



How to Turn Old Footage into Long-term Dividends

Stock houses seek the beautiful and the mundane.

BY KAREN KRAMER

YOU'VE MADE A TERRIFIC DOCUMENTARY, MAYBE several, and you want to get the most out of all that hard-earned footage. Many filmmakers have found they are able to reap financial rewards again and again by consigning their work to a stock footage library.

Independent filmmaker Ralph Ackerman, for example, sold some 1969 footage of Woodstock to the Toronto-based stock company Fabulous Footage. "I made a couple of thousand dollars a month ago for a couple of seconds of footage," he says. Ironically, "It was for an anti-drug PSA."

When independents hear about the large sums possible from stock footage sales, they tend to jump without looking. But as with any distribution outlet, it's important to do your research, then proceed with caution.

THERE ARE MANY TYPES OF STOCK FOOTAGE houses. Some deal with specialized footage (sports, nature, waves, etc.), while others offer a broad spectrum of material. Archive Films, for instance, which is one of the largest libraries, with more than 14,000 hours of footage, specializes in historical material (pre-1970). Generally they don't look for "beauty shots," but are more concerned with content.

The New York-based Imageways, on the other hand, wants the beauty shots. "Let's say a filmmaker is in Hawaii shooting *Hawaii 5-0* or whatever," says Imageways owner Ken Powell. "I don't want to see the episode of *Hawaii 5-0*; I want to see the shot of the palm tree right next to where you are, or what establishes Hawaii. A beauty shot. Sometimes what seems to be mundane is what makes stock footage."

When approaching a stock house, a filmmaker first makes contact with the acquisitions person on staff. The company usually asks for a videocassette of the finished film; if they're interested, they may ask to see some outtakes as well. The reason for this, according to Rick

Ralph Ackerman was able to turn his old Woodstock footage into new cash by licensing it through a stock house.
Courtesy filmmaker



Gell, owner of the three co-owned New York-based stock companies Second Line Search, Hot Shots/Cool Cuts, and Sports, Action, Adventure, is they assume your best material is in the cut.

Arwyn Gosford, senior art director and representative at Fabulous Footage, says, "We look at a film and try to identify the best sequences we can sell, and then try to find a longer cut." Lee Shoulders, acquisitions manager of the New York-based Archive Films, also notes, "We don't need to see everything that somebody has. We just need to see enough to know

that we're interested, and then we will catalog and transfer whatever someone wants to give us."

"I have standard questions when filmmakers come to me," says Gell. "The [status of] rights is number one." Gell makes sure the filmmaker has rights to all the outtakes, as well as to what's in the finished piece. Second, he asks, "In what format does the material exist? Ninety percent of what we do is in tape... [and] the client is looking for a tape master. I also want to know if a filmmaker can provide a good highlight reel, a

good list of what is in the collection, what type of deal they want, and the talent issues involved."

Gell also recommends that filmmakers have information on the footage and outtakes well organized, both the material that is in the hands of the stock house and that which isn't. "There's the material that we want to have mastered, on hand, and ready to go at a moment's notice. But the important thing is if there's a need to go further, you have the information in your database or in your files, so that you can access it in a timely fashion," he says. This helps negotiations proceed more quickly.

Very rarely will a company buy the footage outright; rather, they keep it on a consignment basis, paying only when there is a sale. Most companies don't demand exclusive rights and will draw up contracts for a limited period of time. After the contract is up, the filmmaker can renew or get the material back. The filmmaker is responsible for supplying good screening copies and a viable way to obtain the master quickly, should some footage be sold. Most stock houses want the footage to originate on film, though they sell it in tape format. The client buys footage on a per-second basis, and the fee varies dramatically according to the showcase. When a sale occurs, the standard split is 50/50.

"Footage licensing can range anywhere from \$2,000 to \$2,500 per shot for a high-quality image that's used in a national television commercial," says Gell. "For a multimedia production, they can be paying as low as \$900 a minute. I think that's a range a filmmaker can anticipate."

If a filmmaker is concerned that selling footage from the film itself might undercut its distribution potential, some stock houses, such as Archive Films, will put a clause in the contract specifying that no more than five minutes can be used without permission of the filmmaker.

Because Imageway's Powell and his partner are also filmmakers, they understand how nervous some independents might be about turning over their footage. "I try to make it real clear that they can come see my set-up," Powell says. "I only take time-coded cassettes. With some filmmakers I set up a deal where they can keep the material at a lab of their choice." Powell also cautions filmmakers about the unpredictability of sales—and the benefit of patience. "I try to

tell filmmakers that stock footage is like peanut butter. It can sit up on a shelf for a long time, and a little goes a long way. You never know when you're going to make money. That's why I encourage filmmakers to give me what they've got."

BUT BEFORE HANDING OVER THE GOODS TO ANYONE, a filmmaker should check with peers about a company's reputation. "Filmmakers get ripped off left, right, and center, and there are a lot of lawsuits that go on," says one filmmaker who spoke from experience and prefers to remain anonymous. "A lot of the major houses are not run by the most ethical people. A lot of people do not end up getting paid. I don't think it happens every day, but it happens as often as it can. That means never, never release your original, your masters, to a stock house. And anything you do release, you need to have time-code burned in."

Archivist and consultant Rick Prelinger offers additional advice. "Investigate the business and see who's got material in your subject and who doesn't. You need to sign with a place that won't be competitive—in other words, they won't have other collections that are likely to compete with your material for sales."

"The second thing that you absolutely need to do is to get references from other people they represent. Ask them if they feel the stock footage company is on [top of] promotion, and ask them about marketing. Ask them if they are quick to get material on tape so it can be easily sent out to clients. Do they pay their bills regularly? Are they offering a percentage equal to what others are paying?"

Although stock libraries can be a viable way to sell footage, Prelinger sees no reason why independent filmmakers couldn't get together through a coop or consortium and market their own footage. "I think we should very much look forward to that type of development," he says. "There's no reason why commercial alternatives should be the only alternative. There are literally thousands of people who have images that are of some interest, and they should have a place to go with these images that is not necessarily commercial."

But until that day comes, Prelinger offers one last bit of sage advice to filmmakers dealing with the commercial stock houses: "Everything is open to negotiation; it all depends on how valuable your material is."

Karen Kramer is an independent filmmaker who has produced several documentaries.