

HIGHER GROU

As an artist with clients to wow and a hard-won reputation to uphold, it's perfectly normal to resist delegating to others in favor of an "if you want something done right, do it yourself" approach. And for those who do need extra hands from time to time, the first resort is usually to seek out a freelancer—a nice, malleable lump of clay that can be molded in your image—and (literally) call all the shots yourself.

But be warned: If you resist others' influence, say top-notch event filmmakers who weighed in on this subject, you risk missing out on valuable networking and learning opportunities and, ultimately, the chance to take your films to the next level.

We don't mean posting ads on craigslist for freelance second shooters, but rather teaming up with fellow A-list event filmmakers in the way Kevin Shahinian assembled his all-star crew for *City of Lakes*. Consider it: As experts and studio principals, your peers offer a wealth of technical and business acumen, not to mention talent, that can translate into a worry-free workflow and a brilliantly polished product.

And the inverse: When recruited to help on a colleague's project, you stand to gain perspective in the humbling role of second or third shooter that you can take home to refine, or redefine, your relationship with your crew or contractors.

Most importantly, host and visiting filmmakers together generate fresh ideas that can arise only from putting two or more heads together.

MORE THAN GUNS FOR HIRE

Without question, reliable freelance shooters have their purpose. But proven professionals, your industry peers, brainstorming with you and putting their years of experience at your disposal, serve an even higher one.

Bringing on a freelancer—especially one whose work you are unfamiliar with—can be risky. Put bluntly, "With freelancers it is simply a crapshoot every time," says David Robin of Encino, California's David Robin Films. Preferring to partner with pros, Robin has teamed up with esteemed event filmmakers (and fellow EventDV 25 All-Stars) Loyd Calomay, Shahinian, and Joe Simon on each others' weddings, same-day edits, concept videos, and spoofs.

Event Filmmaking's Emerging Cult of Collaboration

"Working with experienced veterans of this caliber is phenomenal," says Robin. "There is very little worry that the footage coming back will be anything but awesome, and right on the money."

Directing more novice contractors on a shoot might mean spending your limited time micromanaging, looking over shoulders, and instructing. Not having to hold hands is partly why Jennifer Moon of Northernlight Filmworks in Indianapolis enjoys collaborating with established studios, including all-star outfits such as Studio Z Films, Epic Motion, and Life Stage Films. "You don't have to constantly tell them what to do," she says.

There's a phrase Calomay, of Red 5 Studios in Orange County, Calif., often hears while working with industry masters such as the aforesaid Robin, Pacific Pictures' Shahinian, and other friends he has met through Re:Frame gatherings: "'Do your thing'—with a shot list, of course," he adds. He knows that not only will his colleagues capture the moments beautifully but that they will work just as hard as he does. "With someone's work you are already familiar with, you can trust in their decision making without having to be very detailed," he goes on. In contrast, with a freelancer, "It's best to be very specific about shot selection, framing, movement, and so on, so that it matches your current shooting style."



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Collaborating A-listers (from left) Ray Roman, Kevin Shahinian, and David Robin



Loyd Calomay (right) and Andrew Hsu (left) at Re:Frame Austin, the type of event where Calomay has met future collaborators

Principals are also likely to have had their hands on a variety of state-of-the-art and specialized equipment that a freelancer might have only read about, which puts you, as the host filmmaker, at an advantage. “My second shooters are super-amazing,” raves Simon of Joe Simon Wedding Films in Austin, Texas. “But if I’m in a pinch and I need someone to run a second Glidecam, they don’t have that skill. It’s nice that you can bring someone in that can bring the extra skill sets that you might not have in a second shooter.”

Collaborating is a no-brainer for Simon, who has partnered up with Ryan Koral from Epic Motion, Stillmotion’s Patrick Moreau, MIND|Castle Studio’s Casey Warren, Andrew Hsu from

Morning Star Videography, Bruce Patterson from Cloud Nine Creative, Ray Roman of Ray Roman Films, and Shahinian. “When you can bring in people from other studios to help out, to give it that extra push, it’s going to give you a better product in the end.”

