

## **Hiring a filmmaker**

"I'm thinking of having a film made. What should I know about hiring a filmmaker? How much will a film cost and what should I expect from my filmmaker?"

Despite the continually dropping prices of electronic gear, and the seeming ubiquitousness of video cameras, making quality films requires a lot of expensive equipment and thousands of hours, even years and decades of professional experience. It is true that anyone with a web cam or even a cell phone can make short videos for youtube.com, but making effective or even watchable films is an art and a science.

## **Buying your own camera**

If you are considering buying a video camera, the first thing you need to know is that consumer level cameras can cost under \$500, but professional cameras are likely to cost nearer \$1,000. The main feature that distinguishes a pro level camera from a consumer-grade camera is that the pro cameras will have an input for an external microphone. If you are at all serious about doing videos you will need an external mic jack. Shooting in all different situations requires that you will sometimes have to put your camera in a less-than-optimal position, for example, at the back of the room so you are not blocking an audience (or the bride's family!), or far enough from your subject to take in a wide area, such as an entire stage. Since the volume of sound drops off exponentially, if you move your mic twice as far away, you will get one quarter of the volume you would have at the nearer placement. You will want to place your mic up close, or use a wireless mic, or plug directly into a sound system.

## **All the accessories you'll need**

By the time you buy all the accessories you need for your camera, such as various microphones, tripod, batteries, chargers, wide angle lens, etc., you can easily spend \$3,000. Then you will still want a lighting kit, which can cost another \$1,000. Tripods deserve special mention. Video tripods must have a level bubble, so that you can pan the horizon if needed... they do not have a central post, if a tripod has a central post, it's a camera tripod, not for video. The smoothness of the pan is critical, especially for distant subjects; Libec brand is the industry standard. That does not include the computer and the software you will need to edit your film. Your Mac comes with iMovie installed, and to burn DVD's you can download (from download.com, for example) a program such as Toast. If you are using a PC you could get a program such as Adobe Premiere Elements for as little as \$200 (bundled with Photoshop Elements). "Elements" is the bare-bones version of the program that should be plenty for most novices. High-end editing suites such as Avid or VT Edit can cost thousands of dollars and require top-of-the-line computers. The exact type of camera and accessories you'll need will depend on what you want to do. Get some expert advice. I highly recommend [zotzdigital.com](http://zotzdigital.com). Brian at ZotzDigital will find out what you want to do, and recommend what you will need. For instance, there are two kinds of video

tape; oil-lubricated transport, and powder-lubricated. Oil lubricated is the most common, powder lubricated is less widely available, but that is the one you want. You don't want to put oil into your camera, since that will attract dust, and other junk, and you'll end up paying a couple hundred bucks to get your camera cleaned. Use only powder transport, Panasonic AY-DVM63PQ and do not mix the two!

### **Anticipating your costs**

If you decide to hire a filmmaker, keep in mind that they have made a substantial investment of money and time to buy and learn how to use their equipment. It is reasonable for a professional filmmaker to bill their time at \$150 an hour or more, and to also bill for machine time. Some professional shops estimate that a job will cost \$1,000 per finished minute of film: 15 minutes = \$15,000. Obviously, if you are paying this kind of money you can expect completely professional results, professional customer service, and a detailed contract before you begin; expect to pay a deposit, and to make partial payments at benchmarks along the way so the you are not expecting the film studio to expose themselves to the risk of non-payment on a major job. Fortunately, if you do not have the kind of major budget needed to hire a high-end studio, you can likely find an independent filmmaker who can do the job for less, perhaps because they have a lower overhead, for example by working out of their home instead of an office. If you are working with an independent filmmaker, read on.

### **A fully professional film requires an entire production crew**

If you must have a professional film, it can not be produced by an individual. You will need to hire an entire crew; two or three cameras and camerapeople, a director, an audio engineer, at minimum, perhaps a lighting specialist, other technicians, very likely all earning union wages. If you hire an individual, you can expect a high-quality end product, but you can't expect the kind of result you would from a crew.

### **Making the most of your money: pre-production**

Your finished product will be only as good as the footage you film. The more time you spend planning your production, the less time and money it will take to film, and in post-production. Spend as much time as you possibly can in planning, story-boarding, even shooting non-actors or stand-ins, so that you have a crystal-clear idea of what shots are needed. Scout your locations with your filmmaker, and an audio engineer, if at all possible. Visit your locations at the time of day you plan to shoot. You will need to know what the lighting and sound conditions are going to be when you arrive with your cast and crew. As with any complex project, the more precisely you can specify exactly the end-product you want, the more likely you are to get it.

### **Shooting in the field and in the studio**

Expect to pay somewhat more if your filmmaker has to haul all his equipment to a field location; it can take several people hours to pack up, move, set up, break

down, and reset their equipment in the studio. Shoot as many takes as you reasonably can, since it is nearly always more expensive or even impossible to return to re-shoot. Do not rely on the camera's view screen; bring along a larger monitor if at all possible. An otherwise perfect shoot can be ruined by a piece of lint or a stray hair that is impossible to see through the camera.

### **Should I film an event, or stage something for the camera?**

In general, you will get much better results by staging something for the camera. In a live event, you aren't able to do second takes, impose on a paying audience by blocking sight-lines, hold up the event while you adjust the camera, lighting, sound system, etc. When the final product REALLY matters, you may need to review each shot on the monitor before you go on to the next.

### **Post-production**

I find that it is vital to deliver the raw (unedited) footage to the client as soon as possible. The client may save time and money if they discover some imperfection that the filmmaker may not notice or find objectionable (people are their own worst critics!) There is no sense editing and refining a video if the client decides they're not happy with their make-up, or their ums and uhs.

Editing back in the studio is a matter of micro-seconds. You may need to make a cut between words, after a blink, after your subject takes a breath, etc. You and / or your filmmaker should be taking extremely detailed notes on exactly what was shot and the time-codes. Good notes can mean hours of time and hundreds, even thousands of dollars saved in the editing studio. It can be extremely time-consuming and tedious if you or your editor have to watch and rewatch your video to find where the edits need to be made.

Before your filmmaker goes through the time and trouble to render your video and upload it to the web, make sure that they have clear instructions about any titling and credits on the video. Make sure that they know how to spell people's names, and how people want their website address, etc. to appear. Don't waste resources having your filmmaker redo a film because you failed to mention that so-and-so's credit should have said "Dr." instead of "Mr.", for example.

Lastly, you will want to have the film rendered into several formats, a high-resolution format for viewing on TV from a DVD, and a lower-resolution format for the web such as Apple Quicktime .mov, or Windows .wmv.

Some additional resources can be found at my website, [DanShaw.com](http://DanShaw.com). Good luck, and have fun! If you have further questions, or would like to hire me for your project, I invite you to contact me.

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