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VIDEO COMEDY IS SERIOUS STUFF

Effective video comedy is more than just location jokes and slapstick routines. Making people laugh is hard work—but not beyond a serious videomaker's reach.

By Kevin Campbell

We've all been there. After long hours of directing and editing your comedy masterpiece, you're ready. You bring in your audience, slip the videocassette in the VCR, hit *play*, and wait for the gales of laughter.

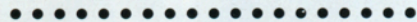
Then, amidst stone-cold silence, feet shuffle and chairs shift. A few viewers even *yawn*. You glance at the person next to you and mumble feebly, "I guess you had to be there."

To the late, great film comedian Marty Feldman, comedy meant just one thing.

"If I make you laugh, it's comedy," he said. "If you don't laugh,

Keep Your Humor within Bounds
 Humor only works within its presented context. Little kids dancing at a wedding reception can be hilarious; little kids in wedding videos are *always* funny. The same stunt in a trucking company training tape won't work. Sight gags in that context only get in the way of your message.

Without knowing exactly who your



Every good comedy has at least one normal person that all the lunatics play off of.

audience is, there's no way to determine a context for your humor.

Once you know your audience, don't ruin your production by using inappropriate humor. Amusing asides about hostile financial takeovers will work for a corporate video. Whoopie cushions, joy buzzers, or men dancing about in women's lingerie (probably) won't.

Determine the style of humor that will work for your audience. Four types

Adapt your humor to fit the audience; don't expect your audience to adapt to the humor.

Notice how the situational comedy of The Golden Girls contrasts the more dramatic humor of Thirtysomething—appealing to different audience tastes.

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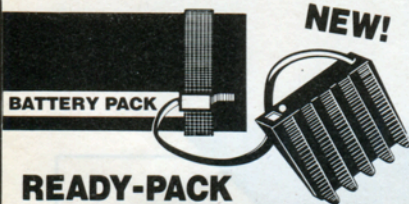


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What's So Funny?

No absolute rules—just a few points to keep in mind when you plan your comedy script.

- *Incorporate elements of surprise.* Example: Two women sip their coffee and discuss its rich flavor. Suddenly, the Duracell bunny whirrs past, banging a drum. The women react, deadpan. The rabbit is unexpected, out of place—and the commercial is hilarious.
- *Keep it simple.* If an audience has to work for the joke, it won't work. Don't force the audience to look things up in an encyclopedia. While they're scratching their heads over one joke, the next will zoom by.
- *Make comparisons.* Most comedy comes from bizarre metaphors and relationships that no one thought of until the comedian or scriptwriter pointed it out. Eddie Murphy once said that herpes sticks around forever—like luggage. Who else would compare something as mundane as suitcases to a social disease?

Take something familiar—dinner at home with the family, a first date, a used car salesman—and turn it on its head. Have your characters make comparisons. Have them react. Then keep twisting the ideas. Keep asking yourself, "What if my character did this...?"

- *Key your humor to your audience.* Scatological or "bathroom" humor may be funny to a 12-year-old, but *your* audience probably won't enjoy it. Likewise with racist, sexist, or other potentially offensive humor.

- *Things are only funny once.* Just because you've spent hours perfecting a funny character or a choice bit of dialog, don't think it'll be twice as funny if repeated.

Steve Martin may have turned "Excuse me!" into a household phrase, but he said it only once per act.

- *Don't steal jokes.* Everyone's seen amateur video productions that lift professional skits word for word. It's a mistake to believe that since it worked on Letterman it'll work just as well for you.

Your audience is smarter than that. If you steal something, your



Photo courtesy of NBC-TV KCRA

audience knows you're a thief, and a bad one at that. Better to try and fail on your own than steal to make up for your lack of originality.

You can borrow *themes*, just don't steal the delivery. The creators of *ALF* borrowed the premise of *Mork and Mindy* (which borrowed from *My Favorite Martian*), but they came up with a whole new character and a very different show.

- *Don't just tell jokes.* The funniest television sit-coms take place in one or two settings and succeed (or fail) based entirely on their *characters*, not on jokes and one-liners. Characters should be so well designed that humorous events flow naturally from what they say and how they react to other characters and situations.

Crafting a funny character without telling jokes is often the biggest challenge of creating effective video humor. Think about what makes a comedy fun to watch: *Night Court* has the lascivious Dan Fielding; *Married with Children* has the hapless, dysfunctional Al Bundy; the visiting alien in *ALF* is an intergalactic version of Don Rickles.

Whether your video is a corporate training tape or just something fun you want to put together for friends, take the time to create interesting, watchable characters.

- *Don't laugh at your own jokes.* Nothing distances an audience more than on-screen characters who laugh while delivering their lines. Nobody likes to be on the outside of an inside joke, and if the joke isn't funny, the performers will look like the only ones who get it.

—Campbell

Courtesy of Photofest



Reaction shots—such as Leslie Nielsen's deadpan expression in *The Naked Gun*—can make or break a good comedy routine.

situation.

Use reaction shots (closeups of the actors) and cutaways (quick changes of scene) to carry the humor. A line or a skit isn't funny just because it's delivered; it's funny because we see how other characters react to it.

Let Your Camera Participate

Creative camera work can be employed for effective video comedy. For example, as Lt. Drebin (Leslie Nielsen) and his partner in *The Naked Gun* walk along the waterfront, the audience hears a voice announcing, "Please disperse! There's nothing to see here!"

As the camera follows the two policemen, the source of the voice is gradually revealed—a cop with his bullhorn aimed point-blank at two people standing right in front of him. If the scene had been shot wide, revealing everything at once, the gag wouldn't have been nearly

as effective.

In the film *Raising Arizona*, the

camera takes the point of view of an infant being bobbed up and down; another time it races along a road, up a ladder, and into the screaming mouth of a woman in curlers. The film is hilarious, and a great deal of the humor comes from creative use of the camera.

The editing process is your last chance to make your video really funny. Observe how your favorite humorous television programs are edited. If a shot is even slightly too long, spontaneity (and the audience!) are lost. Note too the frequent use of reaction shots and cutaways.

Making video comedy *funny* is serious work. Good comedy is a matter of feeling as well as practice. Remember: Every character, joke, and routine you create won't always make your audiences laugh. But they'll have a sense of what you're trying to do.

Listen to them, watch what works, and keep practicing.

Kevin Campbell is a university radio-TV-film instructor and author of Make Money with Your Camcorder (Amherst Media).

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Well-crafted characters are essential to good comedy. We watch ALF and Roseanne not only for the jokes they tell, but for the way they react to the everyday situations and characters around them.



Courtesy of NBC KCRA-TV

I've failed. Smiles don't count—you can't hear them."

While there's no hard and fast definition of good video comedy, that doesn't mean there aren't a few guidelines that can increase your chances of hitting a comedic bull's-eye.

Identify Your Audience

Communicating effectively with humor requires knowing who you want to communicate with.

Before you write a single line, conduct a *market audience analysis*. Why? Recall the opening paragraph. There's no such thing as universal humor (unless you're Bill Cosby). As I always say, different jokes for different folks, because people laugh for different reasons about dissimilar things. Those who roll with laughter over *Roseanne* might completely miss the humor in *L.A. Law*.

As writer and director, you must identify your audience. Who will want to watch your video—even *pay* to watch it? What age group, income, and education level are they? *The Golden Girls* attracts a different audience from *Cheers*, though both are extremely successful.

Remember: Just because *you* think it's funny doesn't mean your audience will.

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