That’s partly because of their sheer talent and partly because “great minds think alike.” Or at least experienced minds. Someone who is accustomed to running the show is naturally more likely to be considering your end product and the process it takes to achieve that. Studio heads have a forward-thinking, visionary mindset, theorizes Randy Panado from Colour Craft Media in Honolulu. Panado has joined forces with principals James Pizarro from red Bicycle Media, Michael

Y. Wong, Jason Magbanua, Angel De Armas, Patterson, and Elysium Production’s Julie Hill. “I find that shooting with freelancers or those who don’t run their own shops doesn’t provide the same chemistry and vision to see a few steps ahead in shooting, as many of them do not edit the final product. When you edit the final product, you know where the holes were and take from each shortcoming an experience to later bridge that gap,” says Panado.

A freelancer who slips up, on the other hand, might not realize the ramifications. “People who have their own company realize more of the pressure involved from beginning to end,” says Simon. “And if something is messed up, they understand what you have to deal with later on in post,” such as a white-balance issue or a missed shot. Also, “They better understand the relationship that you want to maintain with the clients.”

The exception to this, Panado allows, would be a freelancer or second shooter who has been working with a company for quite some time “and has actually put the effort forward to learn and grow in skill set and cerebral shooting practices.”

To be fair, “When you work with a contractor enough,” Jennifer Moon agrees, “you get to that comfortable place where you can let them go and not monitor them all the time. But for the most part, having someone doing the same things I do week after week, there’s a sense of comfort because you know they understand your name is on the line and will do their very best, just as if it were their shoot.”

A headache you don’t typically have to deal with when working with freelancers, though, is inflexibility, or having so much experience that they’re set in their ways. Says Panado, “Business owners usually have their own way of doing things, so sometimes it’s a bit of a challenge to get on the same wavelength. However, once you get there, things flow quite easily. You can look at each other and already know what needs to be done without so much as a nod or a hand gesture.”

FRIENDS WITH BENEFITS

Looking for an exceptional collaborative experience? Then you might have to break one of business’ cardinal rules

and mix it with pleasure. “When you work with someone, you want to know you’re going to work well with them,” Simon advises. “Because you could be stuck on a shoot with someone you’ve never met, and if they wind up being too headstrong and don’t want to follow orders, that’s definitely going to create issues. I definitely want to have a friendship with that person before I’d work with them. It’s a live event. If you have issues, you’re going to be in trouble.”

David Robin considers himself lucky to have had the opportunity to work mostly with his buddies. He started collaborating with peers when “it became a painful reality that there were very few competent DSLR shooters in my town.” So he looked elsewhere for “the best guys available, who also happen to be friends,” or at least well-known in the industry. When Robin tapped Calomay to help on his *Entourage* concept film, the two had never met. But they knew of each other and that they would work well together. “Collaborating on *Entourage* was great,” Calomay says, “because we both are very passionate about movies—watching them and making them.” The two became fast friends.

With so many industry networking opportunities, online and offline, such friendships can gel quickly. Take Panado, for instance, who, because of distance, has had to rely primarily on social networking to get his name out there. In fact, with the exception of Wong and Pizarro, all of his collaborative projects have been borne of online social networking. “I feel that these channels are worthwhile to explore,” he says, being careful to point out their potential to sap productivity if abused. “It’s a balancing act.”

Through Event Filmmaker (previously WedFACT) and Facebook, Panado connected with Magbanua, Patterson, Hill, and De Armas, who’s known in the Hawaiian market as a bit of an enigma. “Everyone knows of him but not many have gotten the chance to meet him,” explains Panado. “He came across my



Randy Panado of Colour Craft Media, who has worked with Jason Magbanua, Julie Hill, and others, says, “Shooting with freelancers or those who don’t run their own shops doesn’t provide the same chemistry and vision to see a few steps ahead in shooting, as many of them do not edit the final product.”

work through Event Filmmaker, and I guess something caught his eye. We met up to get acquainted and found that we had the same types of philosophies in approaching wedding filmmaking. We’ve collaborated on a handful of projects to date.”

