

Courtesy of **Digital Content Producer**

## Politics in High Def

Nov 11, 2008 12:00 PM, By Craig Erpelding



"Every town has its industry, and you have television people to support that," says Jef Huey, senior editor at Henninger Media Services, "and obviously the industry of Washington is politics." Therefore, politics in one form or another drives the video industry in Washington, D.C.—advertisements being one of the largest areas. The District of Columbia has the largest concentration of firms that do political consultancy, and they mostly make political commercials to support their candidates. While some have inhouse facilities, many of the larger consultancy groups use out-of-house facilities such as Henninger Media in order to keep up with the volume of ads they run.

While the main industry of Washington is politics, there are other things as well: The Discovery Channel and National Geographic both have locations in the city, and Henninger actually has a second facility that's located across the street from National Geographic. So the big challenge for the folks at Henninger during the political ad crunch time is to continue to serve these other clients as they have deadlines for their projects as well.

Henninger has a regular staff of 85 people who work both locations, and with the 2008 political season being so hot, this year the company added seven freelancers. The locations, set up for both HD and SD workflows, have nine Avid DS and Symphony dual-boot systems, seven regular Symphonies and eight audio suites in order to handle the bulk of the workload for both major political parties.

"Our Arlington, Va., facility is almost the length of a full city block—and the Democrats are on one end of the building and the Republicans are on the other end," Huey says. "The principals of the Republican and Democrat firms are great friends; they share Nats tickets. So there's competition and everything, yet a lot of camaraderie between the two. It's a very interesting game."

One of the reasons Henninger serves the larger political consultant groups—sometimes running 20-30 races—is that a few years ago, the company added a shared storage system enabling its staff to push projects from edit room to edit room. The staff found the 90TB Facilis Technology Terrablock system, which they divided up into various arrangements for the different editing situations to be a very open system. But being the only facility doing the variety and volume of both HD and SD projects this year, Henninger had to write its own manual on workflow and content security.

As one can imagine, security is a big issue when you have major Democratic and Republican firms in the facility at the same time. So in order to accommodate, Huey says, the company basically carved the storage allocation into two hubs, with four Avid DS shared storage systems each—separate so there would be no security problems.

"We've always prided ourselves on having high security and serving either side of the aisle as effectively as possible," Huey says. "And the clients responded very well to that. The funniest thing is that when you're doing an ad on Monday and on Tuesday, you're working for the other side and you're using the spot you did the day before as the 'bad ad.' And, everybody knows it in the room, but there's never any discussion about it. It's unspoken."

Creatively speaking, Huey says the spots move along the arc of the campaign, starting generally with biographies of the candidate then becoming more "comparative"—when the ads start becoming more like a tennis match and everything speeds up. "One candidate says something about your candidate, then you have to respond. And then they may respond and it goes back and forth faster and faster, causing tighter turnarounds," Huey says.

While Henninger did a lot for the Obama team this year, including the 30-minute Obama TV show, the company did not do any McCain projects. Nonetheless, it still churned out a huge number of TV and radio ads for both parties. Estimates show the largest number of spots that went out in one day was 16. Huey says he can't even guess the amount of political spots the company does in a year, which is a testament to the facility's efficiency—partially due to the Avid workflow the team put in place.

"At the election watch party, we were sitting here watching the 10 to 20 races we're intimately involved in," Huey says. "As an example, I've done at least 15 spots for one senatorial race and that's just one campaign. ... You actually end up knowing those people better than those running for president."

At this point in time, most political ads are run in standard definition. However, most parties are shooting HD as each campaign needs to have a library of footage to call upon—for preparedness for the future and the eventuality of when, not if, delivery of HD spots occurs. Additionally, they need to be able to illustrate certain points at any time during the campaign, and being able to pull HD footage from their own library is the most cost-effective way.

Huey says that one of the Democratic firms he works with acquires footage via the Panasonic AJ-HDC27 Varicam—on tape, not P2, because of the huge volume of footage and because they are shooting in HD for library purposes. The large Republican firm that works out of Henninger shoots a combination of Varicam and Sony HDCAM. There was one greenscreen shoot, Huey says, where the team decided that it would be worth shooting with the new Varicam AJ-HPX2700, 1080 10-bit acquisition because they wanted to evaluate it for future, potential special needs. But as soon as they walked back into their facility, they transferred the footage to Sony HDCAM SR tape for archive.

“The classic [reason for HD] is that many of the shoots are done on horrible deadlines, and sometimes you have candidates who are not actors,” Huey says. “Sometimes just on a simple little candidate speaking directly to camera shoot, if you can’t get in one take, it’s optimal if you shoot in HD you can cut two takes together and zoom in on one take and make an esthetically pleasing cut and it doesn’t look like you’re blowing it up in the DVE. Simple things like that have made the producers like shooting in HD. It offers a little bit more creativity and flexibility in the edit sessions.”

Additional flexibility of note was the fact that during editing of SD spots, the team could reframe the HD shots to fit their needs. However, one commercial in particular the company did do entirely in HD for The Obama Media Team. It was called “Hands” and was aired on NBC during the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics. This spot may, in fact, be the first and only political spot that’s ever been produced, delivered, and aired in HD.

