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Low ceiling, no limits

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A low ceiling hasn't stopped the National Terrorism Preparedness Institute from achieving high production values.

Since 1998, the NTPI has been providing Weapons of Mass Destruction training for civilian and military first responders from St. Petersburg College in St. Petersburg, FL. Created as a result of the Defense Against Weapons of Mass Destruction Act of 1996, it provides classroom and online educational services, plus it broadcasts a monthly program to its clients via satellite.

The video production facilities are housed in a 60x30-foot space that once served as a warehouse. The room has a relatively low ceiling, explained Charles Hall, NTPI's director of media services. As a result, once we put in a lighting grid, we had very little room for complex sets. Plus, we had no place to build them and no place to store them.

To deal with the space issues, NTPI uses an Orad ProSet virtual studio system with an integrated Maestro 3 CG. NTPI's production crew shoots the talent in front of a chromakey green background, then electronically adds a virtual set that's either downloaded directly from a third party virtual set library or created by NTPI's graphics artist. The process is done in real time with four different cameras tracking in the environment at the same time.

Because the virtual sets can look as lofty as desired, NTPI's 12-foot grid is no longer an issue. Our set designer sometimes creates virtual sets entirely from scratch, Hall noted. Other times, he downloads a set, then modifies it to better suit our needs. We can change our sets to closely mirror the topics of our shows.

For instance, one of our regular monthly shows is a live-to-tape panel discussion called Live Response. Each show has a national look to it, with the Capital Building being prominently featured in the background. Meanwhile, when we produced a cultural awareness show that focused on Indonesia, we used our Orad system to create a virtual Indonesian village. NTPI programs are shot using four Sony DXC-D35 cameras. Three are on Shotoku pedestals, while the fourth is on a CamMate jib.

image1

Our entire production system is flightpack designed and can be transported wherever we need to take it, Hall added. Sometimes we do this with our Live Response broadcast, to take it to locations directly related to our WMD training mandate.

Video is switched through a Thomson Grass Valley KayakDD and audio is mixed using a 24-channel Soundcraft K2 console. Beyond the Orad Maestro 3, NTPI has a Chyron Duet LEX CG. For editing, the facility has four Final Cut Pro suites and one Avid suite.

Programs are recorded and played out from a Doremi six-channel server and four Sony DNW-A75 Betacam SX VTRs. We shoot in Betacam SX and broadcast in SD, said Hall. In the future, we anticipate moving up to 16:9 and HD, but that is a few years down the road. Our purchase of a video server is a step toward that digital future, as is our use of virtual sets.

Hall has two pieces of advice for other government agencies considering the switch to virtual sets. Before you buy anything, do your homework, he said. We spent several months researching various virtual set companies, and visited virtual set operations in DC, New York, and Miami. Because of our low ceiling grid, we learned that not all virtual set products would work in our space.

Also, be prepared to invest the time and labor necessary to address the learning curve associated with virtual sets. You cannot expect to install the equipment and software and just begin using virtual sets, Hall warned. It takes time to get everyone properly trained and comfortable with it. ★

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Virtual Set Suggestions

- ★ Measure your studio space, note any atypical obstacles and height limits.
- ★ Research virtual set providers to see if they can meet your specs.
- ★ Check your existing hardware and make sure its sufficient to use the virtual set software you want you might need to upgrade.
- ★ Allow time to train staff in using virtual set technology.



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