

The 8 Mistakes Guaranteed to
DOOM Your
Corporate Video or
Multimedia Project

Jim Penrose
Penrose Productions
Mountain View, CA
650-969-8273

www.penroseproductions.com

© Copyright 2007

INTRODUCTION

It's been a truly amazing journey. I've been in the video and multimedia production business since 1981 and in my 25 years in the business, I've seen some absolutely incredible leaps in the industry. To put video in historical perspective, it was only 22 years before I took the plunge into professional video that Sony, Matsushita, Toshiba, and JVC introduced helical-scan recording, which is the method used since to record on video tape recorders.¹ It took almost the entire subsequent 22-year span to bring these helical scan recorders into the home.

When I started in video production in 1981, consumer video recording was in its infancy. Most American homes did not have a VCR. VHS was still battling Betamax (what's that?!) for supremacy in the home video format wars. $\frac{3}{4}$ " tape (huh?) was the staple of industrial and advertising video production and 2" "Quad" machines (what??) were what the "real" broadcast studios used for their best quality editing and studio work. Field cameras capable of producing the best broadcast-quality pictures cost more than most houses at the time. (And now these have been surpassed in quality by today's consumer camcorders.) The CD-Rom had not yet come on the scene, and internet use was years away. Compressed video and streaming on web sites were barely the proverbial "figment" of someone's imagination. DVDs? HDTV? You're kidding!

Yet despite the incredible technological advances over my two and a half decades, many things have remained constant. The need to capture and retain audience interest, tell a story, and accomplish one's objectives were all critical to effectively communicating then, and remain so today.

And as technological advances have brought affordable high-quality video and multimedia into the hands of the neophyte, the need to use them "correctly" has remained. Just because you've got a paint brush, that doesn't make you Rembrandt!

Let's take a look at some of the mistakes still made in workplace corporate video and multimedia programs:

¹ Taub, Eric, "Eureka! A history of Video Technology" *Variety Magazine* April 1996

The 8 Mistakes Guaranteed to DOOM Your Corporate Video or Multimedia Project:

MISTAKE 1. DON'T BOTHER TO IDENTIFY YOUR AUDIENCE (OR TO CONSTANTLY KEEP IT IN MIND)

This is the first and foremost rule of creating any kind of communications program, yet it is amazing how often it gets violated. This rule is certainly not unique to video or multimedia programming. In all forms of audio and visual communication, it is imperative to develop a precise definition of the target audience – and remember it.

Market research firms and departments spend billions of dollars annually to determine who will receive a message so that proper product placement, advertising and promotions can be done. And it is money well spent.

Yet we often see companies approaching their video and/or multimedia projects with a “Ready, Fire, Aim” approach. They use a shotgun when a rifle is called for. They try to appeal to several audiences with the hope that the program will serve multiple purposes. Remember, when you try to appeal to everybody, you appeal to nobody.

While the same basic program can sometimes be used for different audiences, it is recommended that different variations or versions be developed for those different groups. It's a simple matter to re-edit or re-narrate portions of a production. However, efficiency demands that this is planned from the beginning of the project.

So remember to plan the project with your audience in mind. Know what their level of expertise or experience is with the topic. This will avoid the problem of shooting too low (e.g. wasting their time showing or telling them something they know) or too high (losing them because you assume a level of expertise they haven't yet attained).

MISTAKE 2. DON'T PRE-DETERMINE YOUR OBJECTIVE

This goes hand-in-hand with the first item. In addition to knowing who you are talking to, you need to know what you want them to do or feel after the program has been delivered.

Whenever possible, the objective should be quantifiable. It is certainly easier to measure results in the area of training. As any good training professional knows, pre- and post-training assessment tests can quantify the results of a training program.

Similarly, for sales and marketing or communications, detailed testing and statistics can be gathered about project awareness and attitudes before and after the presentation of the overall program package. But each of those probably aren't the real desired results – the true goal is pumping up the sales figures.

As in training, it is desirable to measure the effectiveness the sales or communications program has in meeting the stated goals.

There is a problem, however. Measurement of the specific impact of the video or multimedia program is difficult, as the production is typically not used in isolation. Instead it is usually part of a package of other material delivered in conjunction with the video or multimedia program.

Ideally, we would like to emulate large consumer companies, where extensive market research provides detailed analysis of specific advertising and promotional techniques. They can isolate the effects of individual components of an overall brand marketing strategy, for example. But this requires an extensive historical background and a very large sample size to help isolate variables and establish causal relationships.

