

Fast Syncs Up for Playback Technologies

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Playback Technologies Inc. is a rental and staging company that services the feature film and episodic television film production industry with "on-set" 24-frame video and computer playback. This unique niche market is almost unheard of outside the film production industry.

Playback is basically a custom presentation company that understands the technical and creative demands of filmmakers who need to photograph various display technologies. Our current clients include the TV shows "Sports Night," "JAG," "Chicago Hope," "Pretender" and "X-Files."

Anytime you are watching a movie, TV show or commercial shot

on film where there are working TVs, computer monitors, plasma screens, laptop computers or large-screen projectors, the film camera must be "synced up" to avoid photographing distracting artifacts. For more than 20 years, the primary 24-frame playback technology has been the 3/4-inch videotape.

Starting with the early top-loaders and continuing today with Sony 5000 and 9000 series VTRs, we have modified the servos to record and play back a 655-line, 48 Hz NTSC color signal. Over the years, several video standards converter manufacturers have modified or built units that would output this unusual video format used by film productions.

IMAGE IMPROVEMENT

As robust as 3/4-inch is, it cannot compete against the quality of images our clients are used to seeing during telecine and on-line editing. We needed



The Fast Forward Omega allows Steve Irwin to build custom playlists and control slo-mo features.

to look at ways of not only improving the image quality we were delivering, but we also needed flexibility in how those images are presented and played back on the set while maintaining a cost-effective hardware package.

The first solution was to take a standard 30-frame Betacam SP deck out with a small standards converter. This has worked well, but it is still a linear playback solution. As non-linear technology

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developed and digital disk recorders became smaller and more cost-effective, we went looking for an affordable and rugged DVR. We decided on the Omega Deck built by Fast Forward Video.

The feature set, low cost, availability and the fact that Fast Forward is a local manufacturer was a perfect fit for our application. We currently own eight single-channel Omega Decks and use them instead of larger, bulkier studio VTRs.

Because we're using a single-channel DVR, we can set up the entire deck's record and playback parameters from the front-panel touch screen. We currently use both the composite and component video I/O and are upgrading to SDI in and out for even better image quality.

USER-SELECTABLE

Fast Forward sells the Omega Deck without hard drives, allowing the end user to select the appropriate speed and capacity required for their application. Our decks are configured with 18 GB Seagate Barracudas, which allow for about 60 minutes of Beta SP quality video with two channels of audio.

Besides the front-panel's full deck controls and jog/shuttle wheel, we are using RS-422 controllers to operate the decks and perform gang starts. New PC control software from Fast Forward allows us to take a laptop out with the deck and record, play back and log clips very easily. We can build multiple custom playlists, trim in and out points, loop clips, set multiple cue points and control slo-mo features.



Playback Technologies sets up all the Omega's parameters via the front-panel touch screen.

For "Sports Night," all script-specific video clips are preloaded onto an Omega Deck. Using the PC control software allows us to easily hit very tight and repeatable cues with zero preroll. We also get clean head and tail freeze frames and instant re-sets. The assistant directors love not having to wait for tape to recue while the rest of the cast and crew are ready for another take.

The Fast Forward Omega Decks have worked out very well for us. The after-market support has been good and Fast Forward has always been interested in our feedback about the decks. We are continuing to educate our clients about

the creative flexibility, improved image quality and timesavings that non-linear playback can provide. ■

Steve Irwin founded Playback Technologies Inc. 15 years ago to service the motion picture and television production industry with on-set, 24-frame video and computer playback. Steve can be reached at 818-556-5030 or SteveI@playbacktech.com.

The opinions above are the author's alone. For more information, contact Fast Forward Video (949-852-8404, www.ffv.com), or circle Reader Service 187.