SELECTING A MAC-BASED PROMPTER SYSTEM
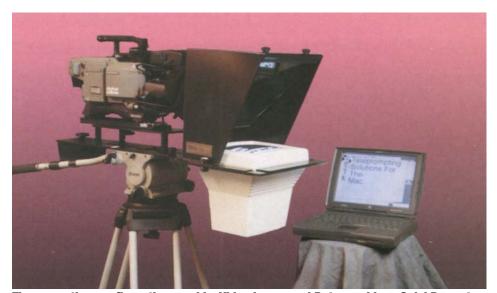
BY CHRIS ALLAIN

I suspect that mine is not the only production facility that occasionally needs a teleprompter. It's hardly an essential purchase since we use it infrequently and because we don't intend to aggressively rent the system to others. Our needs differ dramatically from those of a TV news operation. We wanted a teleprompter mainly for convenience, so it didn't make sense to spend alot of money. This report discusses the solutions we chose and the criteria we considered in our selection.

We typically use a prompter for talking head commercials. Producers can save time and improve the quality of a performance in political spots, for example, in which we're often required to work with inexperienced talent.

I've always discouraged the use of cue cards. At the close distances of most location shoots aond with less experienced talent, you often notice eyes darting between the lens and a cue card or looking noticeably off axis to the lens.

A teleprompter system is basically composed of two parts, the prompter presentation hardware and the computer with software that feeds the prompter display. The prompter presentation hardware includes a display, light blocking shrouded, beam splitter mirror through which the camera lens is aimed, and a camera/prompter support frame to mount all of this to the tripod. Today, most vendors sell these systems as packages with the prompter presentation hardware and the software. They usually rely on the buyer to supply the computer. Although vendors typically provide systems as packages, it is certainly not essential to buy everything from the same company. Increasingly you'll find the prompter hardware and software available separately. The considerations involved in selecting a prompter system include the computer platform on which the prompter software

The prompting configuration used by Vidox Image and Data combines QuickPrompt software, a nine-inch VGA monitor, and a Vinten Vision 20 tripod.

will run, the prompter software package requirements, the size and type of display, the prompter's support mechanism, and the tripod that will support the prompter and camera.

The Computer Platform

Preference and habit, more than anything else, drive the selection of a computer platform to run the prompter package. We use Macintosh computers primarily and had little interest in purchasing a new Windows lap top for this application. An existing Apple PowerBook could drive the prompter when we needed it. Besides we had no interest in converting our text files to a Windows format each time we used the prompter. Macintosh computers can read Windows formatted disks, though, so we'd be able to accept a disk from a Windows machine. Although there's a selection of MacOS compatiable packages available, I was quickly able to eliminate those vendors that didn't

offer one. (Note to prompter vendors: a user is not likely to change platforms to use a tele-prompter, so if you don't have a MacOS package available, license one.)

We wanted to use a prompter monitor with a high scan rate display. The PowerBook's flexible external monitor configurations suited the application well. Most Macintosh computers use a multi-monitor logical display, where users position windows relative to one another using a control panel. The PowerBook's software allows the external monitor to mirror the LCD display or to display different material. With this system one could theoretically use several different software packages to display text for prompting. You could even use a word processor, but dedicated prompter packages give you controls over the stream of text that make them much better solutions.

The Prompter Software

Most of the manufacturers of prompters offer software packages for the Mac OS, although only a few developers actually

produce the software distributed by those manufacturers. The package we selected, QuickPrompt from the Marietta Design Group, (www.mariettadesign.com) offered the best feature set for our needs.

Other Mac OS-compatible software packages available include a couple of low-cost packages: Talent Prompter, form John Stanley Training Programs (www.si-inc.com/prompter/),, and Speech Prompter, by The Orator Company (www.the-orator.com/). These are very basic packages for under $100, with limitations such as a single font and size. For some users, however, a stripped-down package might fit the bill. Two higher-end products, MagicScroll, from Magic Teleprompting (www.magic-scorll.com/), and AccuPrompt, also from Marietta, have somewhat comparable features and prices of $2,800 and $2,995 respectively.

