

# SHOOTING THE CHIEF



**BY GEORGE AVGERAKIS**

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IN THE REALM OF BUSINESS VIDEO, CLEARLY THIS IS THE JOB ALMOST NOBODY WANTS. EVEN SEASONED IN-HOUSE DIRECTORS, THOSE WHO TAKE PRIDE IN NEVER HIRING CONTRACT PRODUCERS, RECOMMEND THE HIGHEST-PRICED, BIG-CITY PRODUCTION COMPANY WHEN IT COMES TO...

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# PRODUCTION

----- FEATURE -----

**"It's a no-win situation," confides one in-house producer, who asks we not use his name, "Even if the shoot is technically flawless and nothing goes wrong, the CEO never likes the way he looks on television because he's comparing himself with a network anchorperson. It's better to contract the job out to a big name.**

**That way, if anything does go wrong, you can always say, 'Hey. So-and-so is the recognized expert in the field, don't look at me.'**



Steve Forbes, CEO of Forbes Inc. (right), with Avgerakis as he gets ready to go on camera for a nationwide satellite press tour.

Freelance producers don't respond any better than the in-house mavens. Most will take the assignment if it's a first shot at working for a new client. The risk, losing the client, is inconsequential. But the story changes when an existing client offers a shot at shooting the boss.

## **Risk and Gain**

What is it about CEO shoots that triggers the fight or flight response in otherwise fearless videographers? Risk.

The gains, contrary to some opinions, are significant. By assisting a chief executive in successfully communicating, you have won a powerful ally. The rewards, while often not often immediate, may be significant to yourself and to your profession.

Motion picture communications for business has a long way to go yet to establish true recognition as a business category and as a corporate task. Too often, "business videographers" (Bizviders) are relegated to a blue collar image, associated more with prosumer, home applications than broadcast news. As a result, the in-house video producer is rarely considered for upper management and the bizvid independent can never use his reel to cop a network or Hollywood assignment.

The perceived role of the bizvid practitioner must change to achieve the full benefits of the hard work and dedication one puts into the craft. Taking on difficult assignments is part of the necessary dues each must pay to reap significant gains. So make no mistake. Being taken seriously by the President of MCI or the CEO of Time Warner can do a lot for one's career and for one's profession!

## **Avoiding Stress**

The underlying risk with the CEO shoot (or any shoot for that matter) is that, anything can go wrong, especially when the pressure to do everything exactly right gets out of hand. In a nutshell, avoiding stress is the key. Nothing gives the commander more confidence in you than seeing you marshaling a professional, relaxed crew; dedicating it to the singular purpose of making that commander's presentation a thing of simplistic beauty.

CEO presentations can be a breeze. You can be a hero in a land where giants fear to tread. All it takes is following some simple strategies and planning ahead.

## **Where's the Script?**

There are two basic styles of a CEO presentation: The Script and The Interview. Obviously, the interview is more challenging, but both have their

unique pitfalls. Scripting opens up the frightful prospect of, "Who writes the script?" That's a long article in itself, best avoided here, but then comes, "How will the CEO read the script?" Scripted presentations require consideration of the term, "performance presentation."

You must accurately assess your subject's capabilities to perform the script. Keep in mind that "capability" may not define what you get when the chief stands before the camera. It is your job to obtain the best performance. This requires clear, quick assessments of what is wrong and how to fix it. Often a polite, "sotto voce" suggestion like, "Once more. Better eye contact." will give your subject just enough information to tune in the best quality.

Don't belabor your directions. CEO's are used to minimal interaction. Their time is more valuable than all of your crew's put together. Give it a test reading, record once, tune it up, record once more. Often, you're lucky if you get two takes, so don't expect more unless you feel you can't use what you have or, praise heaven, you have a CEO who wants to spend the time to get it perfect. Then spend the time.

If you believe your subject is capable of a better

reading, you have to use your wits, charm and if necessary, your authority to get the best performance. Of course, it helps if you have the opportunity to get to know your subject before the taping. While rehearsals are rarely possible with really busy executives, having a basic understanding is a significant asset. Here, the in-house producer is at an advantage, but even the contractor should make an attempt to build a pre-shoot meeting with the CEO into the scope of the project.

