
Case Study: Supporting Independent Filmmaking

Edgewood Studios confounds conventional lore about movie production. Located in the most rural state (Vermont) in a city that is by no means a major metropolis (Rutland), Edgewood Studios serves as an example that you can follow your dreams, make a good living, and give something back to the community along the way. Co-founders David Giancola and Peter Beckwith did just that, turning their love for movies into a sustainable business. From modest beginnings doing the wedding circuit and creating industrial videos, Edgewood Studios now handles million-dollar plus feature films, facility and equipment rentals for production groups working in Vermont, and a variety of independent features, many of which serve as training vehicles for the next generation of filmmakers. They're actively involved with distribution of video features internationally, production of their own feature material, and work-for-hire projects destined for cable television broadcast.

The lessons presented in this chapter, and the underlying advice offered by Dave Giancola, veer off on a somewhat different course from the rest of this book. Dave knows and trusts film and thinks it is far too early to join the stampede to digital video, particularly when the standards continue to change at a blistering pace, rendering today's state-of-the-art cameras and editing tools into tomorrow's doorstops. Some of the 16mm and 35mm cameras in his rental collection date back more than a decade, but they can still produce high-quality films with the rich colors and depth and contrast that characterize film, as opposed to videotape. Those films can serve as masters to support the next generation video formats. When high-definition DVD standards are in place, Edgewood can return

to the original 35mm negatives and digitize the material to fit the new standards. From one high-quality master, any number of future potential digital video formats can be supported simply by converting the film content by means of the telecine process.

Edgewood has been enjoying a resurgence of interest in their earlier work, which is now being re-released on DVD and generating new sales in the distribution channels.

This chapter offers a perspective on the importance of distribution for filmmakers, the techniques for producing films under low-budget conditions, and the increasing importance of DVD as a medium to reach new audiences and grow a business.

From High School Student to Moviemaker

If the thought of several years of film school to become a moviemaker seems daunting, you might approach the problem the way that Dave did. Just jump right in and start your own video business. As Dave explains it, “Edgewood Studios started in 1987. I was literally just out of high school. I really wanted to get into the movie business, but I was not happy about the prospect of four years of college or going to film school and playing by somebody else’s rules. Pretty arrogant. I just wanted to get started. I had some friends who were already going to film school and they were stuck in the theory, barely touching the cameras. I decided: I am going to start my own company and get going. So, I forced my way into some office space, got a bank loan, got some video equipment, and started shooting whatever anybody would pay me for. Which was primarily, at that time, weddings, legal depositions, and even a funeral or two.”

While the business gained momentum, Dave was also working on a variety of creative concepts and developing movie ideas. While drinking in a local bar, he met Peter Beckwith, a Cornell graduate who was managing the bar and also cruising around Vermont enjoying the role of ski bum. The two began talking and discovered that they had a similar outlook on business.

“I was very passionate about making film,” Dave said, recalling the initial conversation, “and he was very passionate about business. There was a really good mix between us.” Shortly afterwards, the sole proprietorship became a partnership.

“We actually were doing really well with Edgewood as a video production company,” Dave recalls. “We stepped out of weddings after a couple of years. It was great training for documentary work, but we really had had enough of it. I knew that I had booked my last wedding when I got in trouble because I didn’t videotape the hors d’oeuvres at a wedding. The mother of the bride was furious at me because I didn’t videotape them and suddenly they were gone. That’s when I said, ‘OK, I’m done with weddings now.’”

The Commercial Route to Film Making

From this early experience with video production, Edgewood Studios began producing television commercials. “We started doing regional cable commercials and those turned into some New England based commercials followed by a few national commercials. Although we were doing pretty good business with the commercial work, our passions led us to dramatic work. We took some of our money and made a short film called *Ten Minutes*, which was based on Will Eisner’s comic book story. It did really well, won some awards, and got into some festivals. It was a great start.”

Turning to Film

At this point, Edgewood Studios turned to 16mm film for their production work, a reversal of the typical progression from film to video. “Like a lot of people at the start of my generation, the usual progression was that you started on film and then went into video. We started in video and discovered film along the way and really fell in love with the image.”

Dave made a conscious decision at that point to get started making movies or to get out of the business completely. The first movie production was launched not much later. “We put together a crew and \$40,000 to make a film called *Time Chasers*. It was shot, literally, on weekends over a six-month period on 16mm film. Everybody who worked on the project was deferred. The budget, which started out at \$40,000, ended up being \$150,000 when we were finished two or three years later. The film was commercial enough that we found a distributor and it really got us started.”

