Set Etiquette
by Ron Dexter
From the Summer 1994 issue of the Operating Cameraman

Ron Dexter is a world renowned Director/Cameraman. He has been an owner of a very successful Hollywood based commercial production company since 1977. Ron is an innovative equipment designer, mechanic and teacher. He has shot in 20 foreign countries and 35 US states. His video tapes on various aspects of film production are available. For information contact: Dexter’s Trix’s 1-800/274-8749

ROAD MAPS, CARTES ROUTIERES, STRASSENKARTEN

In the entertainment business, set etiquette is a must. For a newcomer on a set it can be like being dumped in a foreign country. The language alone is a struggle. The rules are often different and the glamour factor can distort one’s views. Without a carefully defined structure, a large shoot would be absolute chaos. On small shoots, departmental lines can become blurred, but certain rules of etiquette still apply.

These are not elaborate theories, but are observations and opinions from many years working in the business. There are definitely different ways that things are done on the different size and types of shoots.

GETTING ALONG WITH LOCALS

Don’t think that just because you are in the TEE-VEE or MOVIE business that you are something special. To a local person, you may be a once in a lifetime opportunity to fame or emissaries from Hell. Your success on a location and the success of future crews on that location depends on your behavior. Everywhere you are treading on someone’s turf. Tread lightly. Their opinion of you will determine how cooperative they will be.

The first impression is often the most important. Send in your most diplomatic person with the most in common with the area to make that first contact. Maybe . . . ”Hello, how are you . . . You might be able to help us . . . We are trying to find out who owns . . . ” NOT . . . “We’re from Hollywood and we’re going to . . .” They may see Hollywood, TV and movies and the big cities as the reasons that their children are tempted by drugs and sin. To a shopkeeper, you could be a potential customer or shoplifter. Clothes appropriate to the area make you stand out less as a city slicker.

Start any conversation with a perturbed local with, ”I’m sorry, let me get these people out of your way.” NOT, ”We’ll just be a minute.” Being LEGAL or having permission from a higher authority, may not apply locally.
Drivers should park out of people's driveways and parking spaces. Get permission. Don't block traffic. When about to leave, find out the direction of the next location, get turned around and ready to roll.

Treat motels, etc, with respect. Use heating, cooling and lights as needed. Don't "borrow" towels for your own or company needs. Close the door, and turn off lights, etc, when you leave. Be quiet, especially early and late. Keep a low profile with the camera gear. Don't tempt. Word gets around a small town about your behavior.

**COMPANY VEHICLES**

Don't abuse a company or rental vehicle just because it's not yours. If you hear strange sounds, find out what they are. Occasionally turn the radio down so that you can listen for knocks and grinds. If you suspect a problem tell someone in production or transportation so things can be fixed. If on the road, stop and get it checked. Call production immediately.

When you get gas, check the oil and radiator fluid. Engines die for the lack of either one. Check the tires for proper inflation and if the radiator needs water. Watch the gauges and warning lights.

Don't trash a good vehicle with props and equipment. Protect the floor, roof and upholstery. Lock it up if you are not in it. Props, tools or anything stolen at night can mean a disaster on the next day's shoot.

**CREWS AND THEIR OWN EQUIPMENT**

Buying equipment to supplement one's income can be wise, but don't assume that it will help you get work. Would your employers be glad to rent from you AND would you then become competition to YOUR own regular suppliers? If a camera assistant buys filters and batteries to rent he is cutting into one of the money makers for the camera rental house. The rental house loses money on camera body rentals, but makes it up on accessories such as batteries and filters. You might be jeopardizing your own standing with the rental houses.

It's tough deciding how to charge for equipment that you happen to bring along to the job. If something is requested, a rental price should be agreed upon. If you happened to bring along something that saved the day, be careful about how you collect for it. Some producers are fair and some not, no matter how much time and money you might have just saved them. Sometimes your future job may be at risk. It can be assumed that because you are not in the rental equipment business and that what you bring along might be regular tools of the trade.

Remember that your garage operation is in competition with the established businesses with more overhead to support; insurance, rent, employees, etc. In short, be cautious with your side line business. Don't let it interfere with your job that is your major source of income. If your toys make you a better technician, they are worth the cost even if you don't make a lot on them. You can't spend all your efforts on the set just watching out for your equipment. It's there just like anyone else's stuff. Everyone's equipment should be taken care of.
SOME ETIQUETTE FOR LEADERS

Say "Hello," introduce yourself, and get to know people a bit before you give orders. Ask about the families of people you know. Use names. (Make a list.) Thank people. "Yes Sir" and "Thank you Sir" (or Ma'am) implies respect. Try it. (Works when you have forgotten a name.)

