

FILMMAKING RESOURCES

The Laboratory/Post House

With today's growing reliance on the blending of digital technology and traditional film, the role of the lab/post house is becoming increasingly important. Previously, most of the creative decisions regarding the image were made on the set; there were fewer options in post-production. Now, more creative decisions can be made during post-production, which makes it critical to maintain a dialog with your laboratory.

Select a lab and talk to the lab manager before you begin shooting. You'll learn which options are available during and after your shoot. Today's lab technicians are dedicated to insuring consistent results. They keep up with the latest technologies and work with you to help you get the most out of your project.

Laboratory vs. Post House

Until recently it was necessary to work with several businesses to obtain motion picture services (laboratory, negative cutter, optical effects house, digital effects house, video post house, etc.). Today, many laboratories offer most of these services at one location.

Equipment: Rent or Buy

Most production companies rent the cameras, lenses, lights, and filters they'll need; they consider this the most economical and practical way to set up a film shoot. Most of the competitive equipment rental houses that exist throughout the world offer the major brands, and you'll typically find service and support available even on distant or remote locations.

Buying your camera and lighting package can also make sense, depending on your schedule and unique needs. Many fine cameras, lenses, accessories, and light and sound packages are available at reasonable prices in the used market. Extensive hands-on testing should confirm the equipment's condition and reliability before determining the final purchase agreement.

Rental Houses

Rental houses are great resources for new techniques and technologies. It's their business to know the latest advancements in optics and cameras, and they're always happy to discuss your varied options.

Who are the Typical Contacts at These Facilities and What Services do They Provide?

Although post-production facilities differ, most offer the following services:

Capture

Selected scenes are converted from film to digital data during film scanning, for film or electronic output. The data setting, or amount of image data resulting from the scan, is critical to the quality of the final output; i.e., the highest data setting can produce the highest output setting. Conversely, less data cannot effectively produce more data.

Processing

- Digital effects, including color management, are created and managed via the scanned, digital data with computer hardware and software, many of which are proprietary to the post-production facility. The best facilities can produce quality effects and accurately and consistently modify and manage color throughout image processing (often between many workstations, even at different geographical locations).
- Dustbusting may be performed, including wire removal and restoration.
- Audio that is recorded during image capture may require adjustment. Extraneous noise removal and general quality improvements are often performed. Soundtracks are usually added to a program during editorial or just before the final rendering or recording.
- Colorists modify color and contrast according to input from the cinematographer or the director.
- Conforming—off-line and on-line editing—is performed to join selected scenes in the appropriate sequence using an edit decision list (EDL).

Output

- Film recording takes place after image processing. The digital image data that was scanned, color-corrected, edited, and then possibly processed is recorded back to film via a film recorder. This step is the complement to the scanning step; what was film, then converted to data, becomes film once more.
- Digital video mastering, or rendering, also takes place after image processing. The digital image data that was color-corrected, edited, and then possibly processed gets rendered out to different file formats. The level of quality with which the data was captured, then modified and managed throughout image processing, determines the level of quality that can be distributed.

Insurance: Don't Shoot Without It

The equipment rental house will require a certificate of insurance naming their company as the loss payee. In the event that any of the equipment is lost or stolen, or involved in any personal injury or property damage, you and the rental house should be protected. Similar policies are advised even when you own the equipment. Obtain referrals to insurance providers that specialize in coverage for the entertainment business. Many filmmakers also secure negative insurance, which provides for loss or damage to the negative during transit or processing.

Post-production Contacts

An **account executive** or **bidding producer** is your initial contact at a facility. You discuss your project with them, and they develop bid information based on information they collect from their post-production supervisor and/or digital effects supervisor. They are responsible for your contract and for financial arrangements for the duration of your project.

A **producer** or **scheduler** is your main contact within the post-production facility. Their responsibilities include:

- Scheduling sessions
- Scheduling equipment
- Obtaining receivables (elements)
- Tracking elements in the facility
- Delivering the final product

A **post-production supervisor** or **digital effects supervisor** works for you and is your liaison to the post-production facility. They attend and supervise editing and color timing sessions, and they approve all of the work done at the facility.

Colorists are artists who work closely with the cinematographer or the director to color-correct the film.

Scanning and/or **recording technicians** optimize and operate the film scanners and recorders and ensure that the quality of the scans and/or recordings meet image quality expectations.

Editors execute the edit decision list (EDL), joining scenes together with cuts, dissolves, and effects.

Sound editors assemble the soundtracks, then edit them into the finished program.

Graphic artists execute the image processing. Their tasks may include:

- Compositing images
- Performing paint fixes
- Removing or improving image artifacts such as dustbusting, wire removal, etc.

TIPS ON SELECTING A LABORATORY

Generally, the laboratory that gets your business is the one whose capabilities best match the requirements for your particular job. Laboratories differ in terms of the technical services they offer, personnel, track record on similar projects, size and location, prices, and so on. Weigh all of these factors when selecting the right laboratory for the job at hand.

Every production has different requirements. The challenge is to find the lab that can satisfy the greatest number of your needs on schedule and within budget. There are a number of tradeoffs.

- **Consider the question of size.** The big lab can usually offer lower prices due to their large-volume operation, more complete in-house services, and excellent quality control. The small laboratory

usually offers custom handling and easy access to the right people for advice and counsel. But they may have to charge more to support their custom operation.

- **Consider the location.** If a laboratory is a significant distance from your shooting location, you will be faced with the potential hazards and increased costs of shipping valuable footage to and from the lab. Daily communications with the lab may also be more difficult.
- **Consider your confidence in the laboratory.** Look upon the selected laboratory as a silent partner in the production of your project. You should take the laboratory into your confidence, and keep them informed about the films and photographic techniques you use. Given this relationship, the laboratory can assist and simplify your endeavors. You should select a laboratory you believe takes your interests seriously.

Film Lab. Choose the One that Fits Best.

Shop around for a lab that will meet your needs. Most labs more or less provide the same basic menu of services—primarily processing, printing or transferring of your film. Beyond the basics, they may have a particular emphasis on the type of work they specialize in and resultantly have the particular equipment and experienced staff to deliver those specialties. i.e. Documentary and archival, Commercials and music videos, Features and television series. Some labs have built the majority of their business servicing student filmmakers. Consider your needs for the project from preproduction to distribution and find a lab that provides the best fit for your project and budget. By scheduling your lab services in advance and using overnight courier services you can usually have your dailies/rushes back within 24 hours or less. Most labs will have a demo reel giving you an idea as to the type of services and results that they are delivering to their clients.

These important steps in your production can be smoothed considerably if you establish adequate communications right from the start. Both you and your laboratory should know what is expected—and when to expect it.

- **Know your needs.** Have a good idea of what you want from a laboratory and then talk about those needs with several laboratories before you make a choice. In your discussions, be sure to relay your ideas about such things as editing, dubbing, special effects, animation, etc., so the lab can help you accomplish these tasks in the best way possible.
- **Get acquainted.** Once you have made your choice of laboratories, get to know the people who will do your work. Tell them as much as you can about yourself, your needs, and your style. The more you communicate with them about yourself and your production, the better they can serve you.
- **Get it in writing.** Face-to-face discussions and telephone calls are necessary for efficient workflow; but when it comes to specifying what you want, when you want it, and how much it will cost, a carefully written document—the purchase order—is a must.

“Film cameras don’t tend to depreciate like video cameras. Video cameras are here today, gone tomorrow, next generation. With a film camera, the upgrade happens in the roll of film that you buy and put into it, and I find that is a wonderful way of upgrading your images by simply being able to put in a fresh roll of film stock.”

—*John Bowring, ASC*
