



Photo: Fred Ruggles

# Corporate video

● In *The Royal Bank Goes Video*, an eager young exec makes the pitch for the virtues of a wired world

by David Clarke

*The workplace has been pretty much ignored by entertainment or artistically oriented productions, with the exception of coloured depictions of it as the site of various categories of alienation, or simply as a backdrop. Although the average corporate video production is rich in inadvertent tip-offs as to the sociological subtexts of organized productive effort, it is primarily as a market and an industry that corporate video is most fruitfully studied.*

Ever since the days when Crawley Films was one of the world's most prolific producers of industrial film footage back in the '50s and early '60s, industrial films have provided Canadian filmmakers with income, and would-be filmmakers with a chance to show their stuff.

And while there is still a market for film in the corporate setting, and for distribution of corporate-sponsored- or produced- film product in schools, theaters and TV today, it is a stagnant market. Video has replaced film as the corporate medium of choice.

It is video's cost efficiency that makes it appealing. Comments Ross McConnell, in charge of video production at CN, "My first love was film. I still love film, and I've been involved with it for twenty years. You can take a film crew of three or four pretty much anywhere you want to, and pretty much break even. It is when you get down to film stock, library costs, special effects, intercuts and processing that it gets expensive compared to video... I can see

nothing but a tremendous expansion in the area of video use."

Production houses that have resisted the cost of acquiring video equipment and skills are suffering, while others enjoy a boom in revenues generated by the higher priority corporations are placing on video for internal communications, and external uses that include marketing applications and corporate identity programs.

Virtually every major corporation uses video, and a number of smaller ones do too, including an increasing number of retailers who use it in stores to showcase their wares. A sampling was made of more than 30 productions, generated in-house and by production companies for Alcan, Air Canada, Bell Canada, CN General Motors and the Royal Bank.

There are over 70 video production companies in the Toronto area alone, and while it isn't possible to obtain industry-wide hard numbers, it is clear that around Canada more companies are entering the corporate video arena to compete for many more dollars. Something was learned of the industry by focusing on two companies - one a small outfit newly venturing out into the field, the other a large, well-established, veteran firm.

## Case A: Corvideocom

With more than 40 productions since opening its doors three years ago, Ottawa video production company Corvideocom is not a newcomer to the business of meeting client demands. Its work to date has been for companies from the Ottawa high-tech industry, and government and association clients including the Prime Minister's Office and the Canadian Labour Congress.

Winners of a 1983 International Association of Business Communicators award for a production they did for the Canadian Canoe Festival, Corvideocom has a fresh outlook on video technique.

It developed an effective way of combining video and Telidon technology on behalf of Norpak Corporation, while mastering the problems of staging a large-scale video event in a production called "our *Ben Hur*" by Corvideocom president Allan White, on air-disaster control made for the Ottawa area regional government. As well, by diversifying into rock video with a production for a local band called "8 Seconds" that the company will market to TV music video programmers, the company has added to its production expertise.

Posturization, for example, is a post-production technique Corvideocom was able to apply to the 8 Seconds video by using the facilities of General Assembly, formerly the post-production arm of Corvideocom but now an independent venture. "Posturization takes out the sharp edge from the video image," explains General Assembly video editor Ken Stewart, "by taking out information. It is a digital effect that takes out the luminance and the chroma, and the more that is taken out the heavier the effect."

The resulting look is a signature of rock video productions, as well as showing up on TV graphics and commercials. Suggesting a computer graphic, it can transform the most mundane image into a trendy visual artifact, comparable in glossy power to what is on the screen in a *Diva* or a *Blade Runner*. It is best used in small doses. But applied to establishing shots or title sequences, for what Stewart would account for less than 10 percent of the cost of a short production, posturization could provide the 1980's stylization needed to make current corporate video more enticing to employees already exposed to its use in entertainment product.

The problem, however, is the demographics of many corporations are such that a new look in video might meet with only sluggish acceptance. In any event, corporation executives tend to be

omnipresent in the approval stages of corporate video-making, creating a distraction that few advertising agencies have to deal with in supplying commercials on order. The executives' bias towards self-promotion and a look and format with which they are personally comfortable is the real problem when it comes to innovation.

## Case B: Stonehaven

Still, within those limitations, corporations compete aggressively for production values and those who can supply them. Stonehaven Productions is a Montreal-based video (and film) production company that has established itself over the last five years with the Royal Bank, Air Canada and a roster of over 20 other major corporate clients.

