

Purpose of a Demo Reel

Lack of a demo reel has become the best professional excuse for an agent or manager to immediately dismiss you, or not even take a meeting with you.

-Kevin E. West, President and Founder, The Actors' Network

With every collection of scenes, every pile of DVDs, VHS and Online Footage, that an actor brings me to edit together into a demo reel, comes a long list of questions:

How long? How many? Is this good? What should be first? What about a montage? Theatrical vs. Commercial? What do agents/casting directors/managers want?

For Part One, I'll discuss the purpose of a demo reel.

In Part Two I'll deal with preparing material for editing.

In Part Three I'll talk about assembling and packaging your reel.

Cause and Effect

A demo reel has only two purposes:

1. To pique someone's interest enough to pick up the phone to have a meeting
2. To lesson someone's anxiety about hiring you for their production.

William Goldman wrote that in Hollywood "nobody knows nothing," and this is important to keep in mind when preparing your reel. Everyone really wants to be close to the fire, but no one knows how to get there, or more importantly what decisions will keep them there. So a casting director doesn't want to send a lump to see the director because she's afraid the director will never work with her again.

The director doesn't want to cast a lump because he's afraid it'll tank his movie, and he'll be back directing dinner theater in Jupiter, Florida. The producer just wants the cameras to start rolling before the money runs out.

A good demo reel sends the message, "Relax. I can and will carry my end of the rope." To an agent or casting director it says, "Yes, I am a professional, and no,

I won't embarrass you." To a director it says, "The studio, your DP, the union reps, and your A-list star will all be contributing to your going prematurely gray, but I won't be one of your worries."

This should be your goal for your demo reel, and you shouldn't make one if it can't serve this purpose. If you haven't got the material, if the dialogue is really, really bad, and the production values are worse. If all you have is a 30-second scene shot entirely in a medium two-person frame, and your partner makes Pauly Shore look like Laurence-freakin'-Olivier, wait. If you hand someone a reel like this, don't be surprised if you never, ever, hear from them.

If it has to be perfect, where does that leave me?

Now at this point you're probably thinking, "Hey, the last two films I did had a budget of \$50. Combined. Not even Robert Rodriguez can achieve perfection with 50 bucks." Well, contrary to popular wisdom, casting directors and agents aren't stupid. If you're new, or even if you've been chasing Hollywood for a while now, they know you're not going to have three minutes of brilliant, perfectly framed and lit scenes opposite Hugh Jackman and Meryl Streep. You're going to have, say, a minute and a half of good, solid scenes opposite other beginners like yourself, maybe a spec commercial, or a strong over-five that's really only there so the lead has a reason to give a speech. You're new. They get that. As long as the material on your reel shows that you are good-talented, believable, maybe even loved by the camera-and the production values don't actively work against you, that's what counts at this stage.

Because, when you're good, everybody can relax, at least about you. The casting director can pick up the phone to call your agent; the director has one fewer nightmare about *Death of a Salesman* being ruined by table seven celebrating their 50th anniversary, and you move one step closer to getting cast.

Preparing Material for a Demo Reel

Editing is simple. You just have to be willing to kill your babies.

-Anonymous

So you finally have a collection of work that you're willing to show to more than just close friends and people who owe you money. What now?

Determine exactly what you have to work with. Go through your source materials and catalogue all of your scenes, giving each scene a timecode and brief description (this will save a ton of time later). Something like this:

DVD -	Attila the Hun in Paris	12:14-20:20	On the bus having an argument
YOUTUBE -	Scarlett O'Hara	30:10-30:35	Telling a joke

From here, it should be a matter of simply choosing the scenes which show you at your best, but too often I see scenes chosen for... well, questionable reasons. I don't like demonstrating from the negative, but experience has shown that the following list of 12 don'ts is the most effective way to separate your strongest work from the not-so-strong.

1. Don't include scenes just because you're opposite someone famous. Your demo reel is about what you can do, not who you've done it with. Sure, having stars in your reel can show that you're higher up the food chain, but this is true only if you're actually doing something more involved than just watching the star.
2. Similarly, don't include scenes where you're just looking out a window, or sitting at a table. Shocking, but true: watching someone look out the window is boring. Watching someone look out the window in tear-filled, stunned disbelief as their beautiful city of Dresden is firebombed into the Stone Age...now that's entertainment.
3. Don't include a scene because you have fond memories of the shoot, or you had a crush on your co-star, or the day was so hellish you want to salvage something from the torment. Separating your emotional attachment to a scene is tough-it's the basis for my opening quote-but your reel has to be about scenes that will work hard for you, not scenes you worked hard on. (This is an advantage to working with a semi-neutral party. As an editor, my only concern is assembling your strongest work into the most effective marketing tool I can.)
4. Don't worry about "lots of short scenes vs. carrying one or two longer scenes." This is one of those situations where no matter which choice you make

someone's not going to like it, and there's nothing you can do about it. Choose your best scenes regardless of number.

5. Don't worry if your best scene is 10 minutes long. Everything that isn't about you, or absolutely necessary to keep the scene flowing, will get cut. Ten minutes gets whittled down to thirty seconds real quick this way.

