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Harley Davidson Roars into its Second Century with an NLE System Capable of Meeting the Challenges of the Future

By Jim Maslowski, Multimedia Producer, Harley Davidson

When Harley Davidson does something, we do it in a big way. We've been in existence for a hundred years, and are now headed into our second century. Not many companies can say that, and not many companies have the following that we do.

Not only do we make and sell the most exciting and popular motorcycles in the world, but we also have the greatest family of customers, an extensive line of branded products and services, and wildly popular events to go along with those bikes. Harley isn't just a motorcycle -- it's a way of life that we support with a large, in-house video production department that produces a lot of materials.

For years we'd been using a Discreet editing system but when they started focusing on their high-end special effects stuff, we decided to look for a new edit system. The main thing was to find a system that was compatible with our existing system, give us high quality and ease-of-use, and best meet our needs of shooting mostly digital Betacam. We also realized it was extremely important that we have an open architecture system because previously we had a closed architecture system go down and, without an in-house engineer, service was challenging.

I come from a film background; so, when I started looking for a new system, I asked some of my friends in the film industry what system I should look at. They all said something that works with Final Cut Pro. We already had 70 Macs in house for photography and graphics work, along with our in-house Mac technical guys. Additionally, most of our contract editors were already experienced using FCP, so we felt that we could move into a FCP system with minimal down time, and get it up and running pretty quickly, which was critical to our work flow.

I knew we'd need some assistance designing and integrating our system so once again, I asked around and was referred to Digital Film Tree by friends who had recently seen one of their presentations on NLE Systems. When I met with Ramy Katrib and his associates, they showed me Final Cut Pro 3 on a G4, using AJA Video Systems Kona SD card for real-time, compressed, 10-bit editing. I was very impressed with the system. We compared other systems and video capture cards but we chose Kona because of its reputation and its ability to interface with the G4 and Final Cut Pro. Because AJA was working closely with Apple, we felt very comfortable that when the G5 came out, Kona would probably work great.

The system configuration that we decided upon consisted of the Power Mac G5, Kona SD, and Rorke Data's Galaxy 60 2Gb Fibre Channel RAID running into two Sony Digibeta deck A500 recorders, an MPEG IMX deck, and a DV Cam. When the new G5 Power Macs came out, Digital Film Tree put the system together, tested it, and sent an editor along for the installation and training.

Our new NLE system has been up for about four months and has been getting quite a work out. It has worked phenomenally well. The first week that we had our new system running, we did a live satellite broadcasts to approximately 625 dealers (these are done when new bikes come out, for dealer training, retail sale information, and new merchandise). We spent about three days in pre-production, about one week pre-broadcast (editing our roll-ins), dropped it to Digibeta, then went to broadcast. Everything went smoothly, just as we planned.

Then we produced a retail sales training program on our helmet line highlighting correct fitting techniques AND completed editing a training series for our technicians ON updates for our V-Rod motorcycle. We also do a lot of "more traditional corporate production pieces". Right now, major editing has just completed on show reels for our next worldwide dealer meeting. Show reels consist of interviews, riding footage, interviews with dealer principals, and more. This new project we're doing consists of footage from Nascar owner Ray Everham, nine time Grand National AMA champion Scotty Parker and Loretta Claiborne a 1996 ESPY Award Winner – "full throttle into the next century" is the theme. This will be the opening general session and the entire session will be I-magged on four huge screens in the hotel ballroom where we seat about 4,000 – it will be a pretty spectacular opening.

Additionally, we do a lot of documentaries in-house. Using our new NLE system, we've edited a United Way piece on Harley's funding share with interviews of coaches from local universities. Another documentary is about Harley's 100th Anniversary with footage from a parade commemorating the 100th Anniversary of Harley Davidson, to which we're adding some of our archive footage.

We have two editors working on our new system and they've had a much easier time picking up the new system than with our previous editing system. Real-time editing 10-bit compressed video has been such an incredible capability that has made our editors' jobs so much easier. We often get a call from our communications department because somebody is looking for background material to interview our CEO. We can put together b-roll packages for them far more quickly and easily than ever before, yet with the same quality we've always demanded of our products.

We're not working in HD yet. But we anticipate we will sooner or later - that's why we have the amount of memory that we got on our drives. When we're ready to start working in HD, all we'll have to do is put in a Kona HD card. That's one of the open architect things I really like, it's not going to take engineers to upgrade our system.

One last result of our new NLE system that we weren't expecting is that we're developing quite a reputation in this part of the country. Other companies in Milwaukee and Chicago have heard

we got a new system and they've called and asked how I like it. A major association in the media communications industry wants us to hold an open house of the system in the spring. We're excited that we can share our knowledge and experience with our associates in the post-production industry. It's not often that post products come along offering such easy transition while retaining the same high quality we had with far more expensive systems, yet work so much easier. Editing in real-time in compressed, 10-bit video is a breeze.

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