Winner of many awards, including a silver prize at this year's U.S. Industrial Film Festival for an Air Canada production, *Versus*, Stonehaven has perfected a classic mainstream video look. It is a presentation comparable to network TV news feature material, and indeed a Stonehaven production uses a newscaster associated with *The Journal* and a facsimile set to make a Royal Bank production look as credible as possible. Exterior shots in their productions have the same upscale look.

The emphasis on credibility is very much a focus of Stonehaven owner/operator Mike Taylor's thinking. "Many producers don't appreciate that most internal audiences are particularly cynical about anything that comes from the top," comments Taylor. "But I don't think that they have been talked to a great deal as real people."

In practical terms, Taylor's thinking translates into a lot of footage in *Versus* in which employees talk with sometimes startling candor about job-related concerns. Naturally, there is a positive resolution to the video, but in the meantime what has been presented is about as much a forum for employee

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complaints as corporate video is likely to provide. For while Canadian corporations talk a great deal about the diffusion of authority and responsibility utilized by their Japanese competitors, and interactive video is an industry buzzword, putting a bandaid on employee dissatisfaction is generally easier to get by senior management.

## Dos and don'ts

Still, the problem of thematic timidity is only raised in a portion of the corporate videos screened. The bread and butter of the bread and butter corporate video industry is training, with marketing and public affairs applications a high profile but relatively scarce element. And training personnel is not an inherently controversial activity.

The majority of corporate videos are often unadventurous stylistically, with the low-end productions featuring balky editing, awkward use of old footage, and soundtracks bought from music banks that were tinny and soporific. The best, on the other hand, showed that even modest budgets could produce quality production values when put into the right hands.

Exposure to a sampling of corporate video leads to the following suggestions for the would-be corporate videomaker:

1. Ronald Reagan may be president of the United States, but the average corporate executive's skills are quite limited. Don't strain what are usually restricted thespian resources. Playing against type can be effective, i.e., showing a blunt fellow, warts and all.
2. Watch out for the logo. A company's logo has a totemic weightiness that should not be lightly tampered with. One company put a man in a costume signifying the logo, and had him prance around while delivering an agit-prop speech that would incite the most docile employee to mutiny.
3. Using old footage is a tempting way to reduce costs. In the hands of a Ross McConnell, who after a career with Chetwynd Films, Crawley and the CBC joined CN in 1973, old material can be recycled effectively. But in less experienced corporate hands, the potential for awkward transitions and general incongruity can be ruinous. Too many grainy shots of ingots penetrating smelters can make a production look like a Monty Python skit.

4. While the music is meant to be upbeat without being distracting, that doesn't mean sub-Muzak. Leave that to porno video makers.

5. There is more to life than the establishing shot. (This is pretty basic stuff, but then so is some corporate video.)

## Strategies

If you are going to sell video to a corporation, you have to know what kind of company they are, and what their thinking is about the medium.

For Camille Tremblay, a senior public affairs official with Alcan, much of the present corporate fascination with video can be chalked up to trendiness, and is not a bottom-line necessity for some companies. While continuing to undertake video projects, he does not foresee a video program being established at Alcan in the near future, and says that he has no intention of seeing the corporate headquarters become "un bordel électronique" with the acquisition of video hardware.

Integrating video with other media is a priority for Patrick Daly, employee communications manager, Air Canada. "Right now, we do two major productions a year," says Daly. "The videos are just part of the communications vehicles we have in place. We also have audio tapes, an employee newspaper, and publications for managers with updates on industry developments."

Perhaps the most comprehensive analysis of corporate video programs is available from David Moorcroft, who has a key role in the \$1/2 million launch of the Royal Bank's new video network. Although the bank had sponsored television projects such as the Alvin "Third Wave" Toffler special aired on CBC last winter, and had made the occasional video for internal use, there was still not the internal experience to provide assurance that a substantial video program could be successfully managed. And so Moorcroft and Royal Bank training executive Roger Silverthorne undertook a study of what other large corporations had attempted, with particular emphasis on the Bank of America's experience.

"We learned that video is a sophisticated medium that must be handled with professionalism," says Moorcroft. "And that professionalism has to be apparent in all aspects of a corporate

video network from packaging and distribution through production and quality control standards.

