

"Client & Director – The Two Amigos"

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The most important element of any successful video project is a friendly, collaborative relationship between the client and the director. The better the communication between these key players the more likely you'll end up with an effective final product. At every step of the process, it's essential that client and director have a strong commitment to a creative partnership with the ability to compromise. When this relationship works, it not only results in a better program but also brings the project in on time and within budget.

- **Who is the client?** This is seemingly an easy question to answer but not as easy as you might think. In a perfect world, the client is the primary contact and the final decision maker who controls the budget, signs off on the creative direction, attends the shoots and approves the final cut. Ideally, one person performs all these tasks. Realistically, it's a committee at a corporation and at an agency it's the creative director and account executive in addition to all of the above.

Your relationship with a director will often only be as good as the corporate dynamic allows. If the VP of marketing approves the budget, the communications manager approves the script, an intern attends the shoot, but then the CEO decides to sit in on the edit because he "dabbles" in Premier Elements on weekends, the project may become a challenge.

If the client works for a company where employees feel empowered and their supervisors don't second-guess every decision, the chance for success dramatically improves - but what if this isn't the corporate culture?

- **Can we all just get along?** A really good production company (like Spin Creative) has worked with enough companies and agencies to know where an organization falls on the Zen continuum. It is their responsibility to quickly assess the situation and define and assign roles. If the client is not organized, it's up to the video production company to introduce structure. There should be mutual agreement that the client knows what they want and that the production company knows how to efficiently and creatively make it happen. While the client may produce a couple videos a year, the production company does it every day.

- **The Director - CEO of production.** The director is the one person who must take ultimate responsibility for the finished product. During pre-production, the director develops the creative direction with the client. During production, the director instructs the crew and the actors. During postproduction the director works closely with the producer, editor, narrator and musicians to make certain that the vision becomes reality and that the goals and objective are met.
- **Trust the director (part one).** It’s very important that the client trusts the director because once production begins, they must turn the project over and step back. It is tough to stand on the sidelines when you are responsible for the budget and the project may affect your career and yet it’s crucial if the project is to stay on track.

It is the responsibility of the director to lay the groundwork for the client’s trust. Transparency and discussion will establish expectations as well as help avoid misunderstandings. The director must make sure that there is consensus at every point along the way. The producer helps with this by managing expectations, encouraging dialogue while keeping everyone apprised of the schedule.

- **First among equals.** Although producing a video is very much a team activity, directing is not. A team of directors (unless they are the Coen brothers) will result in chaos and added cost. There must be one person who is running the show and that person is the director.
- **Role reversal.** As production moves along, the relationship between the client and the director changes. In the beginning, the director is there to support the client, assess their needs and come up with a strategy. Once the plan is established, the client needs to support the director and make sure they have the information, resources and approvals they need to create an effective video. Great clients provide a buffer for their directors from corporate politics and other distractions.

We now turn to the day of the shoot. Good preparation makes for a smooth day of production. Here’s how to insure that happens.

- **The production meeting.** Prior to any shoot, it’s important for everyone to have the same expectations about the day’s activities. Shortly before the shoot, there should be a production meeting or phone call that includes the client(s), agency team, director and producer. It’s imperative that the director reviews the day’s schedule and explains the role the client will play on the shoot day.
- **Trust the director (part two).** If expectations have been well established beforehand, the client should trust the director on the day of the shoot. It is

the director's job to draw the best performance from an actor or interviewee and to know when it's been delivered. An experienced director will be editing the program in their head as the day progresses.