With this first successful entry into the low-budget film business, Edgewood Studios started work on a second film, *Diamond Run*, which garnered even more success. The next film out of the chute was *Pressure Point*, which had about three times the budget of the prior film. “Before we knew it,” Dave said, “we were making films with million-dollar budgets.

The quality of our projects got better each time. Somewhere along the line, we met with partners who wanted us to do a multi-picture deal and we started building a studio. The next thing I know, I'm sitting inside a 50,000 square-foot building thinking, 'OK, I own a studio now.' That is how we got to where we are today."

Business Philosophy and Direction

The evolution of Edgewood Studios was guided by a shared business philosophy that Dave and Peter developed. To be closer to his family and to benefit the company, Peter relocated to California, settling in the heart of Los Angeles in Burbank. "Peter looks out for our financial and creative interests out there," Dave said, "including those interests that are tied to distribution."

Nonetheless, Dave feels grateful that the Edgewood studio is located in Rutland, Vermont for the overall quality of life that the region offers. The satellite office that Peter operates in North Hollywood—because of its proximity to so many key industry contacts—makes it possible to work actively within the film business. "You really need to have a least a toe in that pond," Dave said. "Edgewood does a number of things. We co-finance low-budget features with other partners, building a library of our own films. We get this library of films distributed worldwide. We also do work-for-hire projects, such as the Porchlight Entertainment movies we have been doing for Pax Television. Because of our expertise in putting a lot of production value on the screen, we get hired to make certain kinds of movies. We have become the experts of the mini-disaster movie, as you may have seen from our Web site."

Edgewood Studios also represents other producers, working with local, national, and international filmmakers to handle their work in the marketplace. "The waters of distribution are filled with sharks," Dave warns, "who are perfectly willing to take your film and not give you any money. We are a credible source. If we feel that a film has a life, we will take it for a small percentage and help the filmmaker out. Sometimes we come in as film fixers, where a filmmaker comes to us with a film that is not complete. Maybe the filmmaker got the film shot, but then couldn't afford to get it edited or mixed. So, often we come in after principal photography has been finished and partner with the filmmaker. Because we own the facility, we can also partner with the filmmaker from pre-production on. Sometimes we do it for fees. Sometimes we do it for deferred fees. Sometimes we do it partially for fees and a piece of the film. Sometimes we do it for a percentage of the film. There is no single way that we work, but we

look to partner with filmmakers who are talented and have a good work ethic and understand the marketplace a little bit. Those are the filmmakers who are generally a good fit for us.”

This essential but non-glamorous work extends Edgewood Studios’ business model into areas that require a healthy understanding of the available distribution channels, the changing trends in market conditions, the tastes and preferences of worldwide audiences, and the going rates for different types of feature films. As Dave explains it, “Everybody gets excited when you have the money to make a film, but nobody wants to talk to you when you are out of money and trying to take the film around and find a distributor.”

Nurturing the Next Generation of Filmmakers

Part of the Edgewood Studios mission involves nurturing the new generation of upcoming filmmakers, setting up channels so that they can get their work done, providing equipment and support, actively working to manage the distribution of the final work.

This approach offers a host of side benefits. “Not only is that good for the filmmaker, it is good for us because those are the filmmakers that get involved in the productions that we own and co-finance with our partners. This is a great way to find talented filmmakers, to look at what they’ve done in the past, and to build a relationship.”

The early experience dealing with international distributors has made a big difference in Edgewood’s approach to marketing. “Our films really started with success internationally, before we found success domestically. The international marketplace for television and videocassette was much stronger when we started in the mid-90’s. That was the place for independent film to find an audience. But, recently, with the introduction of DVD, the situation has gotten better. The cost per piece is down. Distributors are more willing to take risks.”

The equipment rental side of the business, Dave has found, leads to many long-term relationships. “We offer low-cost rentals to filmmakers all over the east coast,” Dave said. Sometimes we partially defer the costs and this builds a relationship. The approach works out really well. We are really interested in building relationships, as opposed to having a one-film hit. The filmmakers who last and make work that resonates—financially successful films—are the people who have been around. Filmmaking is a craft that you have to learn. Like any other profession, the people who

have the experience and the dedication, the people who stay around longer, are the ones who are successful and whose work you want to see.“

Approaching DV Cautiously

Dave approaches the exuberance over the popularity of DV with a cautious attitude grounded in the hard realities of the marketplace. He also admits to a healthy skepticism about the life span of the format, given the notoriously unpredictable nature of the electronics industry.

Dave said, “I have to preface my skepticism with this: I think that DV is a spectacular medium for people to learn, to experiment with, and to take chances. And, I think there are great opportunities within this medium. Having said that and having been in the video business where the format keeps changing every couple of years, so you’ve got to keep upgrading, it is very clear to me that the next five generations of technologies are sitting at the top floor of some offices in Japan somewhere. And they plan to release them when they are good and ready.”

