

Interview with SMPTE President John Mason

The Journal caught up with SMPTE's new President, John Mason, while he was on business in New York City, and was able to ask him a few questions about himself, what he expected from his new post, and the direction he sees SMPTE heading.

SMPTE: Can you tell us a little about yourself?

Mason: I was born in Washington DC, in 1943. My father was in the navy and after the war, moved to Rochester, NY where he found a job with Eastman Kodak Co. He stayed with Kodak his entire professional life. We later moved to Chicago, where I spent most of my youth.

I did my undergraduate work at Washington and Jefferson College in Washington, PA, majoring in English, and then went to Ohio State in the late 1960s where I majored in speech communication with a minor in film. I received a Ph.D. in 1973 from Ohio State and began teaching filmmaking, film production, documentary film, film history, group communication, mass media studies, and a variety of other things at Wayne State University in Detroit. After that, I went into the business world, doing consulting and writing before finally joining Kodak's motion picture division in 1982.

My wife Sheila and I have two children from my first marriage, Hannah and Luke, and they both live in New York City. I like being outdoors, hiking, vacationing, various sports, and going to the movies. Sheila and I enjoy Hawaii a lot, taking a cruise as often as we can.

SMPTE: Your title at Kodak is Manager, Student and Emerging Filmmaker Programs, what does that mean exactly, what do you do?

Mason: Motion picture education has always been near and dear to Kodak. In fact, when I first joined the division, it was called Motion Picture and Educational Markets. So the emphasis

and awareness of education has always been very strong. Although the name has changed, the interest, concern, and support of education remain. About ten years ago, we created an official marketing program, with a thrust toward embracing student filmmaking worldwide, putting into place a program that had specific components and elements relating to the film school audience. This concept spread into the emerging filmmaker group. An emerging filmmaker might be someone who has left the ranks of academia and is now trying to make it as a professional: not quite a household name yet but a growing, aspiring, and developing professional. We wanted to encourage relationships with them since they obviously are customer-based now and will be into the future, so it seemed to make good marketing sense.

SMPTE: The idea of embracing emerging and student filmmakers certainly sounds like something that can be transposed over to SMPTE.

Mason: Very much so, it's the same philosophy. We're top heavy with veterans, people who've been with us for 10, 20, 30, 50 years, and we're a little thin in the ranks of the student population and younger professionals. The aim is to reach out to them because, although it's a real cliché, they are the future. They will be occupying the higher positions in the future, making decisions, making the money, writing the articles, and pre-



SMPTE President John Mason (r) with Past-President Charlie Jablonski, (l).

sending the papers; so if they don't know who we are early in their careers, it might be harder to attract them later on. The specific program at Kodak varies in its components, and includes product grants for film schools, scholarship programs, educational modules, materials, and communications pieces that are available free of charge to film school students and other programs and departments around the world.

SMPTE: It sounds very encompassing actually.

Mason: It is. There is a lot going on now and seem to be more and more students [of film]. Actually in the late 1970s and 80s there was some pulling back from the film departments at colleges and universities. In fact the one I matriculated at, Ohio State, eliminated its film and production departments entirely; Wayne State eliminated its department in the early 1980s. But lately, over the last 10 to 15 years with the expansion of production all over the world, it is a growing field.

Not too long ago, people entering the film and television business did not necessarily come from film school; the migration path into the industry was very unconventional.

They were all mavericks and street fighters, and many of them were not formally educated. The studio bosses were all self-made people. But the migration path is now definitely film school, and I don't have a firm number but I'm guessing that easily 70 to 80% or more of the people in the film business have been educated in production.

Now, applying this to SMPTE, I'd say we have some strong people in sections management and in the educational arena. David Prince and Rene Villeneuve are very well attuned to the importance of potential SMPTE members. I believe the Board and Officers are fully supportive of our educational mission and outreach. Generally and specifically, we have tried to increase and expand our presence on college campuses, and I look forward to working to increase both student and section membership.

