preventive medicine, reducing the likelihood of the "disease" of costly revisions by detecting "incipient malaise" early in the game. Furthermore, the final productions tend to be of a higher quality as a result of better communication between production staff and client at the very outset of a planned program.

It is equally satisfying to any audio-visual department to act as more than a mechanical producer of a program. Through the use of video storyboards, the production staff can make valuable creative contributions that help the client achieve goals in a cost-conscious manner that makes everybody happy. One of the few enemies which video storyboards can't conquer is change for the sake of change. But then, nothing is perfect.

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