

What makes you a Video Professional?

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As the current President of the Colorado Professional Videographers Association, I thought that I would try and address what I think a Professional Videographer is. It's not a simple question to answer and opinions will vary. I simply hope that you take at least one item from what you read here, and put it to good use in your business.

Charge

This might seem too obvious to have to mention but, yes, you need to charge for your services. You should have a set of fees that you can consistently communicate to potential clients and those fees should be in a range that is competitive in your market area. If you price too low you run the risks of not being taken seriously and/or not making enough money to continue in business. Setting your prices higher than the average in your area can work but only if you can convince potential clients that you deserve the extra compensation. That said, there are certainly times when doing pro bono (free) work or giving a discount makes sense. I do pro bono work for two non-profits. Both organizations have a personal place in my heart. I give a true 20% discount to other non-profits. I suggest reaching out to an organization and offering your pro bono services, rather than waiting for them to approach you and asking if you'll work pro bono. When it comes to non-profits it's important to remember that "non-profit" does not mean "has no money"! There are a plethora of other situations where you may be offered compensation other than "full payment at the end of the project". Some of these options might be trades for their services, advertising your business, company stock, delayed payment with a bonus if the start-up company succeeds, etc. In these types of situations you will need to use your own judgment whether you take the job or not. If you are in this business to make a profit you need to carefully balance pro bono and discounted work with getting your full rates.

Reliability

Reliability is one of the most important aspects of being a professional. It will get you trust and, therefore, more return business than just about any other aspect of what you do. Yes, in my opinion, reliability can be more important than the quality of your video deliverables (to a point, obviously). Many clients will never notice a bit of bad color grading, but I guarantee they will notice if you are 15 minutes late to a meeting or a month late delivering their video.

- **Be Prompt and Deliver.** This can be easier said than done (unless you're a Compulsive Punctual, like me). If you will be late, it is important to let the client know ASAP. You are showing respect for their time and they'll appreciate it.
 - Call when you say you're going to call.
 - Arrive at all meetings, shoots, etc. on-time or even a little early.
 - Deliver on time!
- **Be prepared - gear.** Arriving at a shoot and realizing that you forgot a key piece of gear is a nightmare most of us have probably had. With all the planning I do, it's happened to me and tends to happen when I have several jobs in quick

succession. A good way to combat this is by having a set of lists – “single camera talking head”, “voiceover”, “two-camera live performance”, etc. Do not forget those maintenance items like charging all your batteries and checking light bulbs! Spread extra items like batteries, tapes, lens cleaning kits, tape head cleaners, and white balance cards out in multiple bags/cases. For example, I put a lens cleaning kit in every camera bag. Beyond being sure you bring the items you know you’ll need, you should bring items that you might need. Try and have a spare camera, lavalier mic set, etc. if at all possible. Start collecting a box filled with cables, jacks, adapters, power strips, extension cords etc. Not only might you save your own shoot, but you might be a hero by being able to help someone else by lending them something. For example, I have a rolling toolbox that is filled with cables and adapters that, even though it’s large, I bring to any job where I am, or might, be interfacing with a venue’s sound or video system.

Be prepared – production.

The more you know about the job you’re about to do, the smoother it will go.

- Visit the venue(s) ahead of time. If applicable, try and have other involved professionals (sound, lighting) there at the same time. Whether or not you charge for these meetings is up to you. I don’t, unless travel is involved.
- Have a mutually agreed to storyboard. If the client owns this process, ask to see drafts as early as they’ll give them to you. Guide them in the process as much as the situation and personalities will allow. The level of detail in the storyboard will vary with the complexity of the production. I’m not sure it’s possible to have a storyboard with too much detail.

Be prepared – post-production.

The watchword here is back-up. Technology will fail, and Murphy says it will fail at the worst possible time.

- Get home from a shoot and create a copy of the raw footage ASAP. If you’re tape-based, that means capturing the tapes and then putting them in a safe place. If you’re card-based that means making at least two additional copies (assuming you will be re-using the cards) that are not on the same physical storage device!
- As you edit, save intermediate versions of your project files (many NLEs can do this automatically for you). In my studio I have an automated system that does incremental backups of my client data every night to a network attached storage (NAS) device.
- Have a fast way to get a sick computer up and running quickly. Having a cloned OS drive handy is a good way to do this in the event a disk crashes or becomes corrupt.