SMPTE: You've been a member of SMPTE for about 20 years, what have been some of the major changes to the Society that you have witnessed and which, in particular, stand out in your mind as being most challenging to the organization as a whole?

Mason: Well, ironically, I remember my first SMPTE gathering, which was in New York City, so it must have been the Fall Conference. We used to have an opening night bash and it typically was at the Copacabana nightclub. I remember that the whole place was just jammed with SMPTE people, and it was just a huge party atmosphere. So, I have to say that in a way, those were the glory days of the Society. We had more revenue, a larger membership, huge conference attendance, and those conferences had spectacular closing night banquets with hundreds and hundreds of people attending. I'm sure there are a lot of other people who have noted the change over the years—we're just not at that level any more.

SMPTE: What instigated that change?

Mason: I think what happened is that in the 70s and 80s it became more and more apparent that the powerbase within SMPTE was shifting from a

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primarily film-dominant to a more TV and broadcast-dominant Society. So a lot of film-based people and organizations lost faith a little bit and pulled back rather dramatically on conference participation. What we have noticed over the years since then is that broadcast and video manufacturing-based companies have dominated the exhibition floors. That is a significant change.

One of the things that former Presidents Stanley Baron, David George, and Charlie Jablonski have been working on over the past several years has been to try to re-balance things. You have to go where the industry is going, so a lot of the business of the Society and the dynamic growth has been in the areas of TV and video. Here we are trying to go back to our core base, that is film and television, and trying to balance things out a little bit more and recognizing that the legacy of the Society has been film. We all need to recognize that in many ways the film industry and film technology are as dynamic as current developments in video and other media. It isn't really a film

world versus tape world; it's a world that includes both, and digital is in there and hybrid technologies are in there. For into the future we'll use all of those technologies. The buzz word is “convergence,” so we want to be as far reaching and encompassing as we can possibly be.

SMPTE: In your tenure as President, how do you intend to maintain some of these key roles in the convergence of digital television, video, and traditional film technologies?

Mason: I'm a firm believer in strong relationships, or in the value of relationships to get things done. I think one of the things that I would like to do personally is to spend some time visiting key allies across all sectors of the industry. We have historically been partners with the creative community in Hollywood, with the NAB, SIGGRAPH, the MPA, IBC, ACVL, ASC, and the DGA, and I would like to spend some time personally visiting the officers of these organizations. In my new capacity I want to get the message across that we want to work with them, to be partners with them. We have a lot of history together and a future with them, so I don't want anyone to feel as if they are not a part of what SMPTE is all about. Personal interaction like that goes a long way in this business. We also want our Board of Governors and Sections Officers to recruit members from all participating fields, through our training, our outreach, and the *SMPTE Journal*, and to be reflective of as many points of view as possible. This is not just a film statement, or a TV statement, or a new media statement, but I think it is a fairly broad consensus within the Society.

Nevertheless, the real organ that communicates what we're all about is the *SMPTE Journal*. Some have suggested changing things a little, in that the *Journal* speaks to a certain SMPTE audience. Yet there is a vast need from people of a more practical bent, users who want to know how things work and not necessarily what the underlying theory is behind an idea or specific piece of equipment. We haven't done such a good job in relating to them. We know they're out there, in fact a membership survey found that the typ-

ical SMPTE member is exactly that type of a person, he or she is not a hardcore engineer and doesn't do theoretical research or participate in standards work, but is more of a practitioner. However, they come to Section meetings and events; they're members, but are exactly the type of person we are not really reaching.

SMPTE: Other than the SMPTE Journal, are there any other tools within SMPTE that can be used to attract these individuals?

