

Profit * Ability

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The Demo Tape

Set the Hook and Reel 'Em In

By Kevin Campbell

To get customers to come to your door, you need top-notch marketing. To get those customers to actually hire you, you need a great demo tape. In fact, your best marketing and advertising efforts may be wasted if you don't have a persuasive demo to back them up. And the way you present your demo tape can be just as important as the tape itself. A great demo with a poor presentation is just as bad as no demo tape at all.

The reason is simple: your demo tape is your audition for a job. If you don't have a great demo presented

mo, either. Demo tapes are actually quite simple to make—if you follow a few important rules.

Be honest. Probably the most important element of any good demo tape is honesty. Your demo should be a sincere representation of your available production talents and abilities. That means you should not add a lot of slick animation and tons of special transition effects to your demo if you're unable to do them with ease for your clients.

Keep it short! Demo tapes are like commercials. You'll lose your audi-



Your presentation is just as important as your demo tape. Take the time to listen to your client's suggestions and answer

professionally, the client you're auditioning for may just give his video job to someone else.

Some beginning video producers are mystified by demo tapes. Quite a few seasoned video professionals don't know how to make a decent de-

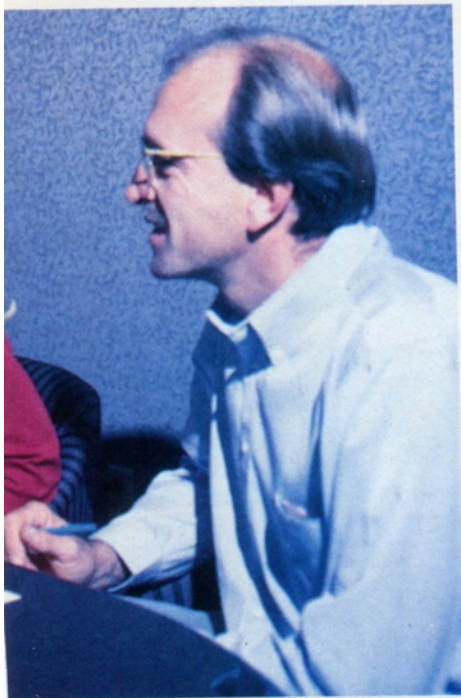
ence—your client—if your video sales pitch goes on too long. If you specialize in commercial spots, your demo should not go more than five minutes. If your specialty is weddings or corporate tapes, seven minutes of length is more than enough. If your client wants

to see a finished video, offer to show a copy of another client's completed project.

Show only your best material.

Even multi-million-dollar production companies only show material from a few of their top productions, and they may have hundreds of great videos to choose from. It's better to have a short demo with great examples than a longer tape with some average segments mixed in with the good ones. If you're a new video producer, keep your demo tape very short, using clips from only your best stuff. As your production experience grows, add new material to your demo and get rid of older segments that are not your best anymore.

Show diversity. Include a mix of fast and slow elements from your best productions. If you produce weddings, for example, include shots that show a selection of emo-



any questions that client might have.

tions—both crying relatives and laughing, happy reception guests. Commercial and corporate producers should include samples of different lighting techniques, camera work, and faster and slower edit sequences.



Tailor your demo to your market. It's common for production companies to have several different demos on hand. If you shoot weddings on weekends and industrial videos during the week, make a separate demo for each market. You want to hit your client's hot button—your goal is to get that client to point to your demo and say, "Yeah, let's do something like that!" If your clients are mom-and-pop companies, your demo should be somewhat warm and fuzzy. If your clients are three-piece-suit corporations, your demo should be just as button-down and businesslike.

Be creative, not clever. Don't try to be funny unless you're really good at it, and then don't do anything offensive. For example, a wedding video company created a demo tape disguised as a news report on weddings ruined by the "Uncle Charlie Syndrome." The tape compared out-of-focus, amateurish footage to the company's professional wedding production capabilities. This creative comparison really hit home for the target market—brides who are not very video-savvy—and was very effective at overcoming price resistance.

Packaging is just as important as your demo tape. Printed tape labels and sleeves are inexpensive, yet they tell your client you're professional (sleeves courtesy Video Post Productions, Kansas City, Missouri).

Another company that specializes in TV commercials for radio stations did a very creative parody on a sports commentary program. The demo included commentators who sounded like ESPN anchors introducing their demo spots with jokes about the on-air personalities. This kind of demo worked because the company had a big budget and used excellent actors.

Putting together a workable demo tape takes time—and restraint. As a producer, you want to show off all your stuff. Before you edit, however, put yourself in your client's shoes. Your customer does not want to see a shopping list of equipment and effects, he wants to see if you can create a professional-quality production. Here are some suggestions on producing a watchable demo tape.

Avoid narration. Hopefully, you'll be showing this demo to your client personally. You don't want a demo tape narrator talking at the same time you and your client are trying to talk. It's easier to eliminate

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the competition in advance by not using any narration. Besides, narration takes time to write and a professional voice to record, and that means more time and cost for you. Instead, just use instrumental music—which encourages conversation between you and your client.

There are exceptions to this no-narration rule, of course. Some of your potential video clients might be hundreds of miles away, making personal presentations impossible. If you're making a demo to send out and you won't be there personally for the presentation, narration could help. For example, many video producers have been sent NewTek's Toaster demo, which uses plenty of professional narration.

