

40

What Were You Thinking?! Pet Peeves of the Video Pros

Jennifer O'Rourke

Have you ever wanted to wrestle a camcorder away from Uncle Buck while at a family function or public event and scream into the lens, “What are you THINKING!!??”

We have to admit, as experienced shooters and editors, that we’ve had to squelch the impulse to take control of someone’s camcorder from time to time. We also know that many shooters, editors, directors and producers have had similar tongue-biting moments when dealing with people within the profession. So we polled our various video associates for their pet peeves and I added a few of my own. Do you see yourself or someone you know in this list?

Subliminal Message

A flash frame in a finished project is the number one “fingernails on a chalkboard” peeve of mine. When they are meant for effect, flash frames are a great editing technique. But when it’s just sloppy editing it presents a poor production. After working hours, days, maybe even months on a project, step back and watch it, really watch every frame that passes by. Watch for continuity. Watch for match editing, and above all, watch for those dangling flash frames. You don’t want to discover the mistake as it goes live on the air, debuts at the major stockholders meeting or shows at your grandma’s lifetime achievement party.



Figure 40-1 A flash frame, in this case a single frame of black that inadvertently snuck in when two clips were not joined properly, will be subconsciously noticeable to the viewer. Be sure to catch and remove these.

Steady as She Goes

Have you watched someone's footage (not yours, of course!) that looks as if they're trying to create the next *Blair Witch Project*? But they're only shooting little Janey's ballet recital.

In the Olden Days, camcorders were big and bulky ... and heavy. The shoulder-mounted weight of the camcorder gave you ballast that helped make shooting steady. But nowadays, with mini this and mini that, everything is small, and small is not good when it comes to shooting video handheld. Use a tripod. If you don't have one, or it's not available, hold your arms close to your sides, tuck the camera in and bend your knees. Or lean against a tree, balance the camcorder on something or even cup the camera under your arm. You have to become a human tripod, and by all means, if you're shooting something at an extreme distance without a tripod, don't zoom in! Trust me on this one, it will not enhance your video. Either get closer, steady the camera some way, or accept that you're going to be stuck with an extreme wide shot. An out-of-control picture that looks like it's in the middle of a hurricane can make your viewer sick, and his eye tends to concentrate on the frame edge rather than the subject matter.

Watch Out for That Tree!

How many times have you seen this? A medium shot of a person talking into the camera with a tree, telephone pole or lamppost growing from the back of his head? Or maybe it's high-tension wires seeming to grow through her ears? Too many people work hard at framing their key subjects in the picture, and forget to look at the rest of the scene. Pay attention to foreground and background, they are just as important to a well-composed picture as the main subject is.

We're always talking about the "Rule of Thirds" which good Videomaker readers all know: by moving your subject from dead-on center, you will create a more



Figure 40-2 When composing your shots, always remember to pay attention to what's happening in the background, so you don't end up with a telephone pole growing out of someone's head.

interesting scene to enjoy. But you also need to look at background and foreground to escape the tree-through-the-head shots and to add depth and interest to a picture.

Get Set, Lock Down, SHUT UP!

If a picture is worth a thousand words, then a talking videographer is worth the price of a bad joke. Listen to the pictures you're recording: can you hear the sound of birds chirping, children laughing, kites whooshing and brooks babbling? If all you hear is yourself narrating, you just ruined one of the most important parts of your video story: NAT SOT (NATURAL Sound On Tape).

I once shot a news story on how the California drought years were ruining the natural habitat of rare fish in the mighty Kings River. While shooting my B-roll, the reporter on the story kept up a continuous dialog with the Parks Service representative we interviewed earlier. Later, the reporter asked for sound full of the once roaring but now babbling river, and all I had was her chattering. Instead of a babbling river, I used her babbling conversation as my NAT SOT full volume, and she learned her lesson. You can enhance any story, documentary, or vacation video with the sound all around us, or ruin it with babbling ... well, people.

Following interviews, news shooters and documentarians will often record a minute of “room noise” or outside noise to use as “sound full” (recorded full volume) without narration, or sound under to enhance the ambience of the scene. Stop and listen, really listen, to the silence, and you’ll hear it’s full of noise, from computers and air-conditioning inside, to the distant barking beagle or lawn mower buzzing outside. When shooting, always remember to hear, not just see, the picture, and use it appropriately. Be aware that the air-conditioning or barking dog might ruin your video, but used right, it could also enhance the story.