Mason: The other real pull is our Section structure. We are a worldwide organization that has nearly 30 Sections around the globe, and it is just amazing how much work they do month after month, year after year. The people involved in SMPTE Sections are enthusiastic, dedicated, and professional. They're really sharp, and we owe it to them to say, "Hey, look, you're really the lifeblood of the Society." The officers of this Society can make plans, but it is the section members, volunteers throughout the world, who really make things happen. So I think we are going to have to look to them more and more to put a face on SMPTE.

We used to have training for Section Managers and we believe that there is a lot of value in it and plan to do it again. So Rene Villeneuve is busily working on pulling some things together. We also want to provide some training for Governors; they need a better definition of their role within the Society. So, at the AMI Conference in February, we will have an orientation for Governors to inform them of what the expectations are, and in particular, to explain to them that we expect them to be involved in the business of the Society. They are not just there to passively listen to meetings and simply follow what the Executive Committee determines. We are going to need them to lead the way in a number of critical areas: membership, sections development, and building up our sustaining membership base. There are many things Governors can do that we have not asked them to do before, but that we think we need from them now.

SMPTE: The Society recently went through a Strategic Planning exercise. Can you tell us more about that?

Mason: I do not have to exact dates, but it began about a year and a half ago, at least. Past-President Charlie Jablonski was the driving force behind it, so I give him full credit. He believed, and the rest of the Executive Committee agreed, that it was time for us to do a gut check. We needed to step outside our day-to-day activities and look towards the future. Now, SMPTE has a standing Long Range Planning Committee, chaired by the Executive Vice-President. The way this usually works is that an outside facilitator is brought in, a company with expertise in strategic planning for our type of group or association. We contracted Price Waterhouse Coopers and had several days of workshops and individual brainstorming. We also included representation of the Governors to get some of their thoughts and perspective. Basically, it was a needs assessment: what's going on, what are the problems, where do we see things going, what are we trying to focus on, and other similar questions.

Price Waterhouse kept filtering, defining, and re-clarifying so they could return to us and say, "Although you guys are going to have to find the solutions, here is what we believe you are telling us about yourselves." Then there were sessions where we reacted to what they were saying, "Is that what we said, is that what we meant, are they interpreting it right?" Very importantly, we staffed the working groups with Governors, dividing them between the committees, and I think that this worked out really great, because they have in their ranks an unbelievable amount of expertise. I mean, these are people who have indefatigable talent, knowledge, experience, and a great deal to contribute; just look at those studies to get a feel for the level of contribution that was made from all involved. I believe that the material within the strategic planning exercise is extremely valuable, and it really does assist us in steering SMPTE into the future.

SMPTE: Will you, as the new President, be using this as a tool to help you do your job?

Mason: It really is useful in that it lays out and identifies key ideas and concepts in a number of critical areas. It then assigns an implied value to those issues, which are important because of the process that we went through to get the information about ourselves. If something hasn't been included, it probably is not too important. However, if it's in the strategic planning report, it merits greater attention. It means that the issue has a high ranking and score around it and so defines the agenda. These issues were not dreamed up in a vacuum, but came from the membership—there is an authenticity here and we need to focus on them.

I defined it in my article as essentially assessment work, in other words, we have assessed a situation. I think another value for this is that it provides a framework for continued action and implementation. In other words, we have the committee structure, broad areas defined, and issues highlighted, so I think it is reasonable to say let's continue to work from here. The material so abundant that there is no possible way we are going to get everything done in two to five years. So, what I think we need to do is, go back to the committees and say, "Let's start refining things from the material that is developed now and let's put a plan in place." As we start this process, we need to focus on things in which we can show some results in a reasonable timeframe so that we can say, "We've done it, we've got it going, it's on line, it's being mailed, it'll happen, it is happening.

Some issues never seem to be resolved. We forever talk about the problem of expeditious delivery of the *SMPTE Journal* overseas and the fact that our international brethren wait and wait to get the hard copy; we need to do something about that. Maybe the solution is putting some editorial content on the web, which kind of looks like the way we are going. This is only a small example, but let's focus on something and try get it done; rather than highlight a dozen other things, let's pick a couple

of things that we can get excited about and get results.