"It would be very expensive to use an advertising agency," he adds, "and so to avoid paying the middle man we try and do what we can do ourselves in dealing with producers. Besides, we know our employees better than an agency. We understand the company's culture."

## MINI-MINI-REVIEWS

### Ten Top Video Productions :

*A jury of one, and a list of entries that omits more possible candidates than it contains. (Mitel, Canadian Pacific and Sun Life all, reportedly, have noteworthy video programs.) Still, there has to be some recompense for watching all that product, and making a list is it.*

#### 1. Futureground

Produced by Stonehaven Productions for Air Canada. This is a documentary (film transferred onto video) on the problems of the air carrier industry in the context of technological change. It is, of course, a little self-serving, in that it would be hard for employees to hear what John Kenneth Galbraith and others have to say about the future of the business and go out and demand the big pay hike. Still, facts is facts, and a little selective presentation of the issues is acceptable when what results is a discussion of this quality. Great airplane footage. Suitable for screening by top management.

#### 2. GM Magazine

Produced by Gabor Communications. Winner of the 1983 International Video/Culture Festival. The 1983 year-end roundup of GM's fortnightly video magazine was technically proficient and all-around slick. Doubtless, the prize is justified. The problem with a corporation producing its own news coverage is that by the time censoring of the material is finished, there can be very little left to report. Judging by this account, it was a pretty dull year around GM.

#### 3. The Royal Bank Goes Video

Produced by Stonehaven Productions. Hard on the heels of GM, the Royal Bank is looking at a news format. (CN tried the format three years ago in a one-shot production.) Since the bank actually had some gripping news in the program, i.e., bringing a touch of Hollywood and Vine to the Main Street branch; excellent production values do not go to waste. There is some not-bad corporate humour. The portrayal of a young woman executive urging an old stick-in-the-mud to accept video has some of the up-with-women energy of Telecom Canada commercials on the same theme. *GM Magazine* edges it out of second spot on its track record.

#### 4. CANAC

Produced internally at CN. Back when CN was a passenger carrier, it accumulated a lot of footage of trains moving across the Canadian countryside. It was spectacular stuff, designed

That means, for suppliers and would-be suppliers, another market has opened up. Corporate video might not be every film student's career dream, even in these days of hardcore business attitudes prevailing on campus. But upgrading production values that are slow to respond to new styles and techniques is a challenge that some video pros enjoy, and from which many profit.

to promote tourist travel by train, and it still works. Produced on a shoestring; a library used efficiently cuts costs. Script touts CN's expertise in rail cargo for external marketing. Seamless and nicely paced, and if you listen to Gordon Lightfoot you'll like it.

#### 5. A Learning Experience

A Corvideocom production for the Emergency Measures Organization of the Ottawa Carleton regional government. A mock air-disaster staged to demonstrate techniques, this video features the funniest line encountered in many hours of screenings. A carnage scene at the airport. The volunteer wounded are setting up for a shot, and a woman walking through the crowded airport disaster scene cries out "Where are the hystericals?" There is some real tension evident in the complicated drill.

#### 6. Alcan Corporate Identity Ads

Produced by J. Walter Thompson. Presumably first screened on TV, good potential for stock footage. Corporate munificence. For a *Dallas* fan like myself, a viewing pleasure. It is basically just Alcan president David Culver talking about the company, but he seems a forceful fellow and the backdrop scenery and plush surroundings are impressive.

#### 7. Untitled

Produced internally by Bell Canada. An endless sequence involving an industrial robot working on a typically painful sound track. This video had me thinking about... how easy it would be... to... just give... up... and submit to the robot. An off-beat hit.

#### 8. Versus

Produced for Air Canada by Stonehaven Productions. Employees talking about their jobs in a soft sell approach to whipping up competitive enthusiasm. Some of them seem pretty upset. The airplane footage is easy on the eye.

#### 9. Variable Interest Rate Lending

A Royal Bank production. This talking head with minimal graphics presentation is too dry to watch. But VIR lending apparently went up 40% in the three-month period after it was screened. Steer clear unless you are a bank manager.

#### 10. 8 Seconds

Produced for the band by Corvideocom, who are negotiating for James Brown; and a pay-TV music special is almost in the can. It is pretty much all corporate video, one way or another.

David Clarke ●

● Stonehaven's Jean-François Després sets up a scene with Expos' catcher Gary Carter



Photo: Gary Chaikin/Stonehaven