If you do get the chance to rehearse, take it in stages: A first reading one-on-one; then introduce the crew and lights; then a reading with the camera, using all the crew commands, like "roll tape," "speed" and "action."

One last point. Never, ever let anyone talk you into using cue cards. The primary quality in any CEO presentation is perfect eye contact with the camera. Cue cards produce awful eye contact. If the corporation cannot afford a teleprompter (preferably the computer driven kind which facilitates last-minute changes), turn down the assignment or demand that the subject memorize his presentation verbatim. Nothing gets you that teleprompter faster than asking for memorization.



**Good CEO interviews begin with personal interaction. Left: Avgerakis (foreground) sets up for an interview with Empower America Co-Director Jack Kemp, prior to a taping. Right: The author chats with Gerald Taylor, President of MCI, during a recent TV commercial shoot.**

## Every Tom, Dick and Barbara

Interviewing a CEO, for me, is a most exhilarating experience. You can easily rank it on a par with flying a high performance aircraft or filming emergency surgery. Obviously, you don't have to worry about script, but you do have to be extremely well prepared, tactful and attentive.

Many top interviewers, in order to free themselves from technical concerns during the shoot, prefer to work with a separate director and camera operator so that they can concentrate on the interview's content. That's great if you can afford the extra crew.

If you can't, establish some simple hand gestures that look natural during a conversation but that signal your cameraman to execute a zoom-out or zoom-in. Then position a monitor somewhere where you both can see it and direct and interview at the same time. It's not that difficult with a little practice and heck, there are only so many variations of a talking head shot anyway. Most good cameramen know when you need the CU and when you need the hand cutaway.

Interviews tend to brew a bit more anxiety in a CEO than a scripted presentation. It helps to talk over the parameters of the interview ahead of time, but I would avoid faxing a list of questions in advance. Often, the result of too much preparation is a scripted response which never, I mean never gets anywhere near a natural looking interview. Most executives will be satisfied with this logic if you give them a general sense of what the interview will cover and how it will be used.

In warming your subject up to the interview, go over the technical aspects briefly. This is like a doctor saying it won't hurt, but the pure logic of what you explain gains confidence. Too many directors unintentionally put forth a self-important attitude when they assume that an interview subject knows all about being on television. A friendly, service-orientated attitude helps gain respect. You might say, "My philosophy is that I'm here to serve you and make you look great. This isn't my interview, it's yours. So if you want to change anything, rewind the tape and start over, just tell me.

Nothing is locked in stone and we can erase any parts you don't like."

If you don't intend to have your own questions in the final cut, you will need to explain to your subject that all the answers need to be phrased as full sentences. In this case, say something like, "I'm not going to include my questions in the final video tape of this interview. Therefore, I must have your answers in full sentences. For instance, if I ask you is it cold outside?" please don't answer, 'Yes.' or 'No.' Say, 'It's cold enough outside to freeze dry a hockey puck.'"

Hopefully, if your joke is better than mine, you'll get a relaxed chuckle and then add, "But don't worry if you forget. If you do, I'll just say, 'Can you rephrase that, please, in a sentence?'"

You might consider giving your subject a practice warm-up question. Start off by saying, "Why don't we start off with a stupid question for warm up purposes. We'll roll tape, too, so that the cameraman can set his light and sound levels for real. How about this for a first question..."

My favorite first question takes advantage of the fact that everyone likes to talk about themselves and how they got where they are. So I ask, "Okay, why don't you tell me who you are and what you do for a living?" Gerald Levin, President, Chairman and CEO of Time Warner, Inc. responded most curiously to this opening. At first, I thought I had offended him, but he laughed, wiped his brow and replied, "Well, I've just merged two companies into the world's largest entertainment and communications company."