6. Don't think of your reel as a work of art. You're not hand-crafting a beautiful, touching story. You're assembling clips that show what an awesome actor you are. I know one woman who has spent over 80 hours working on her yet unfinished reel, and it still clocks in at nine minutes. That's at least 70 hours too many, and six minutes too long.

7. Don't worry about source footage in VHS format. For future projects, you should insist on a copy in either DVD, miniDV, or as a last resort, BetaSP format, but if all you have is VHS, fine. I've seen lots of reels from well-known, prolific actors, and unknown, prolific actors, and many of them had clips that came from a VHS tape.

8. Don't include a clip that just flashes on your face. Three seconds does not a scene make. I don't want to set an absolute minimum, but if your "scene" would be more at home in a music video, it's probably not going to do anything to sell you as an actor.

9. Don't include scenes where your back is to the camera. Not even Marlon Brando could act with the back of his head. Again, I don't want to set an absolute angle, but it's awfully hard to appreciate an actor's work if less than, say, half of their face is away from the camera for any length of time.

10. Don't include scenes where the viewer has to search for you. If you're a non-speaking part of a crowd, well, to be brutally honest, you're an extra, and extras don't need demo reels.

11. Don't add scenes just to lengthen your reel. Adding mediocre material to reach the magic one/two/three minute mark just drags down the great stuff that came before it. And most importantly...

12. Don't include a bunch of scenes where you play against your type. A pro knows who he is, and how he's perceived. Amateurs want to show that they can

do anything and everything, and few things scare a professional more than the thought of putting their success in the hands of an amateur.

Assembly of a Demo Reel

A demo reel should reflect the strengths of the actor, and not the creativity of the editor.-Robert Campbell

All right. You've collected a group of strong scenes that are focused on you doing a bang up job of acting. Now all you have to do is turn them into a demo reel. One step left to go.

It's All About You. Finally!

As you're sitting down to begin editing your reel (or you've dropped off your scenes and are eagerly awaiting the first draft), here are some things to keep in mind:

It's going to take longer than you think. I've edited scores of reels to date, and only two of them took less than three hours to finish. Figure at least three hours, and be prepared for as many as Six (though my record to date is seven hours).

Start with your strongest material. If it's a choice between strong work opposite an unknown, or mediocre work opposite Johnny Depp, Johnny comes second. As long-time casting director Valerie McCaffrey says, "What I want from a demo reel is for the first fifteen seconds to be brilliant so I can move on to the next 99 things on my list." Every agent and casting director has the same list.

Each scene on your reel should begin and end with your face and your voice, or at the very least your face. The only possible exception to this rule is if your first line is so brilliantly delivered, and at the same time such a complete non sequitur that you need some sort of lead in or set up.

Whoever else is in a scene with you should have the least amount of dialogue and screen time possible without the scene becoming a patchwork of jump cuts. A couple of reaction shots, and a line or two that helps things along,

and that's all. Aside from the fact that it's not their reel, if the other person is terrible they'll drag you down, and if they're better than you, well, do you really want a casting director calling you to ask for the name of an actor who was in your reel?

Be prepared to drop one or two of the scenes that made your short list. Maybe the reel is clocking in at five minutes, or you've got two fantastic minutes and one minute of stuff that would otherwise be fine, but isn't in the same league, or you weren't quite so successful in separating your emotional attachments, whatever the reasons, it's a rare reel that contains everything a client brings me.

Save the special effects for your low-budget sci-fi movie. Fancy transitions, "double-snowflake-with-a-newspaper-rollup" fades, and all of that whiz-bang stuff will push people out of the moment. Simple cuts, dissolves, and fade-outs keep the energy focused on you.

Save the montage for your music video. Admittedly this is a very personal opinion, but my feeling is this: Imagine that you are a very, very busy agent/casting director/manager. You've got 14 hours of work to do, and only a 12 hour day to do it in. How kindly are you going to view a demo reel that starts out with a 30 second montage (or 20 second or 40 second because, of course, you have no idea how long this montage is going to last). You've got a role to cast, and this actor is wasting your time with a montage that only shows quick little clips, but no real acting. And all too frequently, when you actually get to the reel, the scenes are the same ones that were in the montage so now the actor is guilty of padding her reel; like using double-spaced 14-point type to make a five-page term paper stretch to seven pages. Finally, the purpose of a montage is to try to use the sizzle-whatever music you've attached to your scenes-to sell the steak, but if anyone is immune to falling for that ploy, it's a Hollywood professional.

It should be part of an editor's job to offer feedback about what he thinks does and doesn't work, but it's never our job to browbeat an actor into doing it our way. If your editor thinks a scene should be cut, or scenes should be put in a different order, he should say so, but if you disagree, well, it ain't her reel, and the oldest rule of business is that the customer is always right.

Consider having some sort of short intro to your reel. Typically, I'll open a

demo with the actor's name and headshot for about five seconds, and then fade into the first scene. This is by no means a necessity, but an intro can give someone time to hang up the phone, put down the sandwich, sign the contract, and finally focus on your reel without missing the first few seconds of your work.

And that's about it. It's an awful lot of information, I know, but if you take it step by step, you should be able to put together a first-rate demo reel that shows you off as a professional worth hiring.

Now give me a call and let's make Your Reel great! [323-375-4193](tel:323-375-4193)