- **Voice of authority.** Each shoot has its own, unique atmosphere and the director sets the mood and establishes a rhythm. Every director has a different way of working and the client and crew should follow their lead. Control of the process is essential for the desired result.
- **Closed vs. open set.** Occasionally the director will want as few people as possible on the set. This is done for a variety of reasons. If talent is on camera the director will want to establish rapport and that is sometimes best done with a small crew. This can be especially important if the interviewee is a non-professional who might be nervous on camera.
- **Client monitor.** A monitor for client viewing is typically provided and usually positioned near the set (unless shooting conditions don't allow for use of a client monitor). This allows the client to see the images, as they will appear to the final audience without the general distraction of the shoot.
- **Feedback and review.** Every director is different when it comes to feedback. For instance, at the end of an interview, most directors will ask the client and producer if there is anything that was missed or should be added. Since it's very important to allow the director to find a rhythm, it is usually inappropriate to interrupt in the middle of a take, or series of takes. This can disrupt the flow of the shoot, stress the talent and crew, delay the schedule and even result in costly overtime charges. Interruptions can make it difficult to get back into a rhythm. The producer and director should make it clear during the production meeting how and when feedback should be given.
- **Client adds value.** It's crucial for the client to be present during the shoot. The client has the expertise to make sure the content is correct and also captured in a way that is consistent with creative strategy. With the director, the client makes up a vital team. The better the communication, the better the working relationship and the more successful the shoot. When these roles are clearly defined they compliment each other and create the environment for a productive and successful shoot.

Now lets discuss specifically how the process should work on the day of the shoot. The client and director each play a vital role and the etiquette of the shoot plays a large part in making the final product a success. Let's specifically discuss the "game day" responsibilities of both amigos.

- **Trust the director (part three).** As we discussed earlier, there can only be one person in charge during a successful shoot and that is the director. More than anyone else, this is the person who knows what needs to be

accomplished each day of shooting and knows how to get it done. The director must establish rapport with the client, the crew and the performers. The director must also consider how the day's footage will fit with the rest of the program and is mentally editing the show while directing. Trust the director. All other participants (including the client) are present to support the needs of the director.

- **Time is money.** This is a cliché yet so true. If you want your program to come in on budget you must allow the director and crew to run the shoot. It is very important that the director gets everyone into a production groove. The day is choreographed to meet the budget. The shoot day is not the time to question the creative treatment or to rewrite the script. Although the project belongs to the client, it is time for the director to implement the plan. That can't happen with a backseat director.
- **Let us help you.** During the production meeting, there should be a specific discussion about client feedback on the day of the shoot and when it should occur. Getting this right is key to an efficient shoot that produces desired results. Here is how it should work.
- **Step one – establishing the frame.** For each shot, the director will work with the Director of Photography to establish a frame for the shot. The client will sign off on the framing and then the Director of Photography will work with his team to set and adjust the lighting.
- **Step two – the shoot.** The director will lead the talent and crew through a series of takes which will meet the requirements laid out in the script. If there is time, the director may also try some variations. It's very important that the client listens to the talent, watches the monitor carefully to make sure the content is accurate and collects notes to share with the director at the appropriate time. It's even more important that the client does not interrupt the shoot. Once the momentum is disrupted it can be very difficult to get back on track. Create space for the director to coax the maximum creative result from the talent and crew.
- **Step three – giving feedback.** During the production meeting, the producer and director will have explained the process for client input. After the series of takes has been completed, it is the responsibility of the director to signal the client and the producer that production has been paused and comments are welcome. This way, the feedback is given all at once without interrupting the production process. To do otherwise is inefficient and can possibly alter the schedule.

For the sake of efficiency, it's important the client speak with one voice. If there are a number of clients and/or agency team members present, it's a good idea to reach some consensus before talking to the director. It's

counterproductive to have a conversation on set that should have happened during the production meeting.

When roles are clearly defined and understood, it becomes easier to establish trust between the client and director. A positive feeling of collaboration will encourage creativity during the crucial preproduction phase. A logical feedback loop during the shoot will establish an efficient rhythm to keep production on schedule and morale high. The culmination of all these positive elements will be a high-quality, effective product that meets the established goals and objectives.

About the Author

[Matthew Billings](#) is the Owner and Creative Director at [Spin Creative, LLC](#). Spin Creative is a full-service high-care high-touch creative video production company based in Seattle. We propel brands using cinematic storytelling. If you would like to work with one the best video production companies on the west coast, shoot us an email at contact@spincreativegroup.com or call 206.686.1090. Our production offices are in Seattle but we travel all over the world for our clients.