

Regional cable provider raises standards for local advertising

Local television ads have a reputation and let's face it, that reputation isn't good. Especially local ads shot for cable. You know the look: video with chroma noise and blown out highlights, a car salesman who looks like he bought his clothes at K-Mart and his hair at Sam's Club.

Bright House Networks in Florida is out to change all that. Bright House is the regional cable provider serving Tampa Bay and Central Florida. Randy Van Patten, the creative services supervisor at Bright House in Lakeland, Florida, began working with local cinematographer Warren Jones from Orlando back in 2001, convincing local businesses to move up from standard video production to 16mm or even 35mm film.

"I think people associate film with going to the movies and seeing something more dramatic," says Jones. His most effective sales pitch is telling potential customers to go home and compare the look of their 11 o'clock news with the *NYPD Blue* reruns that follow it. "We point out that film has more of a dream-like quality to it. It looks more expensive, and it's going to make their company look like it has a national presence. It really separates a business from the local competition."

When Van Patten launched the Bright House Film and HD Unit, he began selling it as a way for businesses to upgrade their advertising without busting the budget. He typically quotes a full day 35mm film shoot at around \$12,000 to \$15,000, including transfer, which yields enough raw material for a couple of 30-second spots. "We don't have to mark up our production costs like other production houses do because our larger revenue comes from advertising dollars," he notes.

If a local business chokes at the cost of 35mm production, Van Patten will also work up a cost for 16mm; and if that still seems too high, yet another price for high-definition video.

Van Patten's team at Bright House serves as an in-house agency, providing creative services from concept and storyboarding through talent selection. Then members of the team — producer/director Laurie Keebler, audio/grip Mary Fear, and key grip John Pivovarnik — become the core of the field crew, supplemented by Jones, camera assistant Steven Latham, and other professional freelancers as needed. A full crew averages 15-20 people.

L to R
Randy Van Patten,
creative services
supervisor for Bright
House Networks,
with camera assistant
Steve Latham filming
a scene for a TV
spot in Auburndale,
Florida.



The standards are purely professional. They rent Panavision Gold or PanaStar camera packages with a Primo 11:1 zoom, and modest lighting kits, Fisher or Super PeeWee dollies, and more from First Unit in Pinellas Park. Most shoots are on location, but the crew also has access to Last Stage Out of Town in nearby Lake Alfred, Florida.

Film is processed and transferred to DigiBeta at CineWorks in Miami, then brought back to Bright House's own facility in Lakeland for editing in Final Cut Pro. Final output is in 4:3 format standard definition video for local cable distribution.

Van Patten says his favorite film for indoor shooting is KODAK VISION2 EXPRESSION 500T 5229 film, "because we don't have a monstrous budget for lighting." Besides, he adds, grain is no problem when you're shooting for television broadcast. For outdoor shooting under the bright, contrasty Florida sun, they switch to KODAK VISION2 50D 5201 film.

The look of Bright House-produced ads is controlled: a moderate contrast ratio with a warm color palette and plenty of fill. Van Patten isn't interested in pushing film to its limits, but in producing local spots with high production values.

"We do a lot with very few Kino Flos, and for a more dramatic look, punching HMIs through the windows," Van Patten says. "I like the look of warm sunlight coming through windows."

He says the range of film, its color palette, and the ability to capture detail far into the shadows, really impress clients who have never shot film before. "Their first reaction is, 'Why didn't we start doing this 10 years ago?'"

Film production clients include Computer Renaissance, MIDFLORIDA Federal Credit Union, Manatee County Area Transit, their own Bay News 9 from St. Petersburg, and numerous local car dealers, attorneys and golf courses.

For Computer Renaissance, a national chain whose corporate office is in Lakeland, Van Patten's team dreamed up a campaign built around the chimp squad (think "geek squad" with hairy faces and hands). They shot for three days for under \$50,000, and produced a series of ads that Computer Renaissance is now using nationwide. "When we produce a spot for clients that advertise with us, they own it and can air it in other markets, too," Van Patten explains.

He says MIDFLORIDA Federal Credit Union, which now shoots three or four spots each year with Bright House, might not be advertising on the cable system at all if it weren't for the look they can get on film. Manatee County Area Transit has local production resources available closer to home, but comes to Van Patten to get the more professional film look he can provide.

Now Van Patten is interested in reaching further outside his backyard. He has compiled a demo DVD on the Bright House Networks Film/HD Unit, and is bidding on production work for clients outside his region. "When you compare our cost structure against agencies in town, we're as much as \$40-\$50,000 cheaper on a two- to four-day job," he explains. ■