Know your craft.

There’s a lot to learn. And you’ll never be done learning. This is especially true in a profession like video that is tied so deeply to technology. The more educated you are about what you do, the better. This means more than understanding how to operate your camera to create video. Heck, your parents can most likely do that! You must at least have a cursory knowledge of legal issues (contracts, copyrights, etc.) audio production,

graphic design, optics, computer system administration, special effects, and lighting. It's daunting, but important. You can't leave school and think you're done with education. Spend time watching and reading tutorials on the internet, reading trade magazines, and attending educational seminars. You don't want a client getting a blank stare from you when they ask about the latest cool video technology they saw on CNN. Not only that, but the next "fad" in our business is often mainstream the next year! You can't be an expert in or know everything. Which leads me to the next topic

Know Your Limitations

A professional is honest. When a situation comes up that you can't handle or even one where you don't feel secure in your skills – get help before you disappoint a client! This is a prime time to search out a colleague to partner with. Pay them just like you'd want to be paid if the roles were reversed and then watch and learn from them! I've seen too many situations where someone got in over their heads and either could not deliver what they'd promised or had to spend so much time getting it done that their hourly rate fell to single digits.

Communicate

During initial meetings with a client, or potential client, I always try to instill in them that the better we communicate the smoother the project will go and . . . the less it will cost them! Good verbal and written communication skills are essential to being a successful video professional. You need to be able to get your points across to clients, partners, and staff efficiently and correctly. Just as important, you need to be able to listen to those same people and understand what they're telling you. Is there anything worse in our business than showing a client a first version of their video and having them tell you it is not at all what they wanted? Write things down. Send clients early edits for approval. Don't be afraid to go over items more than once to be sure everyone's on the same page. Going into a project with a vague definition is one of the easiest ways to end-up making \$5/hour in the end.

Collaborate

Professionals should openly work with other professionals. Share ideas. Ask for help. Run a camera for another production company. Network in your area and get to know copy writers, photographers, marketing specialists, web designers, audio engineers, graphic designers etc. Use them directly and refer others to them as appropriate. A great way to meet and learn from like minded people is by joining professional organizations like the Colorado Professional Videographers Association (CoPVA), Wedding & Event Videographers Association (WEVA), and the Colorado Film and Video Association (CFVA). Get an account on Meetup.com and search in your area for video related meetups.

Look the Part

Yes, this does matter. When you meet with a client or arrive at a shoot you should be neat and clean. That much should be obvious and it's admittedly pretty vague. How you present yourself physically depends on who you are, and who your client is. If you're on your way to talk to a band about shooting a music video you should dress differently

than you would for a meeting with the Board of Directors of a local bank to bid a shoot of their annual awards dinner. That said, it can be obvious to a potential client if you're trying to be someone that you aren't. Again, be honest. It probably does not make sense for a 55 year old videographer to dig up that 35 year old Grateful Dead t-shirt to meet with a local Hip-Hop band. Dress appropriately, and look like you care.

Beyond you, and your team's, physical appearance there are other items that people see that make a difference. You should have business cards, a company logo, company letterhead, and a professional accounting system. Then there's your website, and you must have one – with video on it! I suggest bringing in other professionals to help you design these items. A great website with well thought out graphical elements can help make a great first impression.

It's a Business

For most of us, this is the part we'd rather not do. You, or someone else working closely with you, needs to be a business person. That means dealing with accounting, taxes, business legal structures, copyright law, and insurance. Hire a tax advisor or CPA and use a professional accounting system. Keep track of your finances! Get an insurance policy to protect your assets (most homeowner's policies will not cover business assets) and provide liability. Many larger companies will not let you shoot at their facilities without a liability policy in place. Even when you shoot at someone's residence, you should have coverage for melting a carpet with a hot light etc. If you don't have a business plan, you might want to find a local business coach to work with.

Conclusion

Owning your own small business is not easy. Owning a successful small business is even harder. Even if videography is just a side business for you, there is still a lot of competition out there. The more professional you are, the more likely you'll be to win business. If you want videography to be a primary source of income, then the items I've covered are even more important.

Your reputation is key to your success. Having a reputation as being a real Professional will go a long, long, way towards keeping you in the business as long as you want to be!

Be well. Tell stories.

Larry Chapman

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