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Sound+Vision

Non Professional and Professional Talent

Directing non-professionals can be both rewarding and a real challenge. Whether it is the producer's daughter or the CEO of a Fortune 500 company who insists on delivering the opening statement, directing non-professional talent takes a steady and patient hand. It also helps to have in your arsenal a few helpful hints and techniques ready to pull out at any given moment. In this column, we will discuss some ways to avoid potential pitfalls when directing non-professionals and ways to make your budding talent comfortable and capable of delivering a stellar performance. Before trusting your production to the acting or speaking abilities of a non-professional, you need to ask yourself a few questions:

Are you under a strict deadline?

Will a national or even regional audience see your project?

Is it essential that the script be delivered completely as written, or will you be able to rewrite it to make it more easily presented by a non-professional?

If you answered yes to one or more of these questions, you should probably seek out a professional who would be willing to work for you within your budget. Why? A professional will be able to work through your project quickly and efficiently, using years of training and practice to deliver the script with the right emphasis, tone and pace. Professionals will not only save you

time, but also will be able to present the script as written and adapt their voices or act their parts with an eye on the final outcome.

The practiced ability and polish of a professional usually will play more effectively for a regional or national audience. There will be no glaring accent or local feel to the talent, and this will enhance the credibility of the project. This doesn't mean that non-professional talent will not be able to deliver a valuable performance - it will just take longer, and you will need to be aware of your audience.

The key to using non-professionals in a narrative piece is to typecast your roles. Typecasting means you cast people in roles they closely resemble in look and personality. Famous Russian director Sergei Eisenstein used to cast butchers as butchers and military men as soldiers to add authenticity to the performance. While the role you are casting may be no more than a support player in an ensemble cast, choosing someone who resembles the role will make it a lot easier on both of you. If, however, the producer insists on casting his daughter in the lead role of a production, hope that person is similar to the character she will be playing because, otherwise, you will need to work much harder to make sure she delivers the performance you need.

When you are working with non-professionals on the narrative set, rehearsal is essential. Make sure your actors are very familiar with their blocking (the movement of the actor from one point to another), motivation for their lines and any "business" you may want them to perform while acting their parts. Business is a film term for the actions the actor may be doing to make the character authentic. If you are shooting a scene with a mother, you may have her making sandwiches for her children before they run off to school. The making of the sandwiches is the actor's business. A chef may be preparing food, a doctor performing surgery or a police officer cleaning a gun. It is essential that the business be well-rehearsed, so it looks very natural.

Acting is more than delivering lines. It is inhabiting the character in such a way that it becomes real. Nothing is more distracting than watching a character perform an action he doesn't understand or has not practiced and perfected. Non-professionals, if typecast, can perform quite well if they relate to their characters and are familiar with the type of business their character is assigned.

More often than not, the non-fiction world is where you will be working with the non-professional talent. Often when you produce corporate video, the client prefers to use in-house people. This is actually to your advantage, since you will not have to explain to actors something they have no clue about. It is a bit like typecasting in the fiction narrative. The talent knows how to work the machinery, speak the jargon of the workplace or maneuver through a difficult procedure.

When working with the CEO or other administrative personnel, treat them with respect, but do not give in to their demands. They will often ask for cue cards or ready-made speeches. Both will lead to very stilted and drab performances they will not like in the end. You may allow them to use note cards, but, if they do, type the cue words on blue note cards in large letters, and have them hold the cards so that they are visible. Walk them through the material until they get comfortable working in front of the camera. When you do roll tape, their delivery will be a lot more relaxed, they won't appear to be reading and they will present the information in a much more credible fashion than by reading a written speech.

Best Regards and Happy Shooting!

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