Page 2

The Obama Media Team decided to create something special to air during the Olympics. It was decided that since this was a national ad buy during an international event, the spot “Hands” should be produced in HD. And since they had been filming the senator in HD for months, this seemed like the perfect opportunity.



“When the ‘Hands’ spot happened for NBC, the producers were all interested on one level and groaning on another,” Huey says. “There was a lot of excitement because the producers had not delivered a 24p HD political spot before. And integrating a variety of stock footage into that format can be challenge. But they decided that’s what they wanted to do. It was a fun trip.”

But seemingly producing any political commercial can be a bumpy ride; Huey notes that sometimes the turnaround happens literally in the edit room. At 10 a.m., the script is being written as the rest of the team looks at material for vague ideas for visuals. The campaign may be continually changing the script as they’re going through edit, color-correct, and mix to get it out the door by 8 p.m. or 9 p.m. that night. Even in such time crunches, they turn to their post tools to keep visual elements strong.

“We’ve noticed that because of the strong effects tools in the Avid DS system,” Huey says, “the producers are getting more ambitious with their ideas. We constantly look at regular ads and say, ‘Hey, can we rip that idea off and make a political ad about of it?’ We’re always trying to catch viewers’ attention and make them not just tune out and say, ‘Oh, it’s just a political ad.’ So we’re always trying for unique, interesting looks. But as it gets to final weeks where things are crazy, you’re working around the clock and you tend to get more formulaic.”

Beyond just television spots and the 30-minute Obama show, Henninger Media Services also helped put together the Michelle Obama documentary that was shown at the Democratic National Convention called “South Side Girl.” This 6.5-minute piece was also edited and delivered in HD and it was eventually projected onto large screens inside Denver’s Pepsi Center.

Having the capability to deliver in HD is one thing. But getting approvals from sources scattered across the country is another. So just as important as producing everything big was being able to portray their work just as effectively small.

“We use the Web for approvals and basically send things to the campaign so they can get a sense of what the spot is like,” Huey says. “It’s interesting that there are lots of people out there like John McCain that don’t use a computer, so you’re trying to get the most simple bulletproof compression that anyone can open—maybe even on a cell phone—so they can see what they need to see.”

“Almost every spot has a variety of different compressions made as we capture an uncompressed file and then just run it through various scripts to make the three or four different versions,” Huey says. “Most of the groups want both Windows Media or Real Player as well as QuickTime so they can have choices. Because they want to be able to open them up and look at the version they can see at that time, wherever they are in the field, and make comments. It’s just not feasible to make DVDs and have them couriered back and forth from wherever they happen to be in the country.”

Doing all of the compressions can sometimes be the biggest problem, because Henninger has two or three compression rooms cranking with other projects waiting to get in. When the company is swamped with work, the facility's engineer sparks into action to bend the facility's technology to get everything done. Therefore, the team sometimes compresses in the edit room using Sorenson Media Squeeze, which came with the package purchased from Avid. At times, they also use the Telestream box, of which Huey says, "even though that's a front end for DG, it does a nice job of compression when you're in a crunch."



As a whole, the speed of putting together political spots is increasing every year thanks to the communication capabilities between consultants and their candidates. And when there's more client communications, there are more revisions.

"It's a lifesaver to have an edit system set up where you can have four Avid DS [systems] tied to shared storage so that all of a sudden we can revise what they did in Edit 1 by shooting it over to Edit 2," Huey says. "Before we had shared storage, it just became these huge nightmares."

All of the compression that Henninger does isn't just for approvals anymore. With the changing landscape of information in the modern world, the company also posts a lot of the spots online—to the point where it has an encoding setting on its machines titled the "YouTube preset." This year, more candidates posted video online, so can we depend on this as a trend?

"I tend to think that what we definitely saw was that there was a lot more ads made specifically for the Web," Huey says. "It's cheap, and sometimes I think they use it for strategic reasons—'Let's just throw this ad up on the Web, and then we don't have to pay for [air time], but the news media will still talk about it.' And that's almost as good as having paid the money to have a real buy. Sometimes some of the more unsavory ads are done that way."

In the end, the trend will not only be small, but back to big, in the form of HD content. And while all of the political media teams are used to the HD footage from the shooting end, getting ready for everything on the HD post end is a little more daunting.

"I sit and talk to the producers, and they're all scared to death to switch to HD," Huey says. "Because they know the moment—let's say—they're in a race and their opposition does it, they also have to do it. And they're nervous because all of a sudden all the simple things start to haunt them—now they have to compose all of their graphics for a 16:9 environment. A lot of these ads that are so graphically oriented, that ends up being a big deal because what's it going to look like on an SD TV because we know that a lot of people will be seeing it that way. So it starts complicating areas that they'd really rather not think about."

"Plus, they know that cost can go up a little bit. Renders take longer and the turnaround time—if renders take longer, then it takes longer to get a spot to the client and then there are deadline issues, etc. And it's the classic sort of unknown of how will this really impact me."

Whatever the impact, we can rest assured that every two years, there will be plenty of political ads to watch.