Appreciate people's efforts EVEN if they make mistakes. If they are trying, give them credit for trying. Maybe your instructions were inadequate or confusing. Assume that people are trying to do a good job and that they are trying to please you. Even if you think that your instructions were clear, it is wise for you to take the blame for not communicating. Try to understand their side first. It will give you time to plan your own approach. Your ideas will be better accepted if people are given a chance to contribute.

Let's say a director has very carefully researched and planned how to do something mechanical. Instead of telling the crew exactly what to do, he might start with, "I'm sure that you have a better way of doing this, but I had to plan this before you were on the job" or "I didn't get a chance to ask you about this. Let's go through it and see if my idea will work at all." You can reduce their resistance to your offering expert information by being humble. Even if your way is best, a crew may be able to add shortcuts and insure safety. Do listen, and let them do their job.

For runners and assistants, make sure that they understand instructions. Instruct them to call back if there are problems finding something or if things cost a lot more than expected. Sometimes the limited availability of things will require finding substitutes. Often suppliers, or unexpected things found out there, will offer better solutions. Tell them to call in repeatedly as things change.

Ask for forgiveness if you have to repeat things or explain things they may already know. Some egos are easily insulted. Use "I'm sure that you already know . . ." or "Forgive me for repeating myself . . ."

"THE BIG BREAK"

Most people are preparing and waiting for the chance to move up the ladder. Often that next chance is just a trial step to see if you are ready. Usually that chance is given when the opportunity giver thinks you are about ready, not when you think that you are ready. Your talking about moving up may be taken as normal ambition or a swelled head.

Once given a chance, don't assume that you have made it too soon. You may have to step back down to your old job for a little longer because of not being quite ready or just because there is no need for you in that new position at the moment. Breaks are often given on less demanding jobs so that you will have a better chance of succeeding.

Too often a break goes to people's heads and they think they are an old pro in just three weeks. Knowing the mechanical skills of a job is only part of the job. Every advancement requires additional communications and management skills. Running a crew is a skill that takes time to learn. How orders are given is very important.
SUCCESS AND EGO

Success in the entertainment business can be rocket propelled. But DPs and directors often don’t know how to handle success any better than a rock star, politician or other whiz kid. Making big bucks and having everyone desiring one’s services goes to most people’s heads. Ghandi kept his humble by doing humble things every day. It’s human nature, power corrupts.

One of the casualties of the demise of the studio training system is the progressive rise of people through the ranks. Now people can move too fast, sometimes from bottom to top in one or two steps.

A little advice other than be humble. Don’t be a threat to people. Let them feel worthwhile. Let them succeed too. Give them plenty of credit for their efforts.

MY, MY, MY

A "my crew," "my set," "my shoot" attitude by a production manager or production coordinator, rubs most people the wrong way. Often, along with the "my crew" attitude, is an attitude that jobs are dependent upon making that production person happy. "Do things MY way, treat ME right and I will see that you work in this town again."

First of all, people are very uncomfortable working under such a condition. A director, producer, DP, key grip, gaffer, etc can call their crew "my crew," but not the AD or production coordinator, who only puts out the work calls. The crew is usually selected by the director, DP, etc. The coordinator is just making the calls.

Often, along with this ME, MY, I attitude is never making a mistake. A scapegoat for any mistake must be found and admonished, often along with a job security threat. "If you want to work for me you must make me look good in the boss's eyes."

For a DP or department head to talk affectionately about "my crew," he is saying "You had better take care of them," "Don't abuse them," "Don't try to take advantage of them."

FINANCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

One measure of success is the ability to buy things that we couldn't afford on the way up. All the goodies out there to buy sometimes straps the technician, camera assistant or budding director with payments that can be a chain around his neck when the "real break" arrives. One often has to work for a lot less money or none at all when making that next big step up the ladder.

Lots of vans, boats, and even houses are lost for payments when the economy gets a little slow. Losing hard earned things is a blow to one's self esteem. You can blame the economy, some union out on strike, or changes in the business, but how far one extends oneself financially is one's own decision.