



Ingenuity?

Don't Leave Home Without It!

**The Secrets of Successful Media Production
Outside the United States**
by Phil Cooke

Shooting overseas? *Never leave your ingenuity at home.* After producing programming in more than 30 countries around the globe (*mostly third world*), I've discovered that in tough foreign situations, it's often the most unusual ideas that work best.

As anyone knows who has much experience in producing radio or television programming overseas, the frustrations and struggles come from an infinite number of places - *places where we rarely experience trouble here at home*. For instance, checking in at a hotel here in America is usually a breeze, but overseas, that normally simple act can be a nightmare.

Renting cars, checking in at airports, renting and clearing equipment, making a phone call... all can be a wild experience overseas, especially in what we consider "third world" countries.

Case in point...

On one of my first overseas shoots in the late 1970's, the customs officers of a large South American country held \$250,000 worth of our production equipment for five days. They would offer no reason, except for "*paperwork being processed*".

I tried everything.

I was scheduled to be shooting near the headwaters of the Amazon River at a great financial cost, and my patience was running thin. But all I could do was continue to show up on the doorstep of the customs office each morning bright and early.

Finally, on the fifth day, the managing customs officer asked if I could prove that I was *really* a legitimate television and motion picture director from the United States. (*Forget that we were bringing in a quarter of a million dollars in television equipment*).

I had to stop and think. After all, it's not like we directors carry around a "TV & Film License" or anything. But I started looking through my wallet anyway - *and that's when it hit me*.

I pulled out my old tattered membership card from the *American Film Institute*. In those days, the AFI was just beginning, and the membership card represented little more than a subscription to the foundation's monthly magazine.

But when I whipped out the card, he was stunned and amazed.

"What - you mean you're a member of the American Film Institute?" He asked with the reverence of a religious pilgrim. He had no clue what the AFI was, but he sure thought it sounded impressive.

"Of course I am" I shot back, as if the AFI was an "official" government institute for all American filmmakers.

"Well then, why didn't you say so!" With much pomp, he immediately ushered me and my crew into a warehouse where our equipment was kept, and even offered a special police escort to our hotel.

I never realized how important that simple magazine subscription would be!

Since that time, as a Writer and Director, I have traveled with the Bedouins in the Middle East, taken a freighter up to the headwaters of the Amazon, explored game reserves in Africa, confronted witch doctors in Haiti, and stared down the barrels of automatic weapons shortly after a coup in Nigeria. By the very nature of my work, I rarely go to the *posh* resorts. Worse yet, I'm often sent to countries that are often socially and economically unstable.

But it's important to point out that being prepared doesn't mean having a condescending attitude or being racist. I never recommend you bully your way through any situation - in fact, that's precisely the type of behavior that will land you in a foreign

jail (*and foreign jails are not the most pleasant place to be*). The fact is, we have to learn the skills necessary to accomplish anything here in the United States - but in other countries, it's a different ball game completely.

Whether shooting in Royal Palaces in Vienna, Austria or carrying equipment through the Amazon jungle, there are important skills and techniques necessary to bringing your project home professionally and on budget.

And during those often difficult times, I discovered some important techniques for making those trips (*especially low budget trips*) a little easier.

1) Never attract attention as a film or video producer. If you can possibly pass for a tourist, (*although perhaps a "well equipped tourist"*) - do it. Never lie or do anything illegal, but don't bring undue attention to yourself as an American filmmaker or television producer. There are often very expensive bonds and other fees required when bringing in television and film equipment, so if you can avoid those fees, you'll save quite a bit of money. After all, in many countries, it's up to the immediate discretion of the local official whether to charge you a bond, insurance fees, entry fees, or a host of other quite expensive charges.

Believe me, they see American movies and television programs and often figure this is their big chance to get rich. So dump your ego and be gracious and considerate - and above all, don't flaunt your expensive equipment.

It's easier today with smaller, more compact "DV" equipment, but you still have to be alert.

A number of years ago, while clearing customs in Kenya, I made the mistake of unpacking all my equipment cases so the customs officer could easily see each piece of equipment. But once those cases were opened and that expensive looking television equipment popped out, customs agents, police, and even military men swarmed around the equipment like bees looking for honey. They were fascinated at how the equipment worked, how much it cost, and *was I an American TV producer?*

Fortunately, I had my crew with me and they were able to keep an eye out to make sure nothing was stolen, but more importantly, once the customs officer saw the buzz around my equipment, he felt he had to charge a high customs fee to justify to his

superiors why the airport had nearly shut down so all the employees could get a better look.

