

Common Mistakes Made By New Filmmakers

By CJ Powers

Having rubbed shoulders with both amateurs and some of the best film professionals over the years, I have observed numerous differences that create a great divide between the two groups of people. I've also observed that many new filmmakers reprise the same five mistakes regularly, keeping them from joining the ranks of the professionals. Below are the five big mistakes that I've noticed:

Wearing Too Many Hats

Many joked about how often they read my name in the credits after the premiere of my first short film. Wisdom eluded me as I used my middle name, formal name, and another nickname in the credits of my second film - the jokesters wondered if I had employed my entire family. It wasn't until my third film that I realized that wearing too many hats reduced my focus and the energy needed to excel at my storytelling skills as a writer/director. The first opportunity I had to just wear the director's hat returned me three awards.

Amateurs spread themselves so thin that their quality drops, while professionals focus all of their energy on a single task at hand.

Sparing a Favorite Scene from the Cutting Room Floor

I argued with my producer about dropping a key scene from our first children's film. She wanted to stay true to the book and I wanted to drop the scene because it just didn't work. She reminded me how much every scene cost to produce and wanted to make sure every dollar we spent showed up on screen. After the premiere, everyone who came up to me shared how wonderful the film was, but empathized about how one particular scene just killed the story's pace.

Amateurs keep every scene they spend money on or think is cool, while professionals will re-shoot or drop the scene that hinders the telling of their story.

Networking to Name Drop

Alex and Stephen Kendrick, creators of the top grossing independent film in 2008 (*Fireproof*), were the key players for independent filmmakers to network with during various media conventions this year. While I was impressed by the testimonies and God-incidences they shared, I was more enamored by the excitement of those seeking them out. After speaking with the brothers, most amateur filmmakers ran off to friends and associates to drop the Kendrick name with pride, as if they were buddies.

One filmmaker bragged to me about his conversation with Alex and then exclaimed, "They're great, aren't they?" The filmmaker clearly demonstrated that he was a fan, not a fellow professional looking to share or exchange insights with them. The young man asked of my experience conversing with them. I watched his body slump when I told him that we had talked 5 or 6 times at various conventions/workshops. It was as if his special moment with them was not as unique as he had supposed.

To encourage the young filmmaker, I suggested that neither Alex nor Stephen showed any signs of remembering me from previous conversations. His eyes widened and his grin beamed as he told me that Stephen had remembered his name from the night before. In my parting comment, I asked the filmmaker what he had learned from his personal encounter that would help develop or improve his craft. He looked at me with bewildered eyes.

Amateurs network to share stories with friends and associates, while professionals seek to share and learn from others in order to improve their craft and mature as filmmakers.

Thinking Production is King

New filmmakers love making movies regardless of the funds available, quality of equipment, or the richness of the story. Image pieces rule the short film industry as most filmmakers can make a cool impact piece, but lack the ability to tell a great story. This drive to focus on production finds new filmmakers lacking in development and preproduction skills, the tools that

heightens the film's quality and strengthen the story. Steven Spielberg, who earns about \$3M a week and produces about 5 films a year, has been quoted numerous times on the importance of spending enough quality time in the development stage of a picture and its preproduction.

Amateurs spend about 80% of their time in principal production, while professionals spend about 10%.

Message Over Quality

Since the resurgence of the faith and values market, many new filmmakers are heard talking about the theology of a film over their craft. They forget that they have to compete against people like Steven Spielberg and Ron Howard for screen time. Most importantly, they lose sight of their audience being more visually sophisticated, since *Star Wars* changed the way we read pictures.

Spielberg and Howard both release excellent stories, but focus more on the visual presentation than the film's important message. After all, they master the message in the development stage and spend the rest of their time mastering the quality, in order to satisfy their audience's entertainment needs.

Amateurs feel that quality doesn't matter as long as the story is good, while professionals master the story in development and spend the rest of their waking hours bringing quality to the screen.

The good news is that every one of these mistakes can be avoided by making a simple decision to do so. God has gifted each one of us with talent and it is our choice whether we use it to create amateur or professional movies – both are needed.