There will be people who will have different ideas about what we should be doing, but I believe the strategic planning exercise highlights what we really need to be focused on. In other words someone might ask what the acid test is in terms of making the commitment to one issue as opposed to another. Well, it basically boils down to whether it adds value to the Society and will be good for the membership. I mean, the whole purpose of the Society is to provide services and value to the membership. Looking at it through the eyes of a member, if you're not getting something out of it, you're going to stop doing it. You won't care, you won't go to a section meeting, and you won't renew your membership. It's not a big mystery. These are the things we want to focus on, because if people are satisfied, they're going to want to work, they are going to want to contribute, they are going to want to give back to the Society, and that's what we want.

SMPTE: In your message, you mentioned your father, who was SMPTE's 29th President. Can you tell us a little about him?

He was President in the mid-70s, which, as I mentioned, was the golden age of SMPTE, where we had 15 to 20,000 people at our conferences and huge exhibits. The issue of the day was one-inch videotape and the dawn of the VTR (every era has a dynamic, with events and advances that seem to punctuate and highlight it). My father thoroughly enjoyed his tenure as SMPTE President. He enjoyed the people he worked with, he enjoyed what he did in his work, and he believed strongly in the Society, what it represented, and what it meant. So he was a very good model for me.

SMPTE: I've got two more questions both of them somewhat chronological. How do you picture SMPTE in 20 years?

I expect it would be a larger, more diverse, and truly international society. I think it will continue to play a greater role in the motion imaging



John Mason conducting a panel discussion at the Hollywood Section meeting, October 1998.

field. People want to be entertained and will continue to gather in living rooms, theaters, auditoriums, and at computer screens, to sit and interact and enjoy content that was produced by somebody else. SMPTE has to play a key role in this process. Fundamental to this process are SMPTE's standards for production: its practices and its guidelines. These will become increasingly complex, and there will be a greater demand for our Society to make sense of it all. So, will there be a need for a SMPTE in 20 years? I think there will be more of a need. What we must do to really harness and continue to hold a unique position is to have more diversity, and I mean this in the traditional sense: more women, more people with diverse backgrounds, more members from other countries—all of this to strengthen our services and value. It is my belief that we have nothing but opportunity ahead of us, because the need for what we're doing is only going to increase.

SMPTE: Are there any other areas that you would like to touch on?

I would underscore the critical role that the Headquarters staff plays in all of this. We definitely don't want to minimize their contribution and the fact that more and more is expected of SMPTE staff at all levels. As part of the process, we really need to work together to make sure that Headquarters is properly staffed, financed, and has the tools needed to get the job done.

That's another very significant shift; over the years the Executive Committee, especially the Officers of the Society, played a much stronger

role in all areas of operation. They were really hands-on in a lot of areas: finance, conference organization, and editorial functions, to name a few. In the past, members of the Executive Committee were very involved in day-to-day operations; however, over the years, that operational emphasis has shifted more and more to Headquarters, because members of the Executive Committee are have their own work assignments and more and more is demanded of them in those arenas. So we're all finding it harder to devote time to organizations like SMPTE, which means the staff have more and more to do, and that's probably going to continue.

SMPTE: When SMPTE historians recount your presidency, what do you want John Mason's legacy to be?

First, it's a privilege to be in the lineage of some wonderfully outstanding people. All former presidents have made great contributions to the Society. Personally, I'd like to grow our membership and substantially increase the number of student sections. I'd also like to work on SMPTE's international direction. We've talked about the possibility of having a physical presence or office outside the U.S., and I think we should take a closer look at that idea.

Most important, I'd like to leave the Society on a sound financial footing and make sure we have the internal and financial wherewithal to continue our work and expand on it, because when are stronger we can offer and do more for every SMPTE member, and make the organization a stronger entity in the field of motion imaging.