

THE BIG BUSINESS OF HIGH DEFINITION POST PRODUCTION

ASCENT MEDIA GROUP'S LEVEL 3 POST

BY JOHN FEINS

Santa Monica, California-based Ascent Media provides creative and technical services to the media and entertainment industries through its Creative Services, Creative Sound Services, Media Management and Networks Services groups.

At more than 70 facilities in the regions of Southern California, New York, Atlanta, London and Singapore and additional locations throughout the world, Ascent Media Group provides effective solutions for the creation, management and distribution of content to major motion picture studios, independent producers, broadcast networks, cable channels, advertising agencies and other companies that produce, own and/or distribute entertainment, news, sports, corporate, educational, industrial and advertising content.

Each Ascent Media facility is a source of world-class talent, technology and expertise, providing highly specialized services for virtually every aspect of media production—from film and video post-production and sound services to digital asset management, network origination, satellite and terrestrial distribution. Ascent Media keeps a sharp eye on technological advances to pioneer leading-edge solutions such as Video-on-Demand, HDTV production, virtual collaboration tools, and digital intermediate services for feature films.

High Def 411 spoke with Darrell Anderson, Managing Director of Ascent Media's Level 3 Post, and Robert Glass, VP Sales for Ascent Media Creative Services Group, who have worked on Level 3 Post high definition projects such as "24," "The West Wing," "ER," "Third Watch," "Las Vegas," "Enterprise," "Drew Carey," "Jonny Zero," re-mastering in HD for "Seinfeld," and Movies of the Week including Hallmark Hall of Fame's "In From The Night," and "Back When We Were Grown Ups."

What are Ascent Media's high definition services today?



Level 3 Post Managing Director,
Darrell Anderson

Darrell Anderson: *Ascent Media owns many different facilities, and it has HD capabilities around the world. We work in 24p, 1080i, HDCAM, D5, and the Panasonic Varicam. We provide Spirit and C-Reality telecine transfers, color correction using the da Vinci 2K, visual effects, and linear and non-linear editorial services in HD. Our sound facilities can deliver 5.1 mixes for HD and we have full services for delivery to the networks as well.*

Robert Glass: *We also have some select services that are not available at every location. For example, some of our locations also offer the Sony SR deck that works in HD 4:4:4.*

Particularly now with HD and competing standards and formats, a post facility has to be many different things to many different clients...

Darrell Anderson: *That is true. Our clients pick the acquisition format that is most desirable for their particular show, and we need to meet their requirements. One of the nice things about being part of the Ascent Media Group is that we are a large, diverse collection of facilities, so we have a very deep repository*

of equipment to draw from. If we don't have something, odds are high that one of our sister companies does.

Do you see more convergence or even more diversity coming up in the future?

Darrell Anderson: *I do not sense that it is converging. We have clients that shoot 16mm film, 35mm film, 3Perf and 4Perf, Panasonic Varicam, IMX. Some people shoot standard definition formats and upconvert them or acquire on Sony's SR format. They choose the format that best suits their creative requirements and their budgets, and that is not always done with an eye to how the post-production world is equipped. There is an expectation that if they shoot it, we will take care of it.*



Tony Smith, Sr. Colorist at a Level 3 telecine suite.

Are more of your clients shooting HD with a consideration of what can happen in post?

Darrell Anderson: *The more technically informed everybody is, the smoother the post-production process goes. The clients can get the best value for their money if they do their research up front. When they plan their projects from acquisition through post-production they can certainly maximize their dollars.*

What are the differences in budget and time for high definition versus standard?

Darrell Anderson: *HD requires a higher budget than standard definition, but it does not take any longer. The quick and powerful HD equipment we have invested in is fully integrated into the episodic work flow.*

Is there much to compare and contrast in terms of television, film, and commercial work?

Robert Glass: *There are certain things that are similar. The material can be acquired either on film or tape. Most features are still shot on film of course, as well as most commercials. Television trends in certain marketplaces are definitely moving towards tape—reality television and some of the sitcoms. Our one-hour dramas are still primarily shot on film. HD post has really saturated episodic television, it is emerging in the commercial world, but slowly. The introduction of Digital Intermediates, which we touched on earlier, is really beginning to make a mark in the feature world. Ascent Media just opened two DI Suites at Company 3 in Santa Monica and we're building a third at Encore Hollywood to keep up with demand.*

What are the creative, technical, and management challenges that HD brings to a post facility?

Darrell Anderson: *HD has greater image quality and you can see more detail, so from a creative standpoint you can put more into your high definition picture and see the result in your final product. Also the canvas is bigger; you are working on a 16x9 image.*

Robert Glass: *I think you also have truer representation on delivery to people's homes as well. The high def signal holds up pretty well as compared to standard def. There seems to be a more uniform, higher end product that ends up in people's living rooms too, whereas in standard def it seems to go through several paths and the image can be quite altered compared to how the client saw it at the facility.*

Darrell Anderson: *Operationally, we put the same amount of care and planning into our standard definition work as we do into our high def work. We strive to meet all of our clients' expectations and to meet with success at every point that we are involved. Sometimes the standard def reality shows are every bit as complicated to organize and manage as high def dramas.*

Do technical innovations still change your workflows?

