

RUNNER

How to break into the film, TV and
commercials industry as a runner
and survive long enough to get
your dream job

BY
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INTRODUCTION

When I was a little bit younger, I wanted to be a cameraman. Even though I had a very basic understanding of what a cameraman actually did, I strongly believed that *that* was what I wanted to do. 'A cameraman!' I would articulate confidently, whenever friends, family and teachers asked me what exactly I would like to be when I left school. 'Landscape Gardener' was the suggestion from my careers adviser, once the computer had formulated the results of my careers test (I can't be sure, but I suspect that anyone who ticked the 'Creative' and 'Work Outside' boxes also found themselves contemplating a future in horticulture).

Cut to a few years down the line and I am studying for a BA Honours degree in Broadcasting; my desire to become a cameraman is still at the forefront of my mind. The course lasts three years and is theory-based, with a huge emphasis on Discourse and Semiotics...

It's graduation day and despite having barely touched a camera in three years, I leave with my degree and set about kick-starting my career as a cameraman. After a short period of time back home, it soon dawns on me that I have absolutely no idea what the hell I am doing.

For a few weeks I wander around with a fixed expression of bewilderment, mystified about my future – Where do I start? What do I do? Who do I know?

I could write a great essay on the representation of race and gender in television, but when it came to applying for a job, I was, quite frankly, screwed. I had been so obsessed with the idea of *being* a cameraman, I had never stopped to think about how I might actually *become* one. My vision went only as far as the end of my degree so that when the time did come for me to break into the world of film, I found myself completely unprepared.

It didn't take me long to discover that, in order to get anywhere, I would have to get some experience in the industry and/or start working at the bottom of the ladder as a 'runner'.

I was familiar with the term 'runner' – I think it had been briefly discussed on my course, and I was also vaguely aware that part of it involved making tea and delivering tapes. Such a job didn't sound so hot to me at the time, not for an esteemed graduate such as myself with large debts, but nevertheless it seemed important to start somewhere and it was becoming increasingly obvious that no one in their right mind was going to employ me as a cameraman straight out of a degree, so I knocked my CV into shape and started applying for various running jobs in and around London.

After a few weeks I had amassed an impressive pile of rejection slips. A few companies were interested but either they were not taking on any new runners or they were looking for a person with some relevant experience. The whole thing was very frustrating – I couldn't get a job until I'd got the relevant experience, and I couldn't get the relevant experience until I had a job.

As a matter of course I was always assured that my CV would be filed away for future consideration. What this really meant, I imagined, was that it would collect dust and turn yellow over aeons of time until runners were eventually replaced by droids ...

My break finally came some time later. I had reached new levels of despair and was contemplating taking time out to go travelling, when through chance I discovered that my friend's sister was the office manager at a very large production company based in Soho, London.

Why this gem of information had never been revealed to me before I will never know, but after a few days of frantic phone calls I was eventually offered a three-day trial as a runner, and I suppose the rest, as they say, is history.

When looking to get into the film, TV or commercials industry, what you will no doubt tire of hearing is that a huge amount depends on 'who you know' ('what you know', as it turns out, is important afterwards). Although it sounds incredibly trite, it is by no means an unsubstantiated statement, as I clearly discovered for myself. But I realised that just knowing a 'someone' is not everything, otherwise this book would be very short.

Thinking about it and knowing what I know now, I was incredibly lucky, but to my own credit had I been useless in those first few days I can confidently say that they would have lost me with no qualms at all. Business is business (the same office manager later fired her brother from a running job) so regardless of who you know, ultimately it's really down to you as to whether you make it or not.

Nevertheless knowing someone who will be willing to help you out is invaluable in this industry and should be fully taken advantage of. So my first suggestion therefore is to ask around because you never know what you'll discover. Obviously not everyone is going to know a 'somebody', so don't get horribly depressed if you find that no one can give you a helping hand. There are several ways into the industry, and knowing a mover and shaker is only one of them. This book will endeavour to show you the other ways in.

The idea for *Runner* unsurprisingly came to me whilst I was working as a runner myself. I was out and about doing my runs one afternoon, when I started thinking about the time when I was looking for running work and feeling like I was simply just another media graduate, competing with thousands of others for what felt like only a handful of positions. I didn't have much of an idea about running then, and I had very little knowledge about the kind of world I was about to get involved in.

Once I was in the industry I saw those trying to get started become discouraged and lose hope quite quickly, whilst a number of those new to running were disillusioned with what they were doing as it simply wasn't what they had expected.

It's very easy to forget that runners are the future of this industry. When you see someone making tea or fetching lunches it's hard to imagine him or her five years later calling the shots or editing a film, but that's simply the way it works. It's the runners who will some day make the TV programmes, music videos, commercials and films that fill our screens and cinemas – somebody has to after all.