Needless to say, it took a great deal of negotiation to get the price down to anything reasonable. The truth is, he wanted so much money, I was forced to leave part of the equipment locked up in customs security until I was ready to leave the country - *I couldn't even afford the customs fee to bring it in!*

I learned a very important lesson about remaining low key and quiet while traveling with expensive equipment.

2) Be bold. Without doing anything rash or stupid, don't be afraid to present yourself as a confident person who knows exactly what you want. Often, local officials can be influenced or persuaded to let you go without any hassle - especially if they believe you might be important enough to get them into trouble later. But remember there's a fine line between confidence and arrogance. I find most customs officials to be normal everyday people who are more than willing to work with you - but on the other hand, don't push your luck.

I also recommend you get a copy of Dale Carnegie's classic book: ***How To Win Friends And Influence People***. It's one of the great books of all time on how to deal with difficult people and still accomplish your goal. As the book clearly points out, in many situations it doesn't matter whether you happen to be correct or not. In these circumstances, arguing from a logical perspective does you absolutely no good whatsoever.

It's especially true when you're being hassled by someone who doesn't speak your language, knows nothing about television, is making a few dollars a day, and probably has a 3rd grade education to boot.

Therefore, always be gracious and considerate, but at the same time learn the skills necessary to communicate and persuade even the most obstinate people - you'll find it will help you as much in the United States as anywhere else in the world!

3) Have someone on the inside. Whenever possible, I use a contact on the inside of the country to "*pave the way*" by getting signatures, approvals, and other documentation completed ahead of time. Have them meet you at the airport and walk

you through the right steps - it can really make a difference. This person doesn't need to be a government or business official - although that helps. If you don't know a local person who knows the language, at least send a location or production manager in a week or two before hand to prepare for the crew's arrival.

I've discovered that *missionaries* make excellent "in-country" contacts. Even though they may know little about television or film, because of the unique nature of their work, they usually have extensive experience dealing with government officials and know the local laws and regulations very well. (*Not to mention their knowledge of food, locale, and transportation*). In addition, they know local hardware dealers, electrical repair shops, supply houses - all important resources in the event you need emergency equipment or supplies.

4) Never underestimate the power of corrupt local officials. Once, even after completing all the proper documents, I still had to spend almost \$2,000 in bribes just to get our equipment and people out of one third world airport. After that much expense, I told my cameraman to physically go with the equipment all the way to the plane, just to make sure it all got on.

We didn't hear from him again for three hours. After a frantic search, we discovered he had been arrested outside the plane and tossed in jail (*conveniently located in the basement of the airport*). After a few more hundred in bribes, we finally got him out and were on our way.

I learned then, that sometimes you can sing and dance around local officials, and other times it's important to know when they mean business.

Those of us who have traveled extensively tend to minimize the danger involved in working in politically or economically unstable countries. But the tragic fact is, missionaries, Christian workers, and journalists are being killed each year in a wide variety of countries. Therefore I can't over emphasize even on the most mundane trips, learn the location and phone number of the American Embassy, the American Express office, or stable banks and other institutions including hospitals and police stations.

5) Whenever possible, use an experienced and qualified crew. I especially recommend finding a location/production manager who is familiar with working in these

situations. Even on low budget shoots, I can't emphasize that enough. The production crew is too busy worrying about the creative and technical aspects of the shoot. Someone else needs to worry about *transportation, visas, passports, shipping documents, insurance, permits*, and the multitude of other aspects of foreign production.

If you don't know of a person, contact another production company or ministry who has had that experience and get recommendations from them. In our case, we have developed relationships with people in places like Africa, Israel, Europe, and South America. They speak the language and often know the intricacies of television production as well.

I also believe in the importance of engineers. Before the age of Betacam technology, I once had an appointment to interview the Royal Family of Swaziland on camera, but the intense humidity caused the video tape machine to jam the night before. I would have been completely lost, but our engineer stayed up all night, pulling the equipment apart piece by piece until he corrected the problem.

The interview went flawlessly.

