

Are We In?

By Sean McCormick

At the beginning of the workday on any film set, the first thing heard is, “we’re in, we’re in!” It’s the production world’s equivalent of a [factory whistle](#). Thousands of furloughed television commercial workers – including yours truly – yearn to hear this again. It’s time we got back to work.

Commercials tend to pay more than other types of projects. There’s a reason for this. If they didn’t, no one would agree to work on them. The days are fast-paced and can run anywhere from 10-18 hours long. They often include multiple locations, cramped and uncomfortable conditions, temperamental directors, nitpicky clients and a daily to-do list that is often the stuff of fantasy.

Not anymore.

For commercial production to be successful in the age of COVID-19, ad campaigns will need to be designed from scratch to reflect the limitations brought about by film crews and actors who are having to potentially work alongside the coronavirus.

“The creative needs to match the reality of what we can do. It’s going to need to be one location with half the crew size we’re accustomed to. I have one client that I work with every year. I told him that whatever y’all come up with needs to be one or two actors in one location, with no extras,” says Christopher Rogers, an Austin-based production supervisor.

I won’t miss the extras, but they want us to halve the crew size, now? The last commercial I worked on had over 40 people working and we barely managed to get everything done by sundown. Sweden’s COVID-19 [filming guidelines](#) estimate that

the new workflows and smaller crew sizes “will cause a small decrease in productivity. We estimate this at about 10%.”

This is a hilarious prediction with which production company owner Ashley Bergeron-Ford disagrees. “I’m thinking more of a 30 to 40% increase. 12-hour shoot days – ain’t happening anymore. Not until we have a vaccine,” she says. Rogers concurs with this. “It’s going to take more time to get things done; we’re going to have to manage our clients expectations,” he said.

This is good news for [beleaguered crew members](#), but I suspect these new constraints will introduce a few problems.

Time is the most valuable commodity on any film set. Adding a day or two to a project’s schedule, along with the new medical personnel and additional production assistants, is going to be expensive.

Rogers isn’t terribly troubled by this. “You are no longer going to have 15 agency and client personnel flying in. That can cost 20 or 30 grand on a shoot. You’re no longer going to have gift bags. I think you’re just moving your money around,” he says.

[Virtualization](#) of the clients will be nice but accommodating the on-set director while navigating 10-20 different Zoom participants’ “thoughts” is possibly going to bog things down. “I have an entire page written about patience,” says producer David Wolfson. “They are going to have to understand that it’s just not normal anymore.”

Rogers believes that enhanced pre-production planning will be essential for success. “They’re going to have to make up their minds on all sorts of things beforehand: props, wardrobe, set dressing – they can’t decide on the day,” says Rogers. Personally, I’m a little skeptical of this claim. I recall working on a spot for the Container Store last year where it took over two hours to roll the first take due to 15 people

disagreeing about how many shoes to place in a closet.

Assorted growing pains with the workflow aside, when the [Governor's Strike Force to Open Texas](#) finally allows us back in, this new normal looks to be way better for us workers. At least, until there's a vaccine.