



The Changing Face of Audio Post-Production

by **Bob Grieve**

The face of post-production sound is changing forever. Sound editors and mixers alike will have to fundamentally redefine their job descriptions in order to compete. Some of the changes are hurting the sound editor's ability to maintain a reasonable wage, some are hurting the union's ability to

Post sound budgets are falling precipitously, but total budgets are higher than ever.

protect its members and some are changing the landscape for facilities owners like myself.

It's not news that post-production schedules and budgets are shrinking. And yet movies keep getting made and excellent sound tracks are created. How can sound facilities continue to stay in business if there's no money to be made in post? The answer is surprisingly simple – they are making money, but the companies that are succeeding are redefining their methods of doing business. What follows are my thoughts on how post sound companies are changing and how this might threaten the status quo.

Lowering Wages

Some companies are asking union sound editors to work for less. Most editors in Hollywood are paid over-scale, so companies can insist that these editors work for less without breaking their contracts.

Non-Union Work

Non-Union work is still prevalent around town, even as the union attempts to sign companies up. Bigger budget movies do not always put their dollars into sound. To get these shows, companies must do them non-union. Many union sound editors are willing to work these non-union jobs just to stay afloat. To make ends meet, some editors have resorted to working out of their houses and/or pricing their work by the reel. Facilities can increase their profits by paying these editors less for rooms and equipment.

Loss-leader Pricing

Some companies with deep pockets can undercut the market and try to force their competition out of business. As beleaguered companies fall, prices can rise again and the victor can pick the carcasses of the losers for their best

talent. Hopefully, this is still a relationships business and quality and creativity have not yet become commodities, but this is a disturbing trend, nonetheless.

Decentralizing the Work

With the advent of high-speed data transfer, sound work can leave the state and even the country. Many countries offer tax incentives and completed work can be sent to Hollywood via the Internet in a matter of minutes. Time zone arithmetic can even help get the job done – editors in Europe can be preparing for a temp dub during our night hours and deliver work, ready to go, first thing in our morning. But even if an editor simply prefers to work at home, Internet delivery is appealing. If the show library is cloned and delivered to an editor's house, all that needs to be sent over the net is an EDL or a session that will link up to the duplicate media at the facility.

Package Deals and Smaller Stages

Many sound companies are trying to compete by providing an all-in package. Some can offer both editorial and mixing, since they have both facilities under one roof. Others sell packages with partner editorial companies or dubbing stages. In order to maximize profits, some companies are predubbing in smaller, in-house, rooms with less expensive mixers, thus putting more money in their pockets, and then finaling on a larger stage with premiere mixers. Many of our best mixers think this trend is hurting quality. It's certainly hurting their bottom line.

Redefining Jobs & Shrinking Crew Sizes

As sound companies adjust their businesses, sound professionals must change their working methods to cope. A new breed of sound designers are expanding their horizons to encompass the full spectrum of sound on film. They supervise or do some of the cutting and, when appropriate, move into a mixing chair. These individuals are developing a young clientele that appreciate their talents and their ability to follow a project through the entire sound process. In and of itself, this does not necessarily save money, but it's part of an evolution toward smaller crews, which does. Facilities are feeling the pinch and are looking for new ways to preserve their bottom line. In some cases, they will allow producers to four-wall the stage, or rent it without mixers. This enables the producers to staff the room with fewer people, and sometimes at a lower rate than the stage would pay their top talent.

All these forces are coming to bear on the sound world (and as picture editing equipment and Internet bandwidth improve, many of the same trends are going to influence the picture editing community, as well). The

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main problem, as I see it, is that post sound budgets continue to go dangerously lower even as total budgets are higher than we've ever seen. The other costs of filmmaking continue to grow (actor salaries, visual

effects, etc.) and the producers are looking for anything they can find to cut costs. They have historically looked below the line for these savings. But even as post budgets decline, technology and delivery requirements are causing our responsibilities to grow.

My greatest concern is that the art of sound editing will begin to deteriorate – from a craft to a service. We have to be the master of these changes if sound is to remain a creative and artistic endeavor. If salaries and conditions erode, post sound will cease to attract the best people. We can't stop technological progress and we can only embrace the creative tools of the future, but we must all begin to think about ways to deal with these new challenges – both as individuals and as Guild members – if we want to preserve the artistic qualities of our work. I welcome any ideas that would help nourish and shape the great creative improvements coming our way, without compromising our living conditions and contribution to the art of filmmaking.

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