If you find your subject enjoying himself, don't be afraid to experiment. I've had excellent results asking, "One silly question," like, "Do you think being short made you more aggressive in business?" or "Does a bad earnings report bring back nightmares of final exams ?" Inoffensive questions that disarmingly open up the personal side of your CEO, the side many of can share, often breathe new life into an interview. Of course, you have to be very careful and always on the CEO's side when

pushing the envelope into the personal domain. And it helps if you, too, are short!

Whether you're out for a scripted taping or an interview, there are some good work habits you can build into your CEO "routine" that will contribute significantly to your qualities in all aspects of production.

### **Don't Go In Stupid**

CEO's all agree: THE most annoying thing about interviewers is that they don't know anything about their subject. Take the time to learn everything you can find about the company and the person running it. Then, ironically, don't try to show off what you know, just know it.

This knowledge will be required long before you ever meet the CEO. Even your first contact, probably with the receptionist will require you to ask intelligent questions, like "Who do I call to schedule and interview with the CEO?" If you have a working knowledge of who's who in a corporation, you're already talking like you deserve a fighting chance.

Later, when you meet the chief, your knowledge foundation stands up to the subtle probes that wise men use to separate the fools from the fortunate. If the interaction is an interview, your laconic nature might be a powerful tool to draw your subject into a lucid explanation of fundamentals, but true ignorance yields a paternal homily. Ted Kopple uses this technique in confrontational interviews as a setup for a killer question. Charlie Rose uses it to allow an author to briefly outline a novel. You can use good backgrounding to lead the discussion into territory rarely tread by these journalists.

### **Who's In Charge of the Man In Charge?**

Rarely does an important executive set up his own interview or presentation. Inevitably, there is an executive secretary, often augmented by a VP of Corporate Communications or Public Relations, maybe all three! You must identify who is in charge



**Makeup/Hairstylist, Loretta Palma puts the finishing touches on Lowe's Corporation CEO, Robert Strickland.**

of: the CEO's schedule; the content of the presentation or the acceptable subject for an interview; the locality of the interview and the technical logistics of electricity, noise, load-in, etc.

Cultivate your relationships with the chief executive's support staff. It is from these people from whom the rewards of a good interview will flow. Don't expect the CEO to recommend you a year later for a choice production assignment. It will be the secretary, the PR Director, the Communications VP who will pipe up your name. They, more than anyone, know the meaning of risk. If the CEO loved your work, but his support staff had to kill themselves to make the event a success, your chances of an encore will be slim.

### **Communicate the Logistics**

Once you have communicated with the three critical areas identified above, figure out all of the logistics. Will you need a building electrician on the shoot to unlock the door to the circuit breaker closet? Will nearby computer printers make too much noise. Will the script require your rewriting? Assemble a concise list of concerns and respective answers, then write a memo covering all the aspects. Establish an understanding on each issue such as where you will load in equipment, how much time you will have with the CEO, and when you'll need him to show up for makeup. Call everyone after you've sent the memo and make sure everyone has read it and is satisfied.

One point on location. Try to avoid using the CEO's office as a location. Usually, this space is too sacred, too busy, too private and too full of priceless artifacts to risk weathering through a shoot. Most powerful executives will have a space set aside for meetings; a conference room most likely, where you can lay out the cases without putting them in people's way, set up your shot, and get ready without bothering anybody. Ask the support staff what they think is the most appropriate location. Then SCOUT it ahead of the shoot day.

## The Big Day

While it is common to schedule two or more short location shoots on one day, try to schedule your chief executives on a day of their own. This allows you to dress well for your assignment, to concentrate on your subject with minimal distraction and to wind down from the event when it's over.

Traditionally, crews and directors have taken to casual, even haphazard dress on the set. Certainly, if you, or any of your crew are going to be crawling under desks to run wires, you don't want to risk the Armani, but you should seriously consider your image if you are directing one of America's business leaders.

Our industry deals in an intangible product. Our clients usually don't get to see the results of our work for weeks after a shoot. This places a burden of confidence on our skills similar to that of other intangible industries (insurance, financial services for example). You can employ the same techniques that stock brokers use to establish tangible evidence of their quality: Dress, groom, accessorize, fragrance and drive the best you can tastefully afford. This may mean you need to hire an extra PA so you, yourself never have to lift an anvil case, but the image of quality you communicate will pay significant dividends.