In Dave’s estimation, the manufacturers of DV equipment have found a new, wide open marketplace within the independent filmmaker community. “I can’t tell you how many times someone has come in and said to me, we’re going to shoot on DV—I just bought a camera for three grand. What they don’t know is that I go to the markets, I go to Milan, I go to Cannes. DV is not delivering consistently or well internationally. You might be able to do OK with your DV film on a domestic videocassette or on DVD, which is more forgiving. But, for domestic television, for international television, for international videocassette, where you have got the format changes for PAL, there are increased expectations. They want the Hollywood look.”

Pausing reflectively, Dave continues, “There are just not the opportunities that people think there are. I know a lot of distributors who will reject a film the minute they discover it is DV. I was at a distribution company two weeks ago in L.A., looking for good material, and they said, ‘Here is a pile of DV tapes in the corner.’ The corner of the room was full of DV tapes, screeners of films that were shot on DV. I am concerned that there is a lot of hype going around right now. That hype directly drives large electronics manufacturers who are making a lot of money.“

Edgewood Studios offers a PAL BetaCam camera for rental, but that’s about the only concession they currently make to the realm of video. It’s not so much being against the format as being against the hype. “I hap-

pen to think that DV is a great opportunity and I think that for the right project, there is a lot that can be done,” Dave said. “But I think you need to look at your market before you buy all the hype about DV. Be very critical of it. Be able to separate the fluff from the facts. A lot of people that I talk to who are completely pro-DV can’t really explain the differences between DV and HD. This is a concern, because they are totally different things. I can still buy a BetaCam SP camera that has been around for 10 years and can still give you a better picture for the same or less money. So, the whole DV technological breakthrough is really a financial breakthrough, in terms of the electronics companies trying to open up a new marketplace.”

Fighting the Stacked Deck

Promising developments, such as the adoption of digital cinema systems in independent theaters, still don’t eliminate the barriers faced by the independent filmmaker. As Dave said, “The major studios have theater chains, including Landmark Theaters, locked up forever. That is not going to change. There is still going to be competition for screentime because that theatrical screen time, whether profitable or not, at the very least drives domestic videocassette distribution. I’ve had filmmaker friends who released 35mm prints to the theaters, films that were outperforming every other screen in a five-plex. And, the film got bumped because the studio had another release that they wanted in the theater. Theater owners rely on the major studios for a consistent flow of product. There is really no leverage for the independent filmmaker. In this instance, I don’t think technology is going to change everything. There is still going to be competition for those screens and those bodies in the seats,. The technology doesn’t change the real estate or the popcorn or the overhead or the labor.”

With all this said, Dave still thinks there is a place for DV in the film world. “I think the opportunity is in the world of festivals, if you are willing to be patient and take your time with DV. If you are at the point as a filmmaker where you only have five grand in your pocket and you want to make a film and you want the flexibility of DV, I think it is fine. Ask yourself, however, what is the marketplace for this film? If it is a little horror movie and your budget is small enough, you might be able to make it. The opportunities exist in DVD now because you’ve got video distribution companies that are more open to content shot on DV. That is encouraging, but it is only one small venue for your film.”

“I know some independent filmmakers,” Dave said, “who are doing OK through the domestic pipeline with videos and DVDs. If you are doing something that is really about the actors and the script and the story, you can run the festival circuit and see if you can make it happen. Keep in mind that the odds are maybe not as good as taking your money to Vegas. But, in terms of thinking that your DV film is going to have the same kind of attention paid to it as something shot on 16mm or 35mm, right now it is just not happening.”

Shooting Film and Transferring to DVD

Dave feels that the way to deal with the rapidly evolving video standards and changing equipment is to use film as the production and archival medium. That archived film negative then serves as the source for any number of video formats through a relatively simple (though not inexpensive) conversion process.

“My feeling,” Dave said, “is that you have to look at technology for where it helps you and recognize where it does not. It is very hard if you are just starting out to get a really good sense of what is going on in the industry. Where are the real technology benefits to the independent filmmaker? The fact of the matter is, we are in the business of making movies. The smaller stuff we do—you probably saw *Arachnia* or *Moving Targets*—are really low budget. If there was a way I could shoot on video and get away with it, I would. But, if I am going to spend the amount of money that you would spend buying a house, as a business owner, I am going to want an asset that is going to be around for a long period of time and is going to have the widest possible potential to be distributed.”

