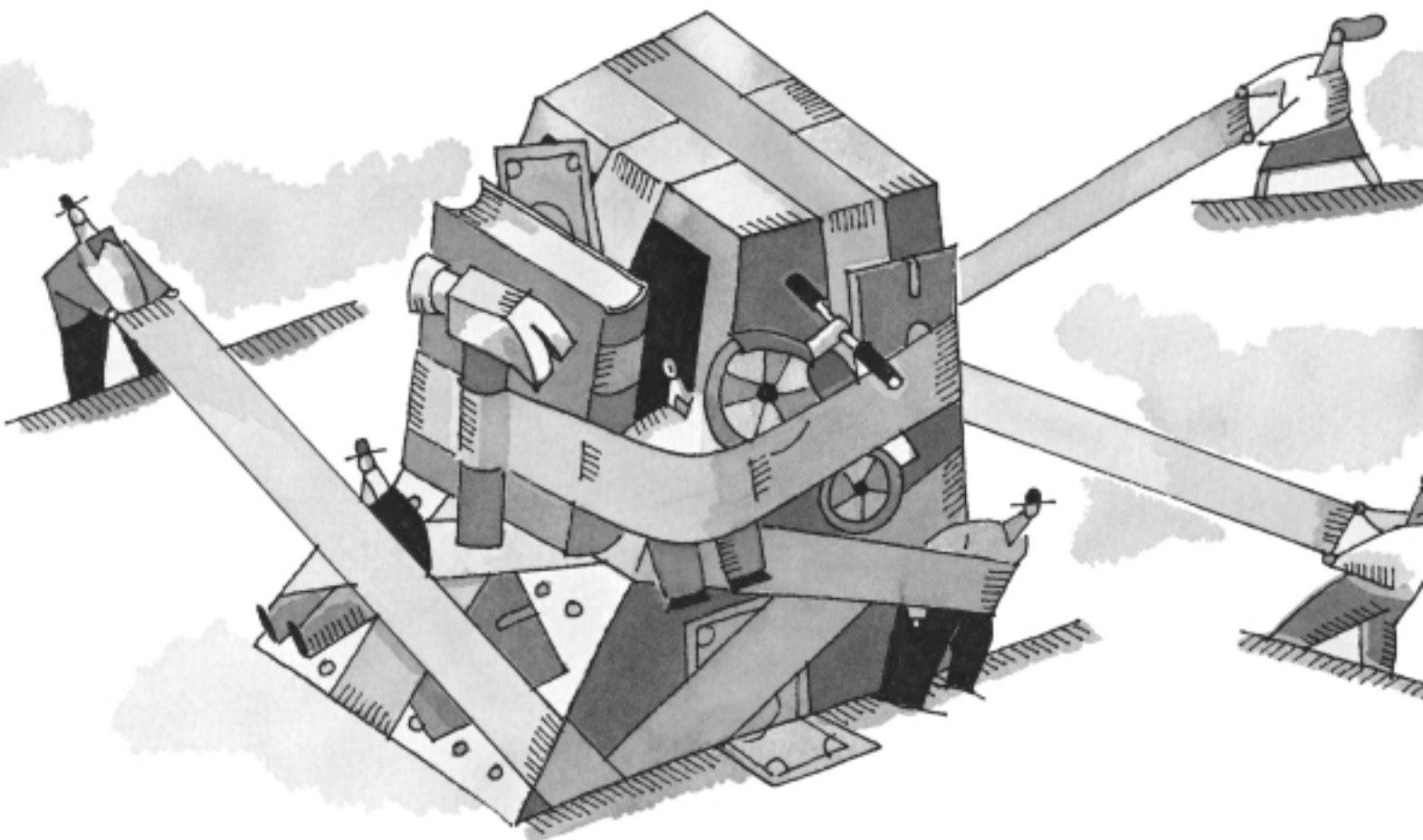


Guidelines for Multimedia

*Veterans of the process explain
how to manage multimedia
production projects*

By **Abbie Brown, Tim Green, and Dave Zatz**



Production Projects

Information is increasingly presented and expected in a digital format (such as on Web sites or CD-ROMs). As a result, organizations without internal multimedia production teams find themselves contracting with external consultants to produce digital media.

The people designated to manage these consultants probably are not themselves well versed in the complexities of high-tech production. Our experience as media producers has found that managers responsible for overseeing high-tech producers often avoid truly managing them. They fear displaying ignorance in an area about which everyone seems to know something (but where, in fact, very few people can do more than spout buzz words).

We can speak both as high-tech producers and as managers of high-tech production teams. In that dual role we offer the following guidelines in developing a plan to cope with the daunting task of high-tech media production management.

Guidelines for Managing a Successful Project

It's always a good idea to start with a plan. (If you don't know where you're going, how will you get there?) Working with and managing multimedia producers can be challenging for many reasons. For example, the most common and significant issue we routinely encounter as producers of multimedia is that of developing a shared vision of — or “seeing eye to eye” on — the final product. Clients often don't know how the finished product could or should look, while producers often

develop a vision based more on the capabilities of the software and hardware than on the needs of the client.

These disparate mind sets often cause miscommunication, leading to products that may be complete and functioning but ultimately useless. A thorough discussion of goals,

resources, and capabilities at the earliest stages of negotiation and production will help the client and the producers develop a shared vision of the final product. (See the sidebar “High-Tech Producers Think Differently.”) We have found that the following strategies add significantly to any multimedia project's success.

