



BUDGETING FOR SOUND

The making of Film and TV productions is an undeniably expensive business. As audience expectations rise for both sound and image it is certain that the pressure on future budgets will only grow. As productions look at ways to save money, or distribute their spend in a different manner, AMPS would like to suggest how to maximise the return on budget financially while producing a high quality and creative sound track for your production.

Good Sound Saves Money

The shooting of the Production and Post Production were once seen as entirely separate steps in the creative process. However modern technology requires decisions to be made that bridge that divide, linking people and processes. While productions frequently still view Production and Post as separate budgets, technology has made them part of the same cost structure. Getting it wrong in Production has implications for cost in Post. Get it right and there will be no unpleasant surprises, leaving the production with a potentially more creative sound track and guaranteed quality.

Communication

AMPS recommends it as good practice to have a meeting before the production starts, or at least open communication, between the Production Manager, Production Sound Mixer, Picture Editor, Post-Production Supervisor, the Supervising Sound Editor/Designer and the Re-Recording Mixer. The purpose of this is to define the correct sound workflow for the Production, ensuring that the Production Mixer on the set provides Post Production with sound materials in exactly the technical format that enables them to work most efficiently. While an experienced Production Mixer can make a 'most likely' requirement decision without this consultation, the correct agreed workflow specification should speed Editing and Post Production and avoid any incompatibility issues that can be costly both in time and money.

The meeting should also ensure that the Sound Report information on the recorded takes, track allocation and technical notes is in a form useful to the Sound Editor(s). This enables them to check quickly the received recordings, identify alternative takes and any Wild Tracks, so ensuring that the best original sound can be used. With up to twelve simultaneous separate tracks now being recorded on set this saves a lot of time in Post and will remove the opportunity for useful recorded material to be overlooked.

Crewing

Sound is a significant part of any Production. The Production Sound Mixer and their team are the only persons on the set responsible for achieving good, clean and usable sound. Because of this it makes sense to employ an experienced sound team who will have a better chance of capturing high quality original sound that can be used in the final sound track and so reduce the costs and problems incurred having to replace dialogue and recreate atmosphere in Post.

AMPS encourages the use of a minimum crew consisting of an experienced Production Mixer and Boom Operator supported by an Assistant. If there are very complex sequences to be shot, then the use of a second Boom Operator and a second Assistant (perhaps a trainee) will facilitate the sound capture and enable the Production Mixer to provide the best possible original sound.

An experienced Boom Operator is the Production Mixer's representative on the set, close to the actors, and can relay changes or any problems to the Production Mixer so that that any alterations to the recording process may be made in a break period rather than interrupting or delaying takes wherever possible. More importantly, the skill of a Boom Operator is in placing the microphone correctly so as to improve the chances of capturing the actors dialogue in good quality original sound.

The Sound Assistant can be directed to sort minor problems that might otherwise delay a take while a more experienced Assistant may be capable of temporarily standing in for either of their colleagues in an emergency.

With correct crewing levels, the Production Mixer or Assistant can capture Wild SFX of vehicles used, equipment and atmospheres on or close to the set, all of which will form a useful library of original sounds. This should enable the sound editors to work faster and more efficiently so further reduce cost in Post.

Sound Thinking

Use the experience of your Production Sound Mixer to identify many of the common costly mistakes that can mostly be avoided with some forethought. The Mixer may be able to point out problem areas for sound from reading the script so that they can be solved before reaching the set.

Consult with them on shooting locations and they can advise on the feasibility of obtaining usable sound. Ask about the suitability for sound of various shooting stages or the possibilities of using a converted warehouse etc. It is possible they will have worked in some of the locations you might consider or can obtain advice from professional colleagues who may have worked there provided they belong to a professional association such as AMPS.

The Production Sound team is there to record the best sound possible for your production. It is worth ensuring that all the other craft areas understand this ambition and will accommodate the small changes needed to achieve this. For example if it's necessary to use a radio microphone concealed amongst the actor's costume, certain fabrics, such as silk and nylon, can cause high levels of noise for sound, possibly rendering it unusable. A brief discussion between the Production Mixer and Costume department before shooting would prevent this situation reaching the set.

Other problem areas that can affect the possibility of achieving usable sound include:

Air conditioning noise
Set design

Heating noise
Noisy lights

Generator location
On-set cell phones

Noise from any one of these can prevent the recording of good quality original sound with the result that scenes have to be completely rebuilt in Post Production – with actors returning for Dialogue Replacement and hours of a Sound Editor's time recreating an ambience or soundscape. There are bound to be situations where there is noise beyond our control and that will just have to be accepted but by keeping such circumstances rare it will have a beneficial affect on costs.

And there is also a creative aspect to this. Actors will tend to give their definitive performance on the set, in costume and in the intended location. The need to bring the actors back for dialogue replacement sessions at some future date is generally unpopular with screen talent, many of whom will not manage to recreate their original performance. It is also expensive - a cost that must be again set against the small amount of effort needed to capture good original sound. It may be worth delaying a take by two minutes to sort an unforeseen squeak with a can of oil because the cost of fixing it in Post may be far higher.

There Will Be Times ...

There will be times when it is just not possible to record usable original sound on the set particularly where there are SFX or transport scenes. Where you know that the sound will only be used as a guide track, consider bringing your Dialogue Replacement to the set. Having your actors redo their lines to-picture in a quiet area close to the set just a few minutes after the shoot is an excellent way of capturing a better performance than trying to recreate it at some future date. The actor's voice will have the same characteristics as the original take and they will be able to recall the emotion and phrasing. Aside from not incurring the costs of recalling actors, there will be less time needed in Post trying to match voice tonalities - a considerable saving.

ADR

It is rare for any production to completely avoid the need for some Dialogue Replacement. Select an ADR Mixer who will work closely with the Director and Dialogue Editor to help them guide the artist to give the required performance to match the original location. To this end, the ADR Mixer will use their knowledge of microphones to select the appropriate type and assist the actor to work with it. This in turn will help the Editor to build the dialogue tracks and the Re-Recording Mixer to match the ADR to the original location recording quickly and easily. Once again the quality of the recordings will speed up the post-production and so keep the costs as low as possible.

Sound Editing, Design and Re-Recording

Using a team of good editors under the guidance of an experienced Supervising Sound Editor/Designer, will ensure that you will get the best tracks prepared and presented for the Re-Recording Mixers to mix and create the Final sound track for your production.

Sound Budget Saved

AMPS hopes that this has shown how factors that affect Production Sound adversely may have a major impact on the Post Production costs. Spending money in Post to recreate what you could have had from good Production Sound is a largely avoidable cost.

The Association of Motion Picture Sound wishes you well with your Productions - and good sound!

About the Association of Motion Picture Sound

AMPS was formed in 1989 by a group of UK-based Film and Television Sound professionals. The aim of the Association was to enable those engaged in the various crafts of Motion Picture Sound to exchange information, endeavour to solve common problems and keep abreast of rapidly changing technologies.

Today AMPS has a membership in excess of 360 of the most highly experienced and creative Sound Recording, Editing and Mixing talent in the British Film and Television industries. The Association has become established and recognised both within the UK and internationally.

For further information on AMPS or its members:

www.amps.net

info@amps.net

AMPS office: 020 7723 6727