If I shoot on film right now,” Dave said, “I know that film is very stable archivally. I also know that whatever format comes up, I am going to be able to telecine to it. As the major electronics manufacturers start to put out HD and then SuperHD and then double SuperHD, you have a good high-resolution film negative that you return to. That negative holds up archivally. When your film budget tops \$100,000 or \$150,000, with the amount of money you are spending on labor and everything else, even though your laboratory and film costs are a big expense, the negative secures your investment. This is my perspective based on the way that our company makes money.”

Figure 12 - 1 Car-mounted camera



Weathering Format Changes

Given equipment costs and the expense of upgrades, Dave expresses a very clear concern over the rapid progression of formats and the expectations of the marketplace. “Even on our very small films,” Dave said, “our buyers are demanding 5.1 mixes. I don’t have enough money to really do a good mix on the film as it is. But, now they want a 5.1 mix without paying me any more. I keep watching technology like a hawk, reading everything and waiting for that sweet spot to do the upgrades. Sometimes it is tough to find that sweet spot.”

“For some of our older films,” Dave said, “we have found that they enjoy another life on DVD. It is amazing that a format can do that, but it does. DVD is cheaper to produce—therefore, you can take more risks on it. There are titles that we released on VHS a long time ago, that might not have gotten re-released any time soon. But, because there is a new format that is collector savvy, the film may have a kind of cult attention. People want to take a chance on it. It is fresher. For our bottom line, that makes a difference, particularly if you can re-release a title that has already been paid for.”

Producing DVD Extras

As part of the rising expectations of distribution companies and audiences, adding DVD extras to titles is rapidly becoming a de facto requirement. “I swear,” Dave said, “within the span of about two years, DVD Extras went from becoming ‘Well, if you’ve got em...throw em on’ to ‘Oh, you have to shoot a behind the scenes video. Can you get the cast back for

this or that?' Nobody is paying any more for the movies. But, for whatever reason, DVD Extras has become standard. There is nothing better for a filmmaker than being able to talk about yourself for an hour and a half. Or, doing your own documentary promoting your film career. People watch these things and collect them. I think it is good for film collectors. I think it is good for filmmakers."

Edgewood Studios generally negotiates with a video distributor to provide the DVD rights and then submits the materials for the DVD Extras portion of the title. "We're involved in delivering a Digital BetaCam of the film, for example, and delivering a DAT tape of the audio commentary and a documentary."

To gain the additional material to round out a title and provide a deeper look at the production side, Dave sometimes goes through the outtakes to find promising segments, and, working from the early edit decision lists, decides which additional segments to telecine. This makes it possible to include alternate scenes and material that wasn't in the original movie.

When lab services are needed beyond the scope of what can be done inhouse, Dave generally relies on the efficiency and expertise of the larger labs. "Usually, when we are using lab services, we go to N.Y. or L.A. Generally, we send work to L.A. because L.A. labs, in general, have been cheaper for us, even including the cost of FedEx. Because we're located in Vermont, I've got to FedEx everything. I'm certainly not going to courier stuff to the lab. It is five hours away to anywhere. With FedEx, I can literally go for the best lab prices and quality anywhere."

Doing the Commentary

"When we first started, we did commentaries and documentaries all the time, just out of hubris. We thought that the stuff we were doing was so great. Then, as we went along making films, we became more jaded and we stopped doing those video behind-the-scenes things. I know on *Arachnia*, which is out now on DVD, I didn't have as much fun shooting the movie as I did sitting with the cast doing the commentary. It was just a riot—it was so much fun. We got about five cast members back to do it. Here's a tip for anybody doing DVD commentary. I had never done it before; this was the first commentary that we had done from scratch where I had a bunch of people in the room. They had not seen the film yet. I screened the film and everyone talked all through it. Then, we went back to record the commentary and everybody clammed up. If you listen

to the DVD, I'm trying to stimulate the discussion and prodding them to talk. Everything changes once the microphone is turned on."

The commentary was synchronized to a time-coded DAT recording that could then be integrated into the DVD content during the authoring process. Dave was determined to keep the commentary light and fun. "I had listened to a bunch of commentaries and I found a lot of them to be pretty dry and serious. And, I had always wanted to make the style of the movie set the style of the commentary. I wanted to make it fun. The movie was fun—it is kind of tongue-in-cheek. On a movie of that budget, a lot of the people are there because they love film—they are not there just for a payday, which is refreshing. We went in and got a timecode DAT and we put it in our mix room so that we had the film on a projector screen. Acoustically, the room is really great. We miked up the room and sat everybody in the mix room and just ran the movie. We mixed the movie soundtrack down to a comfortable level where we thought we could make it all work. The plan was just to run the movie and go with the audio without editing. On our budget, you can't. We just ran the movie and warned everybody that whatever they say is spontaneous. I think the commentary is hilarious, but then I was in it, so I don't know. It was a lot of fun and it was a great way to do it and people got a lot of insight into what was going on in the film."