However, this is more problematic in the business-to-business world.

B to B companies rarely have the historical data to statistically isolate the cause and effect relationships of individual marketing components. This is compounded because a new product or service introduction is often where we see the merger of these packages of video, trade show booth, collateral

and trade publication advertising. This renders historical comparisons largely irrelevant.

The opportunity to measure program effectiveness is not impossible, however. Anecdotal evidence can be gathered from clients as to what portions of the total package made the biggest impact. This can even be formally quantified through the use of surveys. Mix in a good portion of industry experience and common sense, and the sales or marketing exec can often get a pretty good feel for the impact of the video or multimedia portion of the campaign, as well as the other individual components.

MISTAKE 3. JUST ASSUME THAT VIDEO OR MULTIMEDIA IS THE SOLUTION TO YOUR PROBLEM

Not all problems can be solved through the use of video and multimedia, so that is why it is so important to understand the answers to #1 and #2 above.

In the area of sales and marketing, video and multimedia can be an important strategic component in the mix. In other areas, such as skills training, a video presentation might be just the ticket to be able to demonstrate proper technique to newly hired or promoted people.

In general, video and multimedia projects are best used where showing the product, service or process is advised. In sales and marketing, a particularly effective use is to show products in use that are impractical to bring to the prospective client for a demonstration. Over the years, we have done programs showing hotels, large assembly line robots, clean room processes, exercise programs, and many other areas where a demonstration in an office of the product or service is just not practical.

In areas involving interpersonal skills, such as management training, video might be a part of the solution. Establishing the groundwork in an area could be an excellent use of video, especially if there will be many employees over time who require this training. But for smaller groups, or for brief periods of time, role playing and other techniques could be warranted, whereas video and multimedia would not.

MISTAKE 4. TAKE THE ATTITUDE THAT “IT’S JUST A CORPORATE VIDEO”

Let’s face facts: your audience is comprised of sophisticated television and media viewers. According to Nielsen Research², the average American watches 4 hours and 35 minutes of TV each day.

With your viewers constantly bombarded with video images, they are quite jaded to “ordinary” video. They are sophisticated consumers of the media, so do not think that you they will excuse shoddy production values if you want to deliver an effective message.

The obvious implication is that the more important the idea you wish to communicate, the greater the reason to have your video or multimedia project professionally produced. If it’s worth doing, it’s worth doing well.

I will be the first to admit that there are projects that are exceptions to the “it’s only corporate video” rule. If you are just recording a technical seminar or other “mind dump” for future new hires or people that are out of town, then by all means set up the camcorder in the back of the room and let it run. But even if that is the case, please see rule #7, below.

Now that we’ve addressed the pre-production issues, let’s examine some major production gaffes that will doom your production:

MISTAKE 5. SKIP THE LIGHTING AND OTHER EQUIPMENT THAT WILL REALLY MAKE THE IMAGE “POP”

The current level of electronic technology is truly extraordinary. Home camcorders are easy to use and affordable, and everyone fancies himself or herself a TV director. But as good as these cameras have become, a professional, high-impact look will only come when additional lighting and other equipment are applied. Even current reality shows are supplemented

² “Nielsen Media Research Reports Television’s Popularity Is Still Growing” September 21, 2006.
<http://www.nielsenmedia.com/nc/portal/site/Public/menuitem.55dc65b4a7d5adff3f65936147a062a0/?vgnextoid=4156527aaccd010VgnVCM100000ac0a260aRCRD>

by lots of lighting instruments and other gear specially designed to make the shots look good.

Knowing how to light is a complete art and science unto itself. If you were to review the movie credits at the end of a major motion picture (without animation or special effects) over half the people would be involved in lighting and related areas to make the image look just right.

Of course, we're not trying to duplicate "Gone with the Wind" here, but remember that the image that you show, is the image that represents YOU.

In addition to lighting instruments, some of the gear that might be called into play includes soft lights, gels, reflectors, bounce cards, cookies, scrims and light diffusion. You can see a couple of these in Figure 1 below.