Edit Thyself

Oh, this is my biggie against myself. It’s hard to edit down your favorite scenes. Think about it this way: Remember those times when you’ve looked through someone’s collection of still photographs? You quickly flip through some, pause over others, and pass by the blurry close-up of the photographer’s foot. You naturally pass some shots with nary a glance, and spend a great deal of time with others. You are editing. In addition, let’s face it, some still shots are accidental, and if the photographer needs to explain, “oh, that was a mistake ...” then he should have “edited” them out before he handed them to you. The same goes for editing video. Less is more. As hard as it is, remember to always leave them wanting more, not waiting for the end(less) credit roll so they can bolt for the bar.

Lost in Translation

This one drives me so batty it’s made me scream at the TV like a crazed idiot. Producers of some local commercials, bless their sometimes low-budget hearts, try too hard to throw in every trick in their effect banks and overlay video over video over video so badly that you have no idea what the product is that they’re selling.

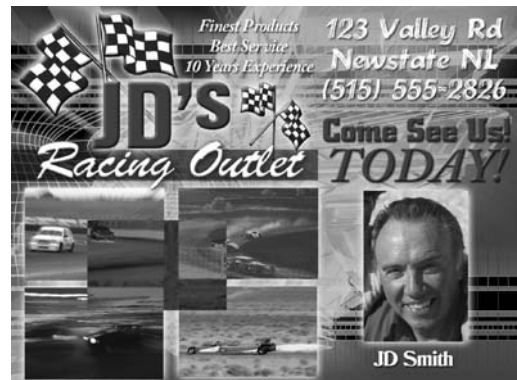


Figure 40-3 In video, as in most visual arts, less is more, and too much information can lead to a busy, confusing look.

Remember this, if you’re laying one stream of video over another, don’t compound the frenzy by using shots of moving video moving all over the place, and don’t use busy complicated video clips.

Remember the KISS rule: Keep It Simple, Spielberg.

Burned Out

We’re easily sated with the overused cheesy effects in 1980s sitcoms, but is anyone else starting to feel the same way every time you see the “Ken Burns” effect? You’ll either see every tracking and zooming on every still, or they track waaaay too quickly, especially when panning, thus losing the subtlety and beauty of the effect.

I love the effect, if done correctly. If you do zoom in on picture “A,” then you should begin your next shot tight on picture “B” and zoom out. This is a lot less jarring to the viewer, and has a more fluid flow. If you’re tracking and zooming to a particular spot in the picture, don’t track too quickly. The original reason for this effect is that going from a moving picture to a still shot has an abruptness that bothers the eye. But editors have now so overused the pan-and-zoom that audiences want to yell, “Enough, already ... you’re NO Ken Burns!” A simple dissolve sometimes is all the effect you need, and subtlety is the key to good pan-and-zoom.

Walk Don't Run. Hey, Don't Walk Either!

Some people just can't seem to settle down and ... well ... shoot. Anyone can record events as they happen in front of a camera. Just turn on the camera, press "record" and wave it around. But if you're chronicling the events of the world around you, you should NOT be a part of the action. Walking down the street, waving the camera back and forth, gathers nothing good, and loses the essence of the event. Settle down and record from a distance. Short, far, it doesn't matter. Sure, an occasional POV (Point of View) shot is fun, and putting the camera into the action makes for more interesting video, but not every shot.

Even worse is what I call the Waving Camera Syndrome. This looks like an indecisive "which way did he go, Joe, which way did he go," shot. I've seen news photographers do this, too. The shooter follows the action, then sees something else in his peripheral vision and swishes over to that, only to decide that the first shot was better after all, then swishes back. Unless he's shooting a one-camera baseball game where the action happens all at once all over the field, he just ruined both shots. Professional videographers know when it's proper to swish quickly from shot to shot. They always begin each shot from a steady still position, then swish to follow the action, ending the shot at a still position. It gives the eye the chance to settle down before the next clip. Learn to make a decision, follow through with the shot, then quickly frame up, compose and focus for the next shot.



Figure 40-4 Video "footage"—shots of your feet when you thought the camcorder was off—are a common mistake of the beginning videographer.

It's not that hard and it makes for a much more visually pleasing video.

And Finally

Keep the zooming to a minimum. Just because your camcorder has a zoom control, doesn't mean you should always use it. The stationary shot with the subject matter supplying the action is most often all the movement you need. When you do zoom or pan the camera, start and end your shot with a still shot.

Of course, our **Videomaker** readers are savvy shooters and all know these simple rules, so you can pass these tips to your next door neighbor, Uncle Buck or the parents at school afflicted with the waving camera syndrome. Meanwhile, keep your eyes and ears open and clean up these production peeves for us, OK? That way we can start picking on something else.