

Do-it-yourself demonstrative evidence

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Using standard, off-the-shelf products available at any electronics store or online, the modern law firm can create, in-house, almost any type of demonstrative evidence for a fraction of the cost of using an expensive outside vendor. The two employees in our technology department produce color photographs and blowups, shoot and edit DVD videos, and create high-quality 3-D animations for use at trial.

It didn't used to be that way.

Five years ago, we started to print photographs for trial on newer, less-expensive inkjet printers instead of sending them out for professional, expensive copies. Attorneys and staff quickly commented on how the in-house photocopies looked great and, more important, took less time to produce and at a fraction of the cost of having professional prints made. So now we do most of our own color photocopying, sending out only large jobs or poster-size prints.

This simple transition led us to wonder if we could do more things in-house, so we began videotaping depositions ourselves, using a regular camcorder and microphone. The tape quality was good and, again, we saved money.

At the time, before DVD burners were common, it was still difficult to edit tapes, so we sent videos out for editing. But after we found an inexpensive dual-deck VHS machine for sale at a local electronics store, we started making copies in-house. This immediately saved us, and our clients, hundreds of dollars on every case.

Today, five years later, we produce high-quality DVD video presentations and complex still and 3-D animations for a variety of cases.

Recruit talent

Creating high-quality demonstrative evidence requires skilled staff. Candidates you consider for the position of in-house media producer/ animator/ designer should have college or art-school training in design, computer graphics, and audio and video production.

You may wonder whether you can afford to hire a full-time production person. But remember that the services of outside vendors can cost tens and even hundreds of thousands of dollars per case. The salary of your prospective new employee—even one with considerable talent and experience—will not be more than the cost of a few commercially produced animations and video depositions. And he or she probably will contribute to the firm in other ways, such as by helping with print production, Web-site production, or database programming.

Your new staffer will need to work with your experts to create compelling evidence. For example, when we wanted to make a 3-D animation of a plaintiff's spine and the medical procedure that caused our client's injury, our staffer met with the expert physician who was going to testify in court. After creating some sketches, with input from the doctor, we purchased prebuilt 3-D models online, saving a lot of time since our staffer did not need to build the key pieces required for the animation. Most 3-D animations can be created using models that are available online. Some are even free. One good source is www.3dcafe.com.

While the animation was being produced, we posted drafts of the video on a secure area of our firm's Web site for outside experts to review. This was easy because the staffer who created the animations also maintains the Web site. The online review facilitated revisions by the attorney, animator, and expert.

In all, it took about a month to complete the animation and cost only \$7,000 to produce, mostly for the time spent in production. An outside vendor would have charged at least \$30,000.

Our staffer can also edit video depositions—a skill most firms probably need more than animation. Once we receive a redacted transcript of a taped deposition, we can edit the footage quickly and create a DVD or video to bring to court.

Start small

The cost savings may be tempting, but don't bite off more than you can chew. Remember, it took us five years to get to where we are now. First, try making your own videos and copies of them. Once you feel comfortable at this level, hire someone part-time to edit your videotapes.

Then contact your local college or art school about hiring a student or recent graduate who already has some training. Before you know it, your firm may be producing state-of-the-art demonstrative evidence from scratch at a fraction of what it costs to hire professionals to do it.

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