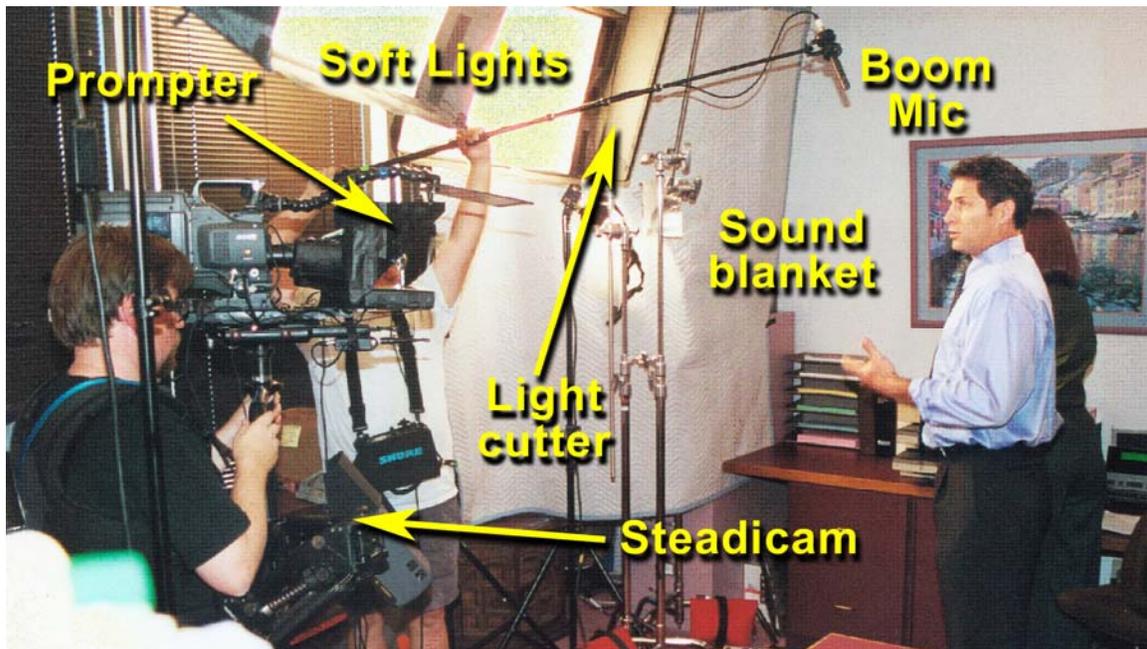


Figure 1

In the above shoot we did, starring Steve Young of 49er fame, you can see 2 big soft lights as the primary lighting source. We have also have other "harder" (e.g. not soft) lights out of frame above and to the left of this image – including fill and back lights.

The light cutter at the top center is used to keep too much light from flooding the background.

In Figure 2 below, note the large reflector above the men with the fog machine. This is used to redirect sunlight for an outdoor shoot. In Figure 3, just to the right of the top center is a half flag, used to block and diffuse some of the light coming from a light out of the picture to the right. You can see the light is still pretty bright on our subject's face.



Figure 2



Figure 3

While this array of lighting and grip equipment is typically not available for shooting corporate video on your own, it can enhance the image dramatically. And if your budget does not allow a complete video production crew to shoot the video, freelance lighting directors with rental equipment are available, and that could give a corporate video a look that will set it apart from other more amateurish efforts.

MISTAKE 6. DON'T USE A TRIPOD OR OTHER CAMERA SUPPORT

The pros know that a steady camera is critical to getting a good, interesting image. If the camera is bouncing around, the viewer gets distracted and often, annoyed. If the viewer's mind is busy following the subject around the screen, it won't be concentrating on your message.

At certain times, a moving camera becomes an art form, such as is seen in music videos. But corporate videos are not music videos. Keep the camera on the tripod and keep the camera movements smooth.

When the pros shoot, there are a wide variety of camera mounts available for image stabilization. These include various sizes of tripods, jib arms, cranes, dollies and a Steadicam®.

In Figures 4 and 5, you'll see the back and front shots of a dolly, with the camera operator on board, and the dolly grip pushing it on tracks. The dolly gives great smooth shots, but due to the expense of rental and the two people needed to operate it, it can be a pricey addition to the program.



Figure 4

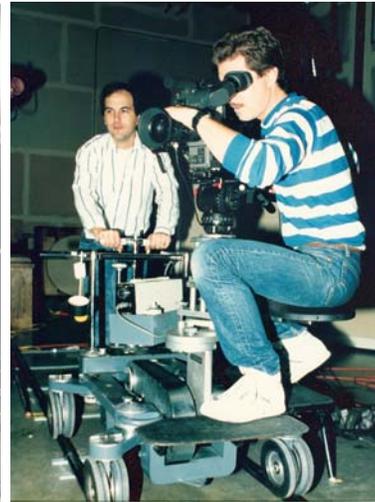


Figure 5

In Figure 6 we are using a jib arm in preparation to making swooping and climbing shots of a store facade. The jib can be rented in various sizes and can create an almost 3D look. It needs a trained operator.



