Topic no. 59

Filmmaking 01

SHOOTING INSTRUCTIONAL PRODUCTIONS

Typical instructional productions

A wide range of video programs can be described as "instruction." Besides the programming found on the networks, niche cable channels are filled with shows about cooking, hunting, home improvement, medicine (surgery), and many other topics. Most of these programs are instructional and are designed for specific markets, such as educational, professional, specialist trades, and so on.

Approaches to instruction

There are some subjects that cannot really be demonstrated effectively in a video program. Instead, directors have to rely on *verbal descriptions* of processes. Other subjects may be only partly successful because of the limitations of the system, such as a demonstration of sound quality.

One of the weakest instructional methods in a video program is an illustrated talk that shows still photographs, diagrams, maps, and so on. To enhance the project, pan or tilt the camera across the still photo or slowly zoom in and out of the still.

A cooking demonstration, on the other hand, can be extremely effective, it is full of visual movement and change, a process that develops as we watch—even though the audience cannot smell or taste whether it is as successful as it looks.

One of the most powerful forms of instruction is when the talent speaks to us directly through the camera, pointing out each feature of the subject.

The "documentary format," in which the host may be heard as a *voiceover* making observations on the images, is much less personal. However, it can be more authoritative, especially if the speaker's visual presence is not particularly impressive on camera for any reason. But the documentary approach is extremely greedy for imagery. Compared to the "direct approach," where directors can always take shots of the talent speaking to the camera, the "documentary" method requires that the camera is continually looking at the subject and its surroundings— which may not have enough interest to sustain the viewer's attention.

Advance planning

On the face of it, one might assume that instructional productions merely involve presenting the item before the camera and pointing out its features.

Some very boring programs are made this way. The secrets of really successful demonstrations are *planning, preparation,* and *rehearsal*, even for the most familiar subjects. In fact, the more familiar it is, the more difficult it can be to make the program interesting and hold the audience's attention. Too easily, the director can assume that the viewers "know all about that."

A good instructional program is designed to fit its audience. If it is produced at too high a level, the uninitiated become bewildered and embarrassed at not being able to grasp the facts. They become confused. They lose their self- confidence. While sorting out what has been said, they get lost.

A successful program encourages curiosity and intrigues, leaving the audience with a sense of satisfaction and fulfillment. "What do you think will happen now?" is much more involving than "When we do this that happens."

Creating the instructional program

Instructional programs can take anything from a few minutes to years to complete. Directors often need to stretch or condense time in various ways to suit the occasion:

- Shoot everything from start to finish. This ensures that the audience misses none of the action and gets an accurate idea of how long everything takes. Clearly this is a good approach for relatively brief productions, but it is unsuitable when producing a program such as "How to build a house."
- The video can be recorded continuously, then edit out the time-consuming, repetitious, or boring parts. This can produce a shorter, better-paced program and ensures that the audience concentrates on the important stages.
- Portions of a show can be arranged in prepared sections. For instance, when showing how to bake a cake, the director may first display the ingredients, begin the method of mixing, and then place the prepared mixture in an oven (or not, if one is not available). The talent can then remove the cooked cake and begin to decorate it, and we end with a shot of the fully decorated cake. Not only does this method save a great deal of time, but it ensures that the results turn out right at each stage. However, directors have to guard against leaving out important information when shortcutting time in this way. For instance, the audience may inadvertently be left wondering how to tell when the food is fully cooked. Preferably the host would both tell and show the audience how to test for doneness.
- For demonstrations that take a long time to develop, such as a plant growing, the simplest plan is to shoot short sequences at strategic moments (hours, days, or weeks apart) and show them one after the other. The alternative is to use some type of an automatic timer that takes a brief video shot at regular intervals. Computer software is avail- able that will trigger the camera and record the video images directly to a hard drive. When the recording is played back at normal speed, time is compressed, and these *time-lapse* sequences show the process highly

Speeded up. A plant can grow from seed, flower, and die in a minute or two. But, of course, this method does tie up a camera and other related equipment (VCR or computer) in a rigidly held position for the duration of the shooting period.

- Sometimes a demonstration program has to be made to a prescribed length in order to fit a scheduled time slot. You can achieve this goal by deliberately including material that is interesting but can be trimmed or omitted as necessary.

- If the video program is to be used as part of a live presentation, such as a classroom lecture where a teacher will also be speaking and answering questions, the production can be designed to be extremely flexible. The program can be arranged as a series of pre timed, self-contained sections so that the teacher can use as much as is needed for a specific lesson without the students feeling that they are being prevented from seeing the entire program.