Magbanua, or J-Mag as he is endearingly known by colleagues, and Panado “met” through the casual postings on Event Filmmaker and Facebook. When J-Mag booked a Hawaiian wedding, he pinged Panado to shoot with him. “I leapt at the chance to collaborate with such a pioneer and leader in the industry,” Panado says.

Don’t doubt the power of online social networking, he warns. When Patterson also needed a hand in Hawaii, “It just so happened I was free that day and one of the only handful of cinematographers here locally who realizes the value of social networking on the internet.” When Panado answered Patterson’s ad on Event Filmmaker, the deal was sealed. “He liked the way I shot,” and the rest is history.

That relationship then led to another. It was on a Cloud Nine shoot in Canada

that Panado met Hill (Patterson’s collaborator in the industry-redefining Re:Frame events), and they then shot a wedding together.

But it was offline, through a Stillmotion Evolution workshop, that Panado met collaborators Pizarro and Wong of red Bicycle Media.

Pizarro and Panado struck up a friendship and kept in touch after the workshop. “We bounced ideas back and forth for a period of 7–8 months,” he says. “At that time, James flew me in to help him shoot a double same-day edit day wedding. He led one team and I led the other.” Thus their “sister studio” relationship was born. “We regularly fly each other out to help shoot for each other,” with Panado flying to Ohio and the East Coast and Pizarro flying out to Hawaii and California.

Since crossing paths with Wong at the Stillmotion Evolution workshop, Panado says, “He has been my mentor in the business.” Last June, Wong mentioned that he had a gig the day before Panado was scheduled to work with Cloud Nine Creative in Vancouver, British Columbia. “It has always been a goal to be able to see Mike’s genius in action, so I was glad that the opportunity arose.”

WATCH AND LEARN

Collaborating is “almost like a mini-conference,” offers Simon. “Everyone’s always exchanging ideas on how to do things.” Through collaborations, for example, Calomay has mastered DSLRs, or in his words, “I’ve learned what techniques are best, what lenses and settings I need to use, and how to be comfortable using the new equipment, in general.”

Likewise, referring to her husband and partner, Jennifer Moon says, “John was able to use the Steadicam Flyer when shooting with Studio Z Films,” a piece of equipment he had never used before. It’s also interesting to watch how others work on the day of an event, she points out. “We have been able to implement some new



Jennifer Moon (second from right) and her husband and partner, John (far right), with sometime collaborators Reagan (second from left) and Steve Zugelger (far left) of Studio Z Films



As a business owner who knows what he wants when making a film, Joe Simon always plans out the shoot and gives his collaborators a list of shots they're responsible for. But, recognizing the real value of collaborating with another artist, he also makes time to swap ideas at dinner the night before the event.

techniques we may have learned from the other company.”

Also, the visiting filmmaker, ordinarily the boss, experiences what it's like in the second or third shooter's shoes. “Now I know how to communicate better with my own contractors because I've been in their position,” says Calomay. After her experiences collaborating, Moon has vowed to let her contractors “go” a little more and be creative.

Like a conference, collaborating offers obvious networking opportunities as well. “It has increased our referrals when those companies we have worked for are booked for a job. We have also become closer friends and know we can count on each other when in need,” says Moon.

I WANT IN!

Are you on board and thinking, “Where do I sign up?” Speak up on forums and forge connections! Show your face at conferences and make new friends. “It seems like the right people just end up finding you if you are an honest, open, and sincere person rather than one who is just in it for themselves,” says Panado.

As the host filmmaker, expect to be the organizer, detailing for your colleagues how they will be compensated, whether they are responsible for travel expenses, and then be prepared to provide some sort of shot list for them to follow.