Don't make your demo from anything but original camera footage. If you don't have a top-notch edit system, it would be worth the money to rent a one-inch or digital suite to edit your demo. You might have to bump your S-VHS or Hi8 mas-

judge your demo by its cover as well as its content. A demo that has a hand-written or typed label will look amateurish—and your client may assume the rest of your production capabilities are just as shoddy. Printed tape labels and sleeves aren't expensive, and they project an air of professionalism.

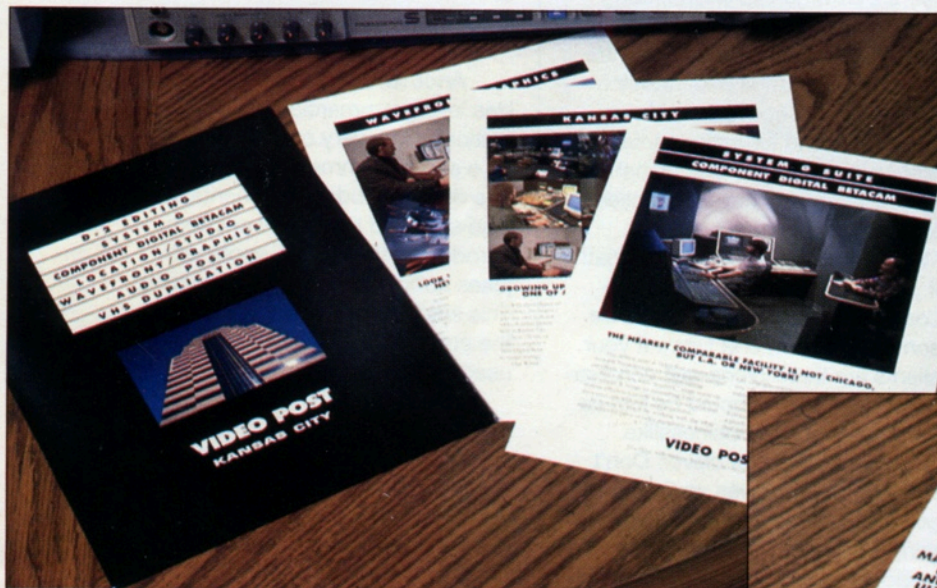
Spend the time and money needed to produce professional printed marketing material, too. Create a brochure, with photos, that you can give to your client along with your video. A demo tape can't tell everything about your company; a brochure can add any additional information you want your client to know. Color printing and photos aren't absolutely necessary for your brochure, but good photographs are. It's common for companies to spend more on print material than on the demo tape itself, so if you feel you can't do the job yourself, hire a desktop publishing company to produce it for you.

A great demo and well-done brochure are only half the battle for your client's dollars; an impressive presentation and delivery are essential to sealing the deal. Here are a few tips to make your presentation go smoothly.

Focus on your client. Make your presentation in a room away from your office or front desk. Offer your client coffee or soft drinks, and make sure the TV, VCR, demo tape, and brochure are already in the

room waiting. Take the phone out of the room, or turn the ringer off. And don't leave the room to take a call; nothing offends a client like making him think callers are more important to you than he is.

If you work out of your home,



Print marketing goes hand-in-hand with your demo tape. You can spend the money on color flyers and inserts (above) or just make a simple black/white brochure (right). Either way, make sure you list any information about your company that isn't in your demo tape.



Use upbeat instrumental music. Invest in a good music library. Don't use pop hits, since they invariably have words (competition for your presentation), and Top-40 music might distract from your message (the music may be better than your demo reel, or your client might dislike the music you use). Using prerecorded music without permission is also illegal.

Edit from your original masters.

ters to the higher format, but you won't lose any quality; your finished demo will be on the higher format, which will hold up well to repeated dubbing onto VHS tapes.

Take the time and effort to make high-quality covers and marketing material to go with your demo. Like it or not, clients will often

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offer to meet the client at his office or home. Ask for a quiet place where you can play the demo. It's not as easy to control such an environment, but it's better than inviting someone into your home to watch a demo tape in your living room.

Have the pause button ready. It's common for clients to point at something you've done and ask

questions. Be ready to pause the tape or roll it back, play segments again, and fully answer any questions the client might

have. Assume that if the client asks about something on the tape, he's thinking of a similar point for his project.

Don't talk during the demo. But do tell the client to jump in with any questions he might have. Demo tapes are great starting-off points for clients to discuss what they want to see in their video projects.

Don't hand out print materials until after the demo. Printed material just invites a good thumbing through, and your client might miss parts of the demo while reading the brochure. Instead, hand out the print material after the demo and presentation. Invite your client to take a long look at everything and call with any questions.

Ask the right questions. Don't ask the client, "So, what do you think?" The client will likely be gracious, and say, "Hey, looks great." That doesn't get the conversation flowing. Instead, ask your client: "Did you see anything you'd like to see in your video?" Or: "Is there anything else you'd like to see in your video that you didn't see in our demo?"

At the end of your presentation, offer your demo to the client along with your printed marketing material. And, of course, ask for the sale!

It's always a good idea to see what your competition is doing for their demo tapes. With a little subterfuge and help from friends, it's relatively easy to obtain demo tapes from other production companies. See what they look like, then make yours better.

A well-produced demo tape is essential to hooking clients and running a profitable production company. All the advertising in the world is wasted without a fantastic demo and presentation to back up your claims. **VP**

Kevin Campbell owns ControlTrack Productions, a how-to production and marketing company in Wichita, Kansas. He has written *Make Money with Your Camcorder*, *Basic Video Editing*, and

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