During the bomb scares of the mid-seventies, I was sent to Israel to cover a mission effort among the Bedouin tribes of the desert. At that time, equipment wasn't quite as portable as today, so we shipped our cameras, video equipment and lights in a large wooden crate. When we arrived in the country we discovered the Israeli security team in New York had not only opened the crate, but dissected each piece of equipment *circuit board by circuit board* looking for explosives. Of course, when they finished, not knowing how to re-assemble the equipment, they just tossed the boards, gears, and belts back into the crate, nailed it shut and sent it on.

Standing in the airport warehouse in Tel Aviv, we opened the crate in horror.

But after our initial shock we carried the equipment to our hotel, and once again, thanks to the engineers on the shoot, we were able to slowly re-assemble each piece of equipment and the shoot went as planned.

Don't scrimp on talent.

6) Finally, don't be discouraged. Remember - there will be plenty of struggles with difficult communication, corrupt officials, confusing information, different rules, and frustrating local customs. But the countries that are often the most difficult, also

have the most on-screen *magic*. You just can't duplicate here in the states what can be captured in many of these potentially volatile situations. Also, especially in ministry broadcasting, the most effective ministries are usually working in the most difficult places. But the chance to report on what God is doing in these often forgotten and out of the way places is remarkable and unforgettable.

Therefore, stay with it - you'll be very glad you did.

Besides, the experiences make great stories to tell your kids!

The King & I

While shooting a mission outreach to a large Bedouin tribe in the deserts of Israel we encountered a Bedouin leader who invited us to his tent for a meal. Along with a delightful collection of unusual foods, we were also offered a hearty drink of rancid, chunky goat's milk that had been "curing" inside the carcass of a dead goat in the heat of the desert sun for nearly two weeks.

The crew and I looked at each other in disbelief. We knew it would be the height of rudeness to turn down their "gracious" offer, and seeing an array of ancient Bedouin swords standing in the corner, we realized we had little choice. Then, our video engineer hit upon an idea that might distract the "royal family". He had learned a technique years ago in the service where he could punch a tiny hole in the end of an egg and literally "blow" the entire egg through the hole, leaving the shell completely intact.

Desperate to try anything to keep from drinking the milk, we gave it a shot.

It worked!

The Bedouin leader was so delighted he asked the engineer to do it again and again. After four or five eggs, it began to get dark outside the tent, and before long, it was time for us to leave. Graciously, we thanked the royal family for their hospitality and quickly left the tent without having to drink the dreaded sour milk!

I've never forgotten that incident and have always been grateful for the ingenuity of our video engineer. I've never made fun of the peculiar talents of my crew members since!

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Where Do I Go For Help?

During the early stages of planning a shoot overseas, there are a number of places to start:

1) Check the tourist resources. Check a guidebook for the country at the local bookstore travel section. Prentice Hall, Hastings House, Rand McNally, and St. Martin's Press are some of the publishing leaders in travel guidebooks. These guidebooks have come a long way in the last few years and often have information relating to visas, travel advisories, medical concerns, current political situations, currency, key addresses and phone numbers, and other critical information.

2) Talk to your local travel agent. If they haven't been to the country lately it's likely they will know someone who has. That referral can provide you with first hand information about practical aspects of the trip such as airport check-in, taxis, hotels, etc...

3) Check Entertainment Industry Resources. More and more countries are trying to attract Hollywood to shoot movies and television programs in their country because of the positive economic impact. In response, an entire industry has grown up around location shooting. Important information can be found in industry directories such as the "Blu-Book Directory" or "LA411".

Film Commissions:

Extremely informative and helpful sources for location shooting are local and international Film Commissions. Because of the financial boon location shooting often brings to the local economy, these commissions are set-up by the local government expressly to attract television and film producers to their countries.

Most Christian producers have yet to use this wonderful resource, but I would encourage you to contact the appropriate commission on your next project. Their sole purpose is to make your experience easy and enjoyable, and they don't charge a penny for their help and assistance.

That assistance includes:

Helping you find local crews and equipment.

Helping make hotel and travel arrangements.

Helping you cut through red tape and regulations.

Helping you find scenic and historic locations to film.

And don't think you have to be a major motion picture to use their services. They are very helpful no matter what size crew. Plus, you'll find Film Commissions not only in highly industrialized countries, but also in places as diverse as Thailand, Guatemala, Chile, Malta, Jamaica, and Poland. Plus, there's an office in all 50 states here in America.

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