In terms of compensation, collaborators have found a handful of methods that

work for each unique situation. Trading services and time is a simple agreement, but consider where each person is located. Will it be likely that you'll cross paths again in order to make good on the trade? If so, the agreement could be for each of you to get to the other's location on your own dime, bring your equipment, and simply have an “I owe ya one” agreement.

If a trade isn't realistic, offer a day rate and a per diem for food and travel expenses. That's what Simon sometimes does. “I've just paid a day rate for shooting. I have a destination day rate that includes whatever the day rate is and a per diem for food and travel expenses.”

Moon and her collaborators have all been within driving distance (less than 5 hours) of one another, so they also use a day rate. “We ask or are asked what our day rate is, and then lodging and mileage is added on to it. Steve Zugelger refers to our day rate as a ‘Full Moon’ or ‘Half Moon’ rate.”

If airlines, with their irksome baggage fees, are involved, you can negotiate who brings what. Simon, who produces his share of destination films, relies on his collaborators to check their equipment so he doesn't have to check multiple bags and incur hundreds of dollars in fees. “That's part of the process, making sure they have the right equipment. They can bring their own camera, tripod, monopod, and so forth, so I don't have to deal with carrying it all myself.”

But hash this out beforehand: “We divide up responsibilities prior to the shoot to make sure there is no confusion as well as deciding who is bringing what in terms of gear,” says Panado.

Once together, planning can begin, with the host filmmaker leading. But because this is an A-team, prep is rarely an exhaustive process—with the exception of concept films, where you might include your collaborators in scripting, storyboarding, location scouting, and meetings with the cast. With weddings, you're mostly divvying up responsibilities. “Very little planning needs to go into the wedding gigs. We are all so experienced in the field already,” says Robin.

Calomay and his collaborators simply discuss shot lists, camera placement,

“and other strategies to get everything that we want to capture.” He also shares his vision so his collaborators can help him work toward it. “As a shooter,” he says, “I would always want to know, ‘What am I shooting for? Is this just for a same-day edit, or do I need to cover more for a longer feature film edit?’ It helps to know these things ahead of time so we know what to focus on.”

Depending on who Panado is collaborating with, it could be a quick “‘this is your angle and responsibility, and this is mine.’ Being a studio owner myself, there’s an instant snap into specific roles that happens, as I know what it’s like to be in every single shooting position. Therefore, not as much planning is required, and we’re able to let things happen in the moment and capture things naturally without worrying if the other person knows what they are doing.”

In Simon’s preproduction powwows, he hands his collaborators a list of shots they are responsible for. “I have

everything planned out.” That said, collaboration’s *raison d’être* is to grow as an artist and to elevate your work. To that end, the day before the event, Simon and his collaborators look at the venues together and then go to dinner to swap ideas.

Synergy is the whole point. “We all foster creative growth with each other, so we listen to what each other’s ideas are, regardless if they are right for that particular project,” says Panado. “It’s the openness to learn and grow that really makes these collaborations special. When someone has a different approach to coverage, I ask them the reasoning behind it. This leads to new knowledge and learning that leads to further innovation.” In doing so, Panado says, “I have learned quite a great deal in terms of marketing, promotion, shooting styles, workflow, and overall operation of business.”

Panado credits collaborating for putting his freshman studio on the fast track. “I know of studios who have been in the industry for 10 years who

still haven’t reached some of the milestones I’ve been fortunate enough to hit in terms of market appeal and creative approach. I fully attribute that to my sincere interest in reaching out and networking with fellow event filmmakers rather than doing it the hard way and figuring things out through trial and error over the course of a number of years. When collaborating with artists who have a true passion for sharing, I feel one can find indispensable knowledge that is not readily available.”

“It’s the future,” predicts Simon. “[Collaboration is] really going to push the industry because you’re going to have a bigger base of talent to create a single product. It really elevates what you can do.”

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