Darrell Anderson: *We have been doing HD post-production for more than four years now, so our HD workflows are well implemented throughout the facility. The thing that we do differently in HD really occurs at the dailies stage. We make Dual Sync dailies so that we produce both HD masters and standard definition versions simultaneously in different aspect ratios.*

Robert Glass: *That is both film and tape dailies: projects that are shot on film that are doing dailies with us and also projects that are doing tape, shooting on say 24p. A single camera show will do syncing with us with multi-standard—high def and standard def tapes running for editorial and for creating a selects reel. That is something that we do at Level 3, Encore and R!OT, that not everybody offers, which I found out talking with different clients around town.*

We also offer some workflow systems that operate a little differently than a few years ago, like the Avid Nitris, which re-digitizes tape at night for a session that happens during the day, for editorial—but we also offer that in standard def and that is on a system called a Symphony so that workflow is really the same, it is just another tool for us to put shows together.

Darrell Anderson: *As far as the non-linear machines go, we are very pleased with our Discreet Logic editorial systems. The Fire* and Smoke* are wonderful tools for working in high def. The Avid Nitris machines that we have are very capable non-linear edit machines that are more than just assembly machines. They have a lot of tools that allow us to do compositing work, color correction, and painting. Our linear bays are also very quick at assembling episodic shows in high definition.*

Our different editorial tools provide clients with options, so they can have everything creatively they need to deliver their shows in high definition and get the most productivity for their dollar.

Robert Glass: *We have worked really hard here to pick and implement the right equipment so there are no extraneous steps that our clients need to do in high def. We hold pre-production meetings with all of our clients and make sure everyone is on the same page before they go in to shoot their project. As far as processing times and that kind of thing, we have got the system down pretty smoothly.*

Darrell Anderson: *For shows that are yet to convert from standard def to high def, the biggest challenge they will face is bringing legacy material forward. Every flashback clip and every stock shot they want to pull from a previous season is going to be in 4:3 standard def. That does not just drop right into a new HD 16:9 episode. We are encouraging everybody to at least protect for 16:9, even if they are only delivering 4:3.*

Robert Glass: *We certainly have solutions, there are ways to do a pan and scan or blow up that material or figure out something unique to the situation, but those are some challenges that the clients will be faced with.*

How do you stay on top of the technology front?

Darrell Anderson: *In a couple of different ways. One is working closely with our clients. As they embrace new technologies, they talk with us about ways we can support them. Most of the time we are very capable of doing that. There are some issues that come up, like when a client is getting marketed a particular technology, and maybe there are reasons that they should look at competing technologies that are out there. We try to make them aware of all the solutions that are available on the market, so they are not just working with one particular equipment vendor that maybe has a more narrow interest in what the client buys.*



Derek Herr, Sr. Non Linear Editor at a Level 3 editing bay.

We also work very closely with our Chief Technology Officer and his team at Ascent Media. They have insight and access to a lot of information we might not get otherwise.

What are some of the biggest challenges and opportunities coming up in the future?

Darrell Anderson: *Our facility is probably at 70 to 75 percent high definition capability. So as more and more clients move to high def, that means more opportunities for us, and I think that is a good thing for our post-production business.*

Robert Glass: *I think with DirecTV and satellite companies and cable providing more high definition programming, it gives us an opportunity to do some restoration or re-mastering services for companies that perhaps shot on film and transferred standard def. Those clients now have a channel that is airing high def material and they need to go back and transfer their properties to high def. We have been doing that for a couple of clients and it has been quite successful. So there are definitely some opportunities there with more and more programming shifting to high definition.*

Will there be as much work as with the advent of DVD, entire libraries that need to be re-mastered and represented?

Robert Glass: *Definitely. It does depend on the particular client, some are moving forward and just delivering now in high def, and some cable companies and studios and what have you are going through their entire libraries and re-mastering in high def or higher.*

Are there technological advances that you are anticipating, or equipment you are considering adopting?

Darrell Anderson: *We are looking into server technologies that will lead to a file based, tapeless workflow. We would be able to use storage media for our HD elements and move the media around as its needed from one department to the other without having to use physical tapes. We will only have go to tape for the final delivery of the client's material to the network.*

As some of the cameras and equipment become more affordable and more widespread how does it impact your business? Do you see that happening quickly?

Darrell Anderson: *There are a number of shows that we work with that would like to be in high definition, but can't afford it. More high quality, affordable acquisition formats available in HD mean more people posting in HD, and that can only be good for our business.*

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