What Your Editor Wants You to Know

The video editor stares at the small video monitor glowing in the darkness. The scene flickering across the screen is his worst nightmare.

"I told the client we could fix it in post," the director says behind him. "We can do it, right?"

The editor's eyes glaze over. "Sure. We can fix it. How much money does he have?"

Every producer and director knows preplanning saves money on the shoot, but according to Greg Pecknold of Third Avenue Productions, preplanning saves money in post, too. "Editors have seen plenty of footage and know what works and what doesn't. Involving them at the preplanning stage lets the producer feel better about the money they are spending, instead of wondering if they've forgotten something and if it's really going to work."

"Preplanning is cheap compared to fixing it in post," Mark Steinway, the chief editor of Western Video says. "If a producer makes decisions for dissolves, wipes or graphic effects during planning stage, the transitions can be set up in the shooting script and they don't have to scrabble during post to make it look right."

Pat Barber, of Pat Barber Editing concurs. "I've seen producers waste time and money making creative decisions at $300 an hour, instead of during the $100 off-line session. And even those decisions could have been made earlier on."

Editors have seen thousands of workable transitions and are valuable resources for resolving crew or technical challenges. Editors see everybody's work — the high and the low budgets, the good, the bad and the ugly. They develop good taste in self defense. At this hub, with all the elements at hand, they have absolute control. Unlike the specialized sound or light person, editors must assimilate it all.

"Don't be afraid to ask questions," Steinway says. "Don't be intimidated. There needs to be a better understanding between producers and their editors during the early stages of a project."

Editors are also good resources for questions about equipment and graphics. They can suggest places for you to go where the technology matches your expectations and your budget.

"I'm a firm believer in appropriate use of technology," Pecknold says. "A writer will draw on all sorts of ideas and the editor can break it all down into what format to use, where to use graphics, Paintbox, Abacus or ADO, CD Audio, FX, SFX, sweetening, etc."

"If you want to use effects, you need to plan for them," Steinway adds. "Otherwise you end up with a hodge-podge of scenes hooked together with last minute graphics or link-ups. Graphics add polish if transitions have a common theme — are they page turns? Are they a certain font against a marble background? Consulting with your editor during the writing phase can establish a consistent look. A storyboard isn't as important as describing the overall effect and providing a good script with key scenes drawn in."

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Some transitions can be controlled during the preplanning and scriptwriting phases, however, documentaries and event coverage present different demands.

"When you can't control transitions, like at sporting events or when filming documentaries, the producer and shooter need to look for and collect generic transitions and supportive shots," Pecknold states. "A good news-trained shooter will get believable match cuts, wide and repeated shots, reversals, cut-aways, tight shots with no reference point and watch for 180-degree crossovers."

Audio presents its own set of difficulties. Great footage works without words, but words without footage won't work. The trend in music is toward original compositions, which can enhance the show considerably. However, needle drops are more predictable, because original scores are not always complete before the on-line session.

One smart way of working is to let the editor do both the off-line and on-line. By reviewing all the footage, the editor can recommend those images that will give the client the biggest bang for their buck. Then the producer can deliver a near final rough cut to the client for changes or sign-off.

"Some producers are afraid to show the off-line cut to the client because the numbers look tacky or the sound track isn't perfect." Pecknold says. "But the off-line cut gets client approval into the open and takes the worry off the editor and the producers for the on-line session. Then the only pressure is creative. I've had clients, who have never seen any part of the show, come into on-line sessions. It's difficult to ignore their comments and suggestions," Pecknold adds. 'The editor is left wondering from whom to take direction — the client or the producer."

"I like the buffer that the producer or director provides while I'm making nit-picky decisions about which frame to cut on or where to begin a dissolve," Barber says. "You can't move your hands as fast as people think. Just give me a good script!"

That's why preplanning is so nice," Pecknold says. "You get to know the client and their ideas. Otherwise you spend the first hour of editing time discovering what language to speak and sounding each other out. Thirty percent of editing time is spent getting approvals. Any pre-established terms and decisions can reduce that time."

"We're like court reporters," Pecknold continues. "We give honest reactions to what we see. Editing is a series of successful moments that connect scenes," he explains, citing James Burke's *The Day the Universe Changed* as an example of planned transitions. "Those transitions were excellent, obviously planned before a single frame of footage was shot."