

An insider's guide to surviving decreasing budgets and increasing technology

The digital wave is fundamentally altering the way in which audiences are accessing, interacting and consuming content; that much we all know. But what many of us fail to recognise, says veteran of the South African film industry, Greg Shaw, is how the changes are affecting traditional advertising agencies, production houses and post-production facilities, which is why this offline editor turned entrepreneur is encouraging film industry players to get together and shake up the status quo.

According to the [South African Film Industry Baseline Report](#), published in 2013 and commissioned by the National Film and Video Foundation of South Africa (an agency of the Department of Arts and Culture), the film industry contributes R3.5bn to the country's GDP and encompasses over 2500 suppliers. But to ensure the increased sustainability of the full value chain in the years to come, argues Shaw, creative craftsmen need to completely re-imagine both their individual roles in the industry and their business models.

The relentless drive to get the job done faster and cheaper is having a profound impact on content production in general, but, at the end of the line, as it were, it's most keenly felt in post-production, explains Shaw. Back in the day, post production houses were shrouded in magic and mystery, providing just a few services which were more or less predictable and highly regimented - one house edited and offlined footage, for example; another house did telecines transfers and colour correction; another did visual effects, design and animation, and, finally, the job landed at an audio post production house before being shipped off (on tape) to the SABC, DStv, M-Net or e-tv. Working their magic at these facilities were master artisans - appreciated (and accordingly remunerated) for their skill and experience.

The concept of the commodity craftsman

Enter technology - many consider it a friend, rather than a foe, of artistry. But the downside of technology, is emerging - the undercutting of price of services. Like it or not, points out Shaw, creative crafts are becoming less an art form and more a commodity to be bought and sold, which essentially means that artisans are all under increased pressure, working harder for less. "Take one thirty-second TVC with a tight budget," he explains, "Splitting the required services between different companies, as per the traditional model, means extra cost in the form of human capacity, fees, mark-ups, and so on - not at all conducive to working with today's constrained budgets!"



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Increased technology and decreased budgets are combining, then, to drive industry change, and hailing the dawn of what Shaw terms *the commodity craftsman* - the master artisan has had his day, largely due to the impact of post production software which enables less experienced technicians to do the job cheaper and faster.

While the global economic climate is prompting clients to urge agencies to find more cost-effective avenues, thus far, technology has proven useful in helping even out the tension between speed, price and quality. However, none of us can be certain exactly where technology will lead us - will it enhance our particular service offering or sound its death knell?

"Take post production software as one example. It's transforming the industry even more than most of us are aware of", says Shaw, "and all conventional businesses are behind the curve. Currently, post production consists of experienced craftsmen, big machines, many owned copies of software and lots of storage hardware. In the future, we will need only interfaces with appropriately trained technicians - smart businesses are already preparing for this future destination."

Reviving a dying industry?

There's no doubt that the post-production services industry is at an interesting juncture. Globally, this industry is one of the Ten Key Dying Industries, along with newspaper publishing and DVD rentals, reports the [Wall Street Journal](#). Driven by the squeeze in production budgets, it's an industry facing low margins, slow growth, and operational complexity. Traditional post-production services such as audio and video editing, sound recording, grading and online have stagnated, causing overall market growth to stall. Conventional facilities are falling by the wayside and those which are left are weakened by an inability to change at the pace required to stay relevant.

And the rot won't stop at post production. Technology is bringing about the end of the era of high barrier to entry, and many organisations are now finding that for a lesser investment they can do many of the production and post-production services they require in-house. The threats currently being experienced in post production, then, will creep up on the next step in the value chain - the production houses, then agencies themselves.

"The game is changing, bringing about a future with no offline houses, no production houses, and no agencies - where we all work in corporations as employees, unless we find new ways of adding value. If we're to survive and thrive, we need to let go of the old rules to which we've become comfortably accustomed - we need to collaborate, re-invent, re-tool and re-imagine our business models. In trying to adapt, for example, most conventional offline houses now offer grade and online services in some form - some of these models seem to be working, while others feel unwieldy. We may be taking a stab at individual survival but collectively we're merely adding to the erosion that's being felt industry-wide, the world over. Something needs to change! The South African film post-production market, in particular, is desperately in need of something new and fresh."

The upshot of it all? Insists Shaw, industry players need to pull together and unite as creative craftsmen, rather than chipping away at and undermining each other. That way, perhaps, synergy and capacity can be built through collaboration, with like-minded people re-imagining how their creative services fit a new way of working, rendering it less conventional and more inclusive - where they work together to retain the value of their crafts and find new solutions which offer clients the best creative talent at a satisfactory price. Doing so is the only way in which collective longevity can be ensured in an industry in flux.

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