Marietta Design has adopted several customer-friendly policies. They offer a generous ten-day trial policy. Prospective buyers try out the software by downloading it form Marietta's Web site. The software package will run for ten day, after which, it cannot be reinstalled without a valid serial number. When we downloaded QuickPrompt for testing, we tried it on two PowerBooks and a couple of desktop machines, so we were confident about compatibility.

We chose the single-user version of QuickPrompt. At $995 retail, it's the most affordable package Marietta offers. They lsos sell a multiuser version for $1,495 that can be installed on as many systems as the buyer desires at a single facility. Marietta Design reports that their policies—especially the one eliminating the hardware-key copy protection—have led to increased sales.

Marietta's more advanced prompter package, AccuPrompt, sells for $2,995 in a single-user version and $3, 995 for a multiuser version. Marietta recommends AccuPrompt for users who need to make a last-minute changes or who handle a much larger quantity of scripts, for example, local or network news operations.

Marietta keeps the versions numbers of QuickPrompt and AccuPrompt in sync. version 1.72—the release current as of September 1997— works with Mac OS 7.6 and 8.0. QuickPrompt ran fine on an older

Duo model and a PowerBook 1400 with a 117 MHz PowerPC 603e without level 2 cache, but Marietta recommends speed doubler for best performance on slower PowerPC systems. Mirror Image offers a discount on Quickprompt which it sells for $800 when you purchase the Mirror Image prompter hardware.

The Prompter Hardware

We chose our prompter system from Mirror Image Teleprompters, **(www.teleprompters.com/)** another small, responsive company we found in the

"Ironically, a good tripod and head package can cost much more than the prompter itself."

VIDEOGRAPHY classified ads. They build quality systems and offer them at reasonable prices.

One of our primary concerns, in addition to economy, was size and weight. We wanted as compact and lightweight a system as possible. We would have preferred a prompter that used an LCD display, but a significantly higher price and concerns about brightness, led us to a conventional CRT based system. The weight reduction of an LCD based system would have been minimal anyway, since the mirror, camera/prompter mounting frame, and counterweight constitute much of the package's heft.

Because we wanted a compact package, we selected a 9-inch monitor to display the text reflected by one-way mirror back to the talent. Although the screen size is smaller than the 14-in. alternative, the total package weighs 20 lbs.as opposed to 42 for the larger model. Although light by prompter standards, when combined with a camera, the smaller system will still probably exceed the weight ratings of most tripods and heads used for field production. You will almost certainly need to acquire a heavier-duty camera-

support system. Ironically, a good tripod and head package can cost much more than the prompter itself. We had a Vinten Vision 20 that has worked just fine.

We liked the compact 9-inch monitors, available in NTSC and VGA models. We feared readability might become a problem, though, when a myopic politician (anatomically speaking of course) removes his or her glasses. That's why we decided to use the VGA model. The progressive-scan display of a VGA monitor provides a much sharper picture than an NTSC screen. Using a VGA monitor also meant that we didn't have to purchase a converter; laptops output VGA signals, not NTSC video. This eliminated another device requiring power and another link in the chain that could fail. J.T. Meidl, of Mirror Image, suggested that using the smaller screen actually wasn't much of a compromise. With greater distances between the subject and camera, the producer could substitute a larger monitor beside the lens. This greater distance reduces the relative off-axis appearance of the talent's gaze, making it unnoticeable. You can set this up using a VGA-to-NTSC converter to feed an ordinary 25-in.monitor that the talent could read from further away. Having prompter software that allows easy changes to font size also helps tremendously when fine tuning the display for readability. The bottom line is that each time we've used it, the 9-inch monitor has worked out fine.

Overall, Mirror Image Teleprompters makes equipment with a first rate fit and finish and QuickPrompt, from Merietta Design Group, offers just the features we need. I'd recommend both without hesitation. Combined with our Apple PowerBook, we've assembled an ideal teleprompting package for our field use. ☐