Figure 6

While the jib can move extensively around a subject, for true 3D views, a Steadicam® is called for. This is a specialized harness that needs to be used by an experienced camera operator. It can give dramatic looks at the subject, including moving smoothly around them for 360 degrees or more.

You can see a Steadicam® on the left in Figure 1 on page 7. Unless you have a Steadicam® and trained operator, don't follow your subject around with the camera – leave it to the pros.

MISTAKE 7. USE THE CAMERA MICROPHONE TO RECORD THE AUDIO

The rapid improvement and compactness of video is also manifested in the audio that accompanies it. Camcorders today record excellent sound. But there is a problem.

The problem is that the sound source closest to the camcorder microphone) will be recorded best. And this may not be what you want recorded.

Have you ever set up a camcorder in the back of the room to record a live seminar and listened to the result? Isn't it amazing how the comments, coughs and collisions in the back of the room sound so clear – and the speaker is unintelligible at those points?

I simply can't count the number of times people have come to us to ask if we can enhance the audio from just such presentations, and other live events as well.

In short, the answer is unfortunately “No.” We can not bring out audio that essentially is not there.

What is the solution? It's all just a matter of microphone placement. In such a situation, you should invest in a lavalier microphone for the presenter to wear. The mic is then in place less than a foot from the presenter's mouth and will record clear audio.

In Figure 7 below, I am placing a lavalier mic on blues guitarist B.B. King prior to shooting a TV commercial. In this case, the microphone will be hidden from view. I'm tucking it under his collar, out of sight.



Figure 7

Another option would have been to use a mic on a boom pole just out of frame as we did for Steve Young back in Figure 1. Another example is seen in Figure 8, below. The boom mic is just above the head of the subject, but is cropped out of the shot by the video camera. You'll also see the make-up artist touching up our subject's hair.



Figure 8

If possible when buying or renting a lavalier, get a good wireless microphone. Don't defeat the purpose by getting a cheap microphone that

feeds buzzes and hisses to your recording system. A pair of decent, yet inexpensive headphones will let you listen to the audio that you are getting. If you don't get a clean signal, take the microphone back to the store and get one that works for you.

Prices for good quality mics have come down dramatically over the years, so if you are going to do much of this type of "talking head" recording, it's worth the small investment.

Microphones are obviously not just for amplification. You need a good mic close to the subject to get good clear audio.

MISTAKE 8. LETTING YOUR IN-HOUSE "TALENT" JUST WING IT

Let's face it, your co-workers are not professional actors, and they need some help to remember all the things they need to say and do on camera. I discussed this recently with another producer friend of mine, and he commented, "If I had a nickel for every time I shot an exec who said he could just talk off the top of his head... What disasters!"

I agree. Use a teleprompter. It mounts in front of the camera. Your executive or employee can look right at the camera and read the words as if he were looking into the lens. After a couple of practice runs, amateurs are almost always comfortable enough to blast right through the script. It's money well spent as it means faster shooting, less errors, and fewer frayed nerves.

And if your executive looks stiff or really doesn't like the feel of "reading" the words, we can put up bullet points or PowerPoint slides on the prompter so that he or she can still appear to be looking at the audience. This avoids the problem of the presenter looking away to notes or cue cards and looking "shifty eyed" as a result.

CONCLUSION

As always, the motto of “If it’s worth doing, it’s worth doing well” applies to your productions. But there are times when a large full scale production is not warranted. Fortunately, it is no longer a matter of all or nothing when it comes to bringing professional production values to your work.

You do not have to spend tens of thousands of dollars for a program.

It surprises many people that are considering the production of industrial video or multimedia that there is an efficient middle ground that can be used. This can be a tremendous cost saver. This includes hiring one or more professionals to assist. This could be:

- a producer/director to oversee your production,
- a lighting director with equipment,
- a teleprompter operator with equipment,
- a make-up artist to make your executive look “just right”
- an editor to bring together the footage you’ve shot into a crisp, effective program,
- a graphic artist or animator to punch up your graphics,
- a duplication facility to make mass quantities of your videotape, DVD or CD

Through the use of experienced professionals in some or all areas of your next production, you can ensure that you create a program that meets your objectives in an efficient and effective way.

Jim Penrose
Penrose Productions
650-969-8273
www.penroseproductions.com



video.
multimedia.
results.