## Here Comes the Chief

When your star arrives on set, drop everything and concentrate fully on your guest. Having done your homework, you know if first names are appropriate.

The privilege of first name familiarity, however, should not extend to your crew. As you conduct your CEO into the set, introduce him or her to your key staff (makeup, lighting director, sound, teleprompter in that order) as Mr. or Ms. using only your staff's first names. In this way, you establish that you are the CEO of the video crew, entitled, albeit temporarily, to the level of conversational familiarity with your guest.

Understand that even if the CEO is a practiced media whiz, he will appreciate your attentive introduction to the "instruments of torture." As you guide the CEO to the on-camera position, point out the wires one might trip over (even though you thoughtfully had the PA tape them down). Ask if the lights aren't too, terribly uncomfortable (they are, but he won't say so). Be sure you offer a cold drink and have an assortment on hand, at arm's reach. Ask if he doesn't mind the sound man delicately attaching the lavalier mike to his Balinese silk tie - you know, the little things you once thought were so intrusive when you stepped into a set the first time!

Our industry has its own language. Before you place the CEO under the critical moment of rolling tape, take a private, whispered moment to teach him the important studio terms he will hear. Most essential, of course, are the phrases, "Roll tape." "Speed." and "Action." If the CEO knows that only the word, "Action!" cues the presentation, embarrassment and false starts will be avoided.

## Take 85

"No one is perfect." is not the best way to ask for yet another try at a flubbed line. No one likes to look incompetent, and some CEO's think they are perfect. Even great actors have a point at which their performances hit a qualitative plateau and then fall off to oblivion. Recognize your CEO's peak and don't push beyond that, especially if there are still five more pages of script to plow through.

Often a short break or a sip of cold water will help bring the performance back to par. Sometimes a particularly nasty line or phrase may simply have to be rewritten (hence the need for a fast teleprompter).

Unless a trusted corporate aid objects, the CEO should be encouraged to take liberties with the script. Often the chief never sees the script until the shoot and his changes are rarely challenged, during or after the taping.

If you have any doubt about the script or any aspect of the performance, be sure to have a *bona fide* decision maker on set. This person should be identified early in the process, even in the original contract, as one whose authority supersedes all others. Identifying one person to represent the client's interests allows you the luxury of gaining approval with simple eye contact and an occasional nod.

Before you wrap the shoot, get a verbal okay from someone of authority, if not the CEO himself. A week later, if someone thinks that something is missing from the interview you taped, it helps your case if everyone remembers that you were given a thumbs-up.

Of course, as the Producer, you should be ready to take all blame and responsibility for the shoot. Inevitably, you are the fall guy anyway, so have contingencies in mind that are effective and inexpensive.

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## Wrapping Up

Once you've completed the taping, it is a most courteous gesture to offer to play some scenes back for the boss. Some will want to see the tape, others couldn't care less. Those that do, give you the opportunity of one last quality check with a real decision maker. If the CEO says, "Well done." in front of his minions, you can bet there won't be many arguments about the subsequent stages of the production, but don't always assume the CEO has the last word. If the speech has legal ramifications (and what speech doesn't), even the CEO's approval can be overridden by the Chief Legal Counsel. If you have the opportunity for a screening after the shoot, make sure everyone has a chance to "sign off" on the results before you strike the set.

This may seem silly, here, but at this time, it's a good idea to render the tapes unrecordable (punch out the tab, pop out the "red dot" whatever your video cassette has that keeps you from recording over the tape). Instruct your crew to properly label your cassettes, also, BEFORE they go into the record deck.

One producer lost the only scenes of his son being born because the cassette was not labeled. The next day, he recorded a lousy karate movie over the irreplaceable footage. To this day, I WISH it was a CEO interview I lost! As my wife will remind my readers and anyone else within range; there are worse things than losing a client.