Becoming a Filmmaker By Making Films

"I am a big believer," Dave said, "that you only become a better filmmaker by making films. Which means that you use the tools that you have on hand and work with the budget you have and then you just go make your film. I don't want anyone to think that I'm saying that if you can't make it on 16mm, it is not really a film. I don't think that is fair at all. That is just as inaccurate as saying that DV is equal to film. I think that the only way that I have ever advanced in my career is to keep working. You win some, you lose some. You make some good stuff. You make some bad stuff. But everything gets better with the perspective and the skills that you learn by going forward. DV is not a panacea for good production values or good work ethic or talent. And hard work. That is what I think the lesson should be for people. There is more to making a movie than just the technology involved and the camera. I think that technology is there for us to use. It doesn't necessarily create a wealth of opportunities, even though the advertisers may promote it that way."

Figure 12 - 2 A bouyant platform for filming



Contending with the Realities of Distribution

Dave believes that a good story can be told on any medium, but the realities of distribution are a critical concern. “It is very hard to get your work seen. It is very hard to have your work break out. Even if your work is good, there are a lot of political reasons in terms of what does or doesn’t get into the Sundance Film Festival, for example, that don’t have anything to do with the quality of your film. It is important to recognize that and understand it for what it is. So, you can succeed on your own terms. You can avoid debilitating disappointment (which I see a lot of). I don’t think that is productive at all. There are filmmakers that work with us who live for one film. They get such disappointment and financial fallout from the process that they sometimes don’t continue. There are things that can be learned from what we are doing at Edgewood that will hopefully open up people’s eyes as to what is and what isn’t going to work for them.”

Rubbing Elbows with the Stars

Edgewood Studios hasn’t yet worked on any 50-million dollar Hollywood blockbusters, but they’ve worked closely with a number of luminaries from television and the cinema world. “My new saying is,” Dave said, laughing, “if you are working with Edgewood Studios, you are either on

your way up or your way down. We have worked with Larry Linville (who has since passed away) on one of our films. He was Frank Burns of *Mash* fame. We have worked with the new hot little thing, Kate Bosworth, who was just in *Blue Crush* and she is now in *The John Holmes Story*. We are representing a film produced by the guys from Project Green Light, Kyle Rankin and Ephram Potelle, who we met because they're from Maine. There have been a lot of those stories where people are passing through our world."

"What is interesting about it," Dave continued, "you learn a lot about who these people really are based on how they treat other people. And, at the end of the day, that is really more important than their success. I know a lot of super-famous people who are really unhappy with themselves and the world around them. What is the point in doing that?"

Boosting Regional Filmmaking

Edgewood Studios works closely with the Vermont Film Commission to draw new filmmaking projects to the state, both from independent filmmakers and the major studios. "I think that the environment for regional filmmaking has gotten better in most states and in Vermont it has gotten a lot better," Dave said. "They have passed some legislation that, while not ground breaking, is certainly helping things. I think that among filmmakers there was a movement that started about 15 or 20 years ago where filmmakers left Hollywood and started to explore places like Texas and Florida. Regional filmmaking started to break out on its own. I think you are seeing part of that here."

"For a lot of the huge movies that came into the state," Dave said, "for better or for worse, the draw was the bucolic beauty of Vermont. In the movie *Cider House Rules*, everyone just loved the locations, the beauty of Vermont—they could make it work. They could also find a crew here, which was wonderful. The same thing with *What Lies Beneath*, the Jim Carey movie. They came here because I think they wanted to hang out in Vermont for the summer and just have a good time. And they did."

Business generated from movie production companies coming to Vermont to shoot helps keep the revenues flowing at Edgewood Studios as well. "When larger shows come in," Dave said, "we have a company called New England Lighting and Grip. We rent out lighting and grip for everything from the Budweiser guys doing a Clydesdale commercial to the big movies, where we get the overflow, to the little independent films. We help them all out. It is amazing to me the number of movie stars that

have second homes in Vermont. We do a lot of looping for actors. They come in here and they can go to their place on the lake or in the mountains and then do looping on their movies—we make the arrangements with their studios to handle the details. An amazing amount of work gets done from our humble location in Rutland, Vermont. The longer we are around, the more people know about us. The work just keeps coming to us. I am still amazed myself that we are doing as well as we are.”

More information on Edgewood Studios can be found at:
www.edgewoodstudios.com.