High-Tech Producers Think Differently

At a fundamental level, high-tech producers think differently from the clients who hire them. High-tech producers view the world in terms of bit-depth, refresh rate, and fragments of code. To collaborate productively, these groups must strive for effective communication, leading to a shared vision. This will ensure that both parties are satisfied with the final product, with a minimal amount of frustration and wasted time during the creative phase. Four strategies help maintain a shared vision of the product: respect, regular consultation, specificity, and a paper trail.

1. *Respect.* Individuals from each group must respect the skills that the other side brings to the table. Show respect by listening to the advice given to you, and be respectful when giving advice.
2. *Regular consultation.* By meeting regularly, members of each group can track the progress of the other to ensure that everyone is on the same page. Regular meetings will allow for sharing of ideas, provide clarifications, and help ensure that the product is being designed to match the shared vision.
3. *Specificity.* Telling a high-tech producer that you want a “cool graphic” may result in something entirely different from your expectation. Be specific regarding what you want.
4. *Paper trail.* Have the high-tech producers share draft images, layouts, and navigational structures with you frequently, and save these items. This will allow for creation of a record that both groups can work from during the design process.



The Production Triangle

The multimedia production triangle links the scarce resources of time, money, and quality. The ideal, of course, would be to produce a high-quality product quickly and inexpensively. Unfortunately, an adage of multimedia production based on hard experience is that you can choose only two elements of the triangle — fast, cheap, or good — but not all three. That gives you three less-than-ideal choices: The resulting product can be of good quality and inexpensive to produce, but it won't be completed quickly. If the product is produced quickly and is of good quality, it won't be cheap to make. The last choice, and perhaps the worst, is a quickly and inexpensively produced product of poor quality.

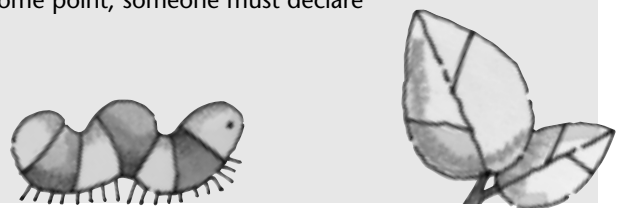
1. Articulate your vision of the finished product. Before you begin production, perhaps even before you decide who will produce the work, you should decide exactly what you want.
 - What problem is this multimedia piece meant to solve? Be realistic. If the problem is, "We need a high-tech piece to show off," say so. Keep in mind, however, that a single multimedia piece rarely can solve multiple, complex problems or meet the needs of many different users.
 - How will the end user actually use the piece? Can you describe a detailed scenario of the typical use of the finished product?
 - To further define the project's scope, articulate how the multimedia piece should *not* be used. This helps you determine the project's limits and focus more directly on the problem the multimedia piece is meant to solve.
 - What is a realistic budget for this project? (See the sidebar "The Production Triangle.")
 - What is a realistic timeframe for completing this project?
 2. Interview potential producers. Find out what kind of work they do and what kind of work they get excited about doing. Keep in mind that most multimedia producers consider themselves artists.
 - Ask for samples of previous work.
 - Ask to speak with a previous client. Ask that client if the product created is useful to them.
 - Have the producer define realistic goals for the project. What can actually be done given the time and resources allocated? What should actually be done to solve the problem you've articulated? Be wary of any producer who promises you everything you ask for without asking you any questions.
 3. Define and agree to a set of production milestones.
 - Negotiate a date when the content you provide the multimedia producers is complete and unchangeable. Early in the development process, it's easy to make changes
- Articulate the final product's structure. One common method uses Post-it notes to visualize the different screens and the navigational structure, allowing you and the producers to make changes and discuss possibilities on the fly.
 - Insist that you see designs and a prototype on paper first. Multimedia producers love to work with technology — it's easy for them to go directly to the computer and start a prototype design. This can be dangerous because you run the risk of feeling locked into that design. (See Figure 1.)
 - Insist on prototypes in the target media before final production begins. You should see and approve different stages of development, including specific elements such as drawings, screen grabs, video clips, scores, scripts, codes, and working prototypes. This back-and-forth process ensures that you and the producers still share the same vision of the product. (See Figure 2.)
 - Negotiate who will conduct usability tests on the product. It's wise for you to conduct your own usability tests with individuals who will be using the final prod-

to content, but once final production begins, changing content becomes costly in terms of time and money. (See the sidebar "Mission Creep.")

Mission Creep

"No multimedia is ever completed; it is merely abandoned."

One of the problems with successful multimedia production is that, once it becomes evident that the product will work, those contributing to the product will want to add components and make "improvements." This wish to add to a successful product often results in the product's never reaching completion. At some point, someone must declare the product completed.



uct. You typically know your target audience better than the multimedia producers will. We strongly recommend conducting usability testing early enough in the production process to allow for changes in the product based on test results.

- Negotiate with the producers on who is responsible for mass production and distribution. At the minimum, your producers should provide you with multiple copies of the original product. In the case of fixed media (such as CD-ROM) decide in advance who will ultimately retain the original of the product — the golden master from which all copies should be made.

Guidelines to Success

Major projects like producing high-tech multimedia are always difficult undertakings filled with potential for failure. We know from experience, however, that it's possible to manage and produce quality, high-tech multimedia. Following the guidelines we've articulated can significantly increase the likelihood of success.

As we've discussed these guidelines with colleagues and friends, we have come to realize that they apply to more than just high-tech media production. Similar guidelines are used in building, interior design, commercial photography, and fashion design. We see this as a positive indicator that the basic concepts expressed in such guidelines have a history of successful application. This strongly supports their potential value for anyone managing or producing high-tech media. *e*

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Figure 1

A design sketch and prototype on paper.



Figure 2

Screen grab of the design in Figure 1.

