

AV workshop notes by Peter Coldwell

These notes were originally prepared for an AV workshop in November 2010 but are still valid.

Introduction

We are all constantly exposed to high quality media material from excellent technical quality TV. Programmes, sophisticated TV. advertising commercials, at the Cinema special F/X using Computer generated graphics, the Road side Bill Boards and Newspaper and Magazines. This means our A/V's need real "Pizazz" to stand any chance of holding an Audience's attention.

Whilst we, as enthusiastic Photographers, may be interested to watch a series of high Photographic quality, static images projected one after another at constant time intervals accompanied by some "escalator music" don't expect this to keep a group of hyper-active kids riveted to their seats. Something with much more movement and variety is required.

The basics of an A/V are some Images and some Noises. Of course, Images do not have to be Photographs, they can be Video Movies, Graphics, Drawings, Computer Clipart and Captions. A Business A/V may be all Pie-charts and graphs (try putting Pizazz into that !)
The Noises are not necessarily just Music, they can be sound effects or voice overs.

With the currently available sophisticated products to both produce the Images and put them together with a sound track it is now possible for a determined amateur hobbyist to produce a Show almost indistinguishable from a high budget TV. Commercial – at little financial cost.

What is required is a creative idea and a lot of time !! It is also essential to decide at the outset the target audience. Few of us produce our Images solely for our own viewing pleasure – we want to show them to other people, some even want to enter them in Competitions and Exhibitions !! This is possibly even more true with our A/V productions than with our Prints and Projected Images, because of the amount of time involved to produce them.

By and large if you can " Imagine " a show then Proshow and other Programs are capable of turning it into reality, which can be out-put to many different storage media or up-loaded to web-sites and the internet.

I look forward to hearing your opinions on the above and leave you with the following point.

It is now almost impossible to purchase a new Digital Camera without some form of Movie Recording. This is not just for cell phones and cheap "Point and Shoots". The top-end Full Frame Digital SLRs from Canon, Nikon and others now include High definition Video Modes. So, where has this demand come from and who is using these cameras in the Video Mode?

In my opinion it should be us A/V producers. Some "Creative Ideas" can only be put across by incorporating movement within some of the "slides". Proshow treats Video Movie Clips in the same way as still Photos, it can incorporate them as just another "layer" within a single slide. If any of us A/V workers are not using "layers" in our slides then we are only scratching the surface of what is possible with modern "Slide Show " Programs.

The current "Buzz" format for A/V's at Photodex Headquarters in Austin, Texas is "Fusion". This is the increasing incorporation of Video Movies into the still Photo Images to produce a Show with constant movement of hybrid Visuals.

General hints and tips

I claim no expertise in producing great A/V's nor a stunning understanding of the finer points of ProShow Gold or Producer but I will share with you what experience I have.

Whilst some of the following suggestions are from my own discoveries from using the programs much of it is from reading guide books by experts, watching others' A/V's and research on the Internet.

The Photodex.com web-site is well worth a visit to see what training products are available and to watch A/V's produced by Professionals and gifted Amateurs. These are cutting edge multimedia productions which will make you realise that most of us have only scratched the surface of what can now be produced with " Slide Show " software.

This is my summary of what I have learned from reading books by experts and watching some of their shows.

1. Your A/V show should start with an Idea, a Concept – decide what it is that you want to say and why.
2. It should have a story line with a clear beginning, middle and end. The beginning should tell the audience what the show will be about. The middle leads the Audience somewhere and gives them information. The end should have a conclusion and have explained what the beginning said it would be about.
3. Decide who your Target Audience will be, do you want to show it to Your Family, to Business Colleagues, to other Members of your Photo Club or to a specialist interest group, Gardeners, Anglers, Train enthusiasts etc. This will influence the content and style of your production. Showing a stunning A/V on Salmon Fishing to the Tennis Club Members may not get you a standing ovation.
4. Try to establish in what format your show will be presented to the Audience. Will it be projected on to a screen, shown on TV. 4:3 or Widescreen 16:9 will it be viewed on a P.C. Monitor, streamed via the Internet? You may have discovered that what appears on your P.C. Monitor has a wider field than your TV. Screen – and each TV varies as to what is cut off. This is particularly important if any of your Captions are towards the edge of the frame. Pro-show can show the likely TV area whilst you work on your P.C. Monitor to help you stay within safe limits. Another "work around" is to have all your Show images in reduced size in a frame or border on a plain background of your choice. You can then show your production in various modes without losing any of your Image area it's just a varying amount of background which becomes lost.
5. Your Show should be Consistent – it should have a theme and a style which runs throughout its length. Don't keep changing the style. If you use Captions keep to a maximum of two font types, of the same colour, and have them appear in a similar position on all the slides which have Captions – unless the use of Captions is part of the Show's "style ". When we have learned all the clever digital tricks an intricate Program can do there is a temptation to demonstrate our ability to utilise all the special effects even when they are not relevant to the Storyline. The audience can become distracted and show more interest in the technology than the message of the Show. Don't use every Transition effect in one show. The straight "cut" and "dissolve" are the most common Transitions used by Experts. On TV and at the Cinema the "cut" is nearly always used between scenes as it works better than the "dissolve" with moving images.
6. Avoid overdoing it, don't beat the subject to death, and be aware of the typical Audience's attention span. Keep reviewing your show, see what can be cut out, and if in doubt leave it out. Take breaks -- of a few days – come back to it with fresh eyes. Keep it short, leave 'em wanting more, you don't have to show every Image you shot. Try not to leave any loose ends, don't leave the Audience wondering what happened next -- unless that's a deliberate part of the Storyline.
7. Captions can be distracting, consider whether a voice over would work better. Keep them as short as possible and avoid placing them on "busy" Images where they can merge into the picture. If necessary create a plain "platform" on your Image for the Caption to land on. Break up longer Captions into chunks which works well on scrolling messages. Select easy to read Fonts in suitable colour to stand out from the Image, use outlines or drop shadows where necessary. Make sure the Caption adds information to what the Audience can see in the Image. A seaside Image captioned "On the Beach" falls into the Basil Fawlty category of "stating the bleeding obvious". Leave the Caption in view long enough for the Audience to read it. You will be familiar with the message, so a rule of thumb is for the time for you to read it twice is normally sufficient for an Audience reading the Caption for the first time. Use a Dictionary to check tricky spelling.

