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Abstract
I'm a television producer. Or I should say I used to be a television producer. I've produced many shows including "Rachael Ray's Tasty Travels," "Design on a Dime Chicago," "That's Clever," "Designed to Sell," and "Uncommon Threads." Those are all lifestyle shows that entrance viewers and then make them ask themselves the question, "Wait, was I just watching that for AN HOUR?" I worked mainly for the Food Network and HGTV (Home and Garden Television) in Los Angeles and Chicago for almost eight years … and then I married an archaeologist, and we moved to Abu Dhabi.

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From Hollywood to Abu Dhabi: Goodbye Team, Hello Me

By Sonya Edelman | sedelman2@yahoo.com

I'm a television producer. Or I should say I used to be a television producer. I've produced many shows including "Rachael Ray's Tasty Travels," "Design on a Dime Chicago," "That's Clever," "Designed to Sell," and "Uncommon Threads." Those are all lifestyle shows that entrance viewers and then make them ask themselves the question, "Wait, was I just watching that for AN HOUR?" I worked mainly for the Food Network and HGTV (Home and Garden Television) in Los Angeles and Chicago for almost eight years…and then I married an archaeologist, and we moved to Abu Dhabi.

Is that crazy? Yes, of course, but the idea of adventure was thrilling and, although the television production market in Los Angeles is one of the largest in the world, I imagined production work couldn't be that hard to find even in the Middle East. I mean, everyone around the world watches TV so producing television should, in theory, be a completely transferable skill, right?

Well, not exactly.

We arrived in Abu Dhabi with three suitcases and dropped them in our completely unfurnished apartment. No refrigerator, no stove, no bed. We quickly figured out how to acquire these things, but my career, well, that took a little more time.

At the time I arrived in the Gulf, most production positions were film- or commercial-based and the majority required Arabic language skills. After months of checking online job boards daily, and coming up with nothing, I realized I was going to have to rethink my trajectory.

I examined my skill set and thought about how I could apply it in a different context. I had written scripts and had several seasons of experience shooting B camera and supplemental footage for broadcast. I had a functional knowledge of Final Cut editing software and most importantly, I had an HD camera. Why couldn't I do it all: be a producer, shooter, writer, editor in one? And, actually, I could, and I did. But the transition wasn't seamless.

Having worked for years supervising large groups of people -- a technical crew, actors and non-actors, designers, assistants - my shift to "one man band" was both liberating and petrifying. If I botched a shot, I couldn't blame it on the cameraman; if the edit wasn't right, I was the one who stayed up into the wee hours until it was. But the gratifying side was that when things went right, I had no one to thank but myself.

My gear is simple and reliable. I shoot with a Canon HV40 which is a small high-end consumer HD camera that shoots a nice 24p. I use a wide angle lens adaptor and have a few mic options: wired, wireless and onboard shotgun. I love how small my kit is. I can run and gun very easily.

I've created content for the International Herald Tribune, a Random House publication, and various web commercials for local businesses. I shot the Abu Dhabi episode of a Web series called "Bridge the Gap" which aims to motivate youth to be more socially conscious, and I even created a pair of artsy poetry music videos for a local client. So my work really runs the gamut. See some examples at http://www.vimeo.com/sedelman2/videos

When I meet with clients, I first ask how they plan to use the footage. Is it intended for broadcast? Internet? Mobile device? A live event? Then I ask questions that will help me get a sense of what the video needs to communicate and what the client's vision is. I sometimes ask

for examples of other videos, commercials, TV shows, films they've seen and liked. Using examples is a helpful jumping-off point when dealing with a client who might not have the technical vocabulary to talk about visual content.

How I go about shooting depends on the material that I have to produce. Sit down interviews? A controlled environment? Or do I throw a shotgun mic on my camera to get sound bites from people on the street? These are all elements that affect how I approach each project.

Once I've finished shooting, my least favorite part of the process begins. Thankfully, I've found a good strategy for the monotonous task of logging footage. I take rough notes on content with the corresponding time code, but if there's a sound bite I think I might use, I transcribe it completely. Then, as necessary, I write voice over either during or after the rough cut, and record it using a great little microphone I got at B&H in New York for $15 (surprisingly, it does as well as my $600 Sennheiser). I use the audio program Audacity or my Mac's built-in camera to record directly into iMovie. When my rough cut begins to take shape, I lay down the voice over and music and fine tune from there.

Shooting in the UAE has been challenging, especially when engaging with the public. People here tend to be modest, and many of the mores make it tricky to get man-on-the-street interviews and B-roll of people in public, especially women. Another consideration is that you need a permit from the National Media Council when you go on the street or any public place. When you pull a shooting permit in Abu Dhabi, you agree "not to shoot any scenes projecting disrespect to the social perspectives, values and culture of the UAE." I am constantly working around these restrictions on content and navigating cultural differences.

There are, however, huge upsides to working in this region. The market here is fluid, and people are willing to grant opportunities to those who seem as if they can get the job done even if they lack extensive experience. I doubt I would have been able to make this career shift as easily in the US and certainly not in LA, where what seems like a small shift (from reality to scripted TV or in my case multimedia) can mean having to start again at the bottom of the ladder. For those of us who pulled ourselves out of the drudgery of being PA's, going back to that isn't the most appealing option.

I love video as a creative medium and will continue to work with clients from a variety of industries. The kind of work I do suits online content beautifully and because I handle all aspects of pre-production, production, and post-production, I can keep costs very affordable.

To anyone thinking about production work in the Middle East, my advice is to go for it! The job market isn't saturated with competition which translates to plenty of opportunity. Think outside the box and capitalize on opportunities you might not be able to take advantage of in a market like Los Angeles or New York. If you're willing to improvise a little, opportunities in the Middle East abound.