

Mad Men, Crash Ditch DVD Dailies

How Sample Digital's D3 System Simplifies Production Workflow

By Bryant Frazer

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Bobby Williams, VP of post-production at Lionsgate, has been relying on DAX digital-production workflow technology from Sample Digital as a solution for encoding digital dailies for TV episodics for about seven years. But this year, as the company switches shows including *Mad Men* and *Crash* to the new D3 System, Lionsgate is moving from distributing dailies on DVD to an all-streaming solution. The new workflow is definitely greener and probably more secure, and it's also reduced headaches for Williams. *F&V* rang him up to ask him how it works.

How long have you been using the DAX dailies system?

We've used DAX for something like seven years, and they switched us over recently to the D3 System. We used to have someone internally encode the dailies and put them on the system. But now we have so many shows, so much going on, and the fact that we've been able to eliminate the DVDs is a big help. We're just having whatever lab we're using at the time do the encode. Right after telecine, right after the transfer's done, they encode them, and within an hour or so everyone who uses the system gets a notification that they're up.

Blue Mountain States is a brand-new show for Spike TV that just started shooting two weeks ago. That show and *Crash* both started on D3 this year, so we didn't have to move anybody over [in mid-season] from the older system.

And they're distributed completely electronically?

Yes. And at any time of the day, too, which is wonderful. When we shoot *Blue Mountain States* in Montreal, the time difference means that by the time the dailies actually get down here — because we're still shipping HD dailies to L.A. — they might not get to the lab until 8 or 9 at night. But they're up, with a notification email in somebody's inbox, by 11 p.m. and the production has them the next morning. A lot of hassles I had previously are now taken care of. And it's greener, too. When you've got five shows going and a reel or two of dailies coming for each show for each executive, that's a lot of waste that we don't see anymore.

Back when we were only delivering DVDs, you had to limit who saw them, just because of the expense. Now you can grant somebody access if they need to download them, or not give them access. Generally just myself and my assistant and our counterparts at the network and in production can download. Everyone else is limited to streaming. But we can let them download the files if they need to. I think it's great that some of the assistants can see dailies. Before, they would never be able to see it. Sometimes, there are scenes that have nudity or something else involved with them that we don't want people to see, so we either don't put them up or we limit people's access.

How many of your shows are shot on film?

Just *Mad Men* and *Crash*. Everything else is in HD.

Does shooting in HD help make the dailies process a little smoother?

There's not much difference except the time. Film is going to take a lot longer to process and telecine. *Mad Men* goes to Laser Pacific. *Crash* comes from New Mexico, gets to the L.A. airport, then goes to FotoKem [for processing] and then it still has to go to The Post Group, where it's transferred and encoded.

How do people actually watch the dailies? Do they use their computers, or the Digital Dailies set-top box Dax provides?

I've set up all the executives here at Lionsgate with a second [computer] monitor. There's a clickable icon for DAX D3, and you can run the system on that second monitor all day long. The set-top box is wonderful for certain people. But in the television industry, and for the executives I work with? You don't really have time

to look anywhere else but your computer. You're on the phone and multitasking. Having the monitor right next to me, just running dailies and using my mouse to control it, is the easiest. The set-top box requires a little more patience because you have to actually use the remote control, and I just don't even have the time to look over at that television a lot of the time.

And you can build your own playlist in D3. You can take dailies and cut your own sequence if you want to. My producers in Montreal aren't in the edit room, but they can actually cut this stuff together. You can put notes in there. It's awesome to do it on your computer, but it's more difficult to paw through stuff on a television screen. It's really efficient to just use a second monitor.

Do you worry about keeping the monitors calibrated, so everyone's seeing exactly the same color and contrast?

I definitely do. But everybody knows that they can set red flags. Someone will let me know if something looks funny. With DVDs you wouldn't find out for two days until somebody popped a disc in and looked at it. Now, I'll get an email from my head of production or have the network call me right away, and I can call my post guy and say, "How did it transfer? What did it look like?" And it turns out that the picture is a little darker when you watch on your computer screen. This system lets you put those concerns to rest a lot quicker. It's not a big problem, but I've definitely gotten those phone calls. At least we're looking at exactly the same thing, and if there is anything funny, hopefully it's just a glitch from the telecine.

Are people watching dailies in HD?

We're not watching on HD monitors. But they're encoded using H.264, which means they look a lot better than they ever used to. I think that's why I don't hear too much about color calibration or other problems with the monitor.

How many shows is Lionsgate doing right now on the Dax system?

Right now, we're only on five shows.

How long do you keep the dailies on the system?

Quite a while. I've seen them up there for a year or two. We've run into issues where we had to go back to old dailies and check them out, so it's really helped us out — especially me. I don't have to back and find them in storage. When we had everything on our internal server and not with DAX, which is way too big a job for one person, we used to take them down because it was bogging us down. But they tend to leave them up for us.

What would you consider the next jump forward for this kind of workflow?

I'm hoping that eventually we'll be able to hook the Avids up to it and have Avid file delivery. If we had Avids on set we could share all those files with the Avids here and wherever we were posting the show. There's a big value in that for many different things – recaps, promos. The system is really good for recaps. There are so many approvals with a two-minute recap that it's nice to just flow that up on the D3 and get a quick response. I know they're working on it, but I don't want to be a guinea pig!

http://www.studiodaily.com/filmandvideo/currentissue/Mad-Men-Crash-Ditch-DVD-Dailies_11032.html