8. Soundtracks. As Photographers we have to contain our prejudice and acknowledge that the Audio is equally important as the Visual. In fact the Experts claim that it is more likely that poor quality sound will ruin a Show than poor quality Images. The distraction from a sound fault—low volume, clicks, pops, distortion is more annoying than a short glitch in video footage. A blank screen which the music continues to play over is usually more readily accepted than a break in the sound over continuing Images – don't ask me to explain why !!
9. Shooting Images for A/V's. Most expert A/V producers will recommend that you only shoot horizontal (landscape) format Images. They are more "natural". The Human's Visual Field is wider than it is high (even with only one eye). Adding a second eye gives a slightly wider field but does not increase the height. Our Cheek bones and brow line restricts the vertical field. TV screens are horizontal (modern 16:9 format even more so). Cinema screens are horizontal (even wider than 16:9). Video footage in Camcorders and still cameras is only available in horizontal format. Haphazard mixing of horizontal and vertical Images is very distracting for the Audience trying to follow the Storyline. It is usually possible to crop a portrait format from a landscape format but difficult the other way round. If you have some portrait format images that you MUST use then try to group them together as a section. I will try to demonstrate some ways to blend between the two formats with the least distraction. It is possible to have two portrait Images side by side to the same width as a landscape Image to minimise the distraction. When shooting for an A/V get used to including more in the frame than you would for a print or a single digital Image. This allows for losing some of the edges when viewed on a TV and for zooming in during an A/V show. It is always possible to crop out unwanted items but nearly impossible to add to a shot already taken (O.K.,O.K., cloning in extra pixels around the edges excepted !!)
10. Use of movement, layers, "layer styles" and video footage. When digital imaging and Computer Programs to work with these Images burst onto the photographic scene it totally changed what was economically possible compared to Film based Images. Nowhere more so than with multimedia "slide shows". Increasingly at the cutting edge of both technological and artistic boundaries moving video footage is being included in what we used to call "slide shows ". It is probable that for A/V competitions some clear re-defining of what is acceptable will need to be carried out. Many current shows using ONLY Images shot as stills are perceived by the general (non-photographic) public as video movies. On the Photodex.com web-site many of the demonstration A/V's incorporate some video footage although still images are the majority of the Show. Proshow allows an unlimited number of layers of Images to be included in a single slide. In the Gold Program all the layers move at the same time but in Producer there is a "time-line " facility which allows control of the layers individually. This allows very complex Shows to be produced. It is VERY time consuming to arrange many different layers to move different amounts at different timings. In version 4.0 onwards Photodex released "layer styles" in both Gold and Producer. This considerably reduces the "Grunt Work" in making some stunning effects. Photodex produce " templates" of special effects and the worker just drops his images into the spaces and the Program does the rest!! This would have saved me hours on some slides with 18 layers each to size, add borders, position and set beginning and ending times within the single slide.

Adding audio

Most experienced A/V workers believe the Audio side of A/V's is at least as important as the Visuals.

The Soundtrack may be a single element or a combination of several to include background music, voice over and sound effects.

The music may be a single piece (shortened to fit if necessary) or several pieces to fill the length and mood of the A/V sequence. The Music could be a live recording or extracted from a pre-recorded source. If using copyright protected recordings you must hold current MCPS, BPI and PPL Licenses. These are obtainable from The Institute of Amateur Cinemaphotographers. The Licenses cost less than ten pounds annually but you have to be a Member of the I. A. C. to buy them !! (www.theiac.org.uk)

Voice overs can be either location recordings or Studio recordings. The Voice(s) can be spoken informally or from a prepared script.

Sound effects may be used to create atmosphere or reinforce the Images. They can be recorded on location where the Images were made or created in the Studio or extracted from pre-recorded sources. (The BBC produce C.D./Cassettes of sound effects which some Libraries stock.)

“Scripts” for recording voice overs should use “ informal grammar “ as spoken, rather than the grammar used in formal essays i.e. use “ isn’t “ rather than “ is not “. Don’t use one long continuous stream of words. Give yourself breathing spaces, this allows the audience to digest the information you are giving them (don’t forget that the audience is also absorbing the visual information being presented). Don’t fill the script with numerical facts and information (numbers are absorbed more easily within titles on the screen.) Ensure that the script has a logical beginning, middle and end/conclusion. Try to include a “ hook “ early on to grab your audiences’ attention. Often a bit of mystery/humour will help maintain interest.

Don’t describe what the audience can see on the screen. The voice over should add information to the Image that the audience would not otherwise know.

As an example --- for two consecutive images don’t say “This is the Market Square “ and “ This shot is The Church “ Much better to give additional information as in “ The small, pedestrianised Market Square is 100 metres North of the recently renovated 17th. Century Church of St. Cuthbert “ This allows you to give information not obvious from the Images.

Recording a Voice over.

Whilst these can be done on location, so that you are also recording background sounds simultaneously this makes it difficult to retain control of all the elements. Much easier to record the background sounds separately (which can be edited later). If you are recording Video moving images then there will be a simultaneous sound track. However, many experts will also record additional sound only background effects (a “Wild Track “) to give extra material to choose from. Often the best background sounds do not occur at the same time as the Images are created – sometimes the sound recordings are from several miles from the Image recordings !!

Home Studio Voice Overs.

These require attention to location, environment, equipment and rehearsal to get the best result we can achieve. Try to use a medium size furnished room with carpets, curtains, upholstery, cushions etc. to absorb sound and avoid reflected echoes from walls. If you have to use a small empty box room then hang duvets, towels, pillows and old curtains to avoid reflections from hard walls. Don’t stand/sit near to any wall when making your voice over --- but avoid the dead centre of a room equidistant from each wall.

Before starting your recording listen carefully for extraneous noises. These might be ticking of wall clocks, buzzing of strip lights, the Budgie in the next room or the neighbour’s dog. Central heating boilers/pumps/timers fridge re-cycling clicks. Your microphone will pick up all these sounds particularly in gaps between sentences. You may have to work late at night to avoid many of these sounds – however if you live near to Heathrow Terminals you will have a very tough time !!

Use the best quality microphone you can afford/borrow (some clubs own decent models) Use good quality connectors and short microphone cables. You may need a quality pre-amp . Don’t place any written script on a flat hard surface which might reflect sound or rustle if you handle it whilst recording. It is better to have your script on a single sheet on a music or lighting stand. Have your mike on a stand rather than hand held.

It is better to stand than sit when making your recording. Point the mike at your mouth rather than having to point your mouth at the mike. There is no point in recording a single voice in stereo, a mono mike will be cheaper for any given quality.

Rehearse the script several times before attempting a recording. Read the script out loud, not inside your head. This will identify any tongue twisters which can be modified if necessary.

Ensure that it sounds natural and relaxed. Many of us become embarrassed when confronted with a mike. Get over this nervousness before attempting a recording. It is worthwhile to read/speak the script several times without stopping the recording and then listen to the complete play back. You will probably find each " take " is different, try to identify which parts came over best and aim to repeat that delivery on subsequent recordings. It may take 8/10 goes before you are happy with one of them. You may decide to have your script spoken by a third party if you feel it would give a better final result. Some scripts may require male/female voice only.

Most Slide show Programs, Pro-Show, Pictures to Exe etc. only cater for one sound track (and maybe a second sound attached to individual slides). So, if you have several sound elements to make up a single sound track you will have to " mix down " the elements before it is imported into your slide show. Adobe Audition caters for this but is expensive. Audacity is a free downloadable audio editor (audacity.sourceforge.net) which is suitable for most needs. Try to use PCM.WAV format sound recording for the various elements of your sound track and mix down in this format only converting to MP3 if necessary when incorporating into your slide show (Pro-show Gold/Producer etc.)

www.markertek.co.uk is a specialist supplier of all things to do with Audio.

Serious workers have battery operated digital sound recorders to use in the field. These cost several hundred pounds. For the rest of us a Walkman cassette recorder or Olympus Dictaphone can be used. Or of course the microphone in your Video/ Modern stills camera can be used. You can even speak into these in your home studio.

Try to see as many Sequences as possible by other workers. Look on the Pro-show web-site to see demos/professional advertisers work (www.Photodex.com) Another web-site worth looking at is www.leedsavgrouop.co.uk for tutorials and demos.

Finally, remember that an original interesting Sequence (suitable for the relevant audience) is far more important than a technically perfect boring Sequence.