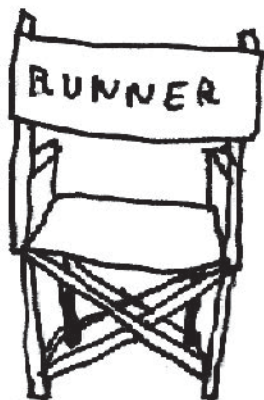
Very few people are born into this industry, which means that the majority of you will have to start somewhere, and whether your desire is to record sound, produce, edit or direct, then there is a good chance that your first steps into this business will be as a runner.

With advice from top industry professionals coupled with my own experience, I have written this book to help you get that all-important foot in the door, and, essentially, to keep it there.

I wish you all the best of luck.

Will Judge

1. THE JOB DESCRIPTION



A FOOT IN THE DOOR

'Be careful who you shit on whilst on your way up – you might meet them on the way down'

(Old media proverb)

If you are savvy with media terms, you could well be familiar with the term 'runner' already. Within the same context you may also have heard the word 'gopher', but in my time as a runner nobody ever called me a gopher (well, not to my face), which leads me to suspect that the term is now either dated or just simply ridiculous. But if you are new to this then runner is your job title at the entry-level of the film, TV and commercials industry.

Whichever way you look at it, running is important, simply because a majority of the people who currently work or have worked in the industry, started off as a runner.

There are exceptions of course, as in all things, but starting as a runner is now understood to be *the* entry route into the industry. Why? Well, not only is it considered a way of earning your stripes or paying your dues, but after a year or two of running (whether you work in TV, commercials or film), you will have a great working knowledge of the business and will also have made a lot of useful contacts. It's these contacts, hopefully, that you will be referring to as either your colleagues or your clients later on in your career.

You will also have proved to yourself and to everybody else that you have what it takes to make it. Conveniently you will only need a few week's worth of running in a couple of places to know whether or not it is the right area of work for you, and coming to that realisation is in itself an invaluable experience.

Starting at the bottom as a runner and working your way up will provide you with an insight and awareness that is valued far more highly by prospective employers or workmates than someone who took a short cut to the top.

You will learn skills that will inform and prepare you like no degree or education can. Contrary to what you may have heard, the job does not fit the stereotype of making tea all day. Yes, no doubt you will be making tea and/or coffee a great deal, but running demands far more from the individual, making it, I think, one of the toughest jobs in the industry.

Running really is like no other job; your friends will probably think you're crazy and your parents will worry about you. The learning curve is steep with generally long unsocial hours and very low pay. It can also be stressful and highly pressured. As a consequence the job soon distinguishes between those who can and those who can't – it just depends on how badly you want it.

If you are lucky enough to get work experience or a running position then employers will be watching you carefully to see if you have the mettle to tough it out. There will almost always be a trial period ranging from a day to a couple of weeks to see how you get on.

Naturally it will be difficult at first and a bit strange, with not knowing anyone or perhaps what to do, but if you can execute it as cheerfully and positively as possible, without complaining about how tired you are and without getting in late, then you will already be on the right track.

It's common sense stuff really, but you will be amazed at how many people get it wrong. If you are not enjoying your work, then it will become obvious to your employers and in all likelihood you will be replaced by somebody a lot more enthusiastic. The application rate is high, the employment rate is low, and so sadly runners are a disposable workforce. It is your mission to try to become *indispensable*, not only in your initial trial period, but also for the remainder of your time as a runner.

This was a point I was occasionally reminded of whenever I was in danger of becoming complacent; getting a job as a runner can be difficult, but keeping it is tougher. Just because you have your foot in the door, don't think they aren't going to slam the door shut.

I have known a number of runners to be fired for all sorts of different reasons and they haven't always been the best of reasons either.

On the other hand if you keep your head down and work hard, then people will take notice and you'll be rewarded with either more responsibilities or possibly, when the time is right, a step up the career ladder.

It really is in a company's best interests to hold on to good people and nurture them up through the organisation, so if you prove yourself to be a valuable asset then it's unlikely that they will want to get rid of you, but you are going to have to work very hard in order to get there.

I have read that successful runners tend to be confident, intuitive, bright, and highly motivated. Anybody who fits this description I am sure would do well anywhere! And while these qualities are obviously good to have, what is most crucial to your success, and I can't emphasise this enough, is your ability to be able to work well with people – to 'get on' with others.

The film industry really is a people industry and the right kind of personality goes a long way. Seeing as you will be working closely with many types of people, on many different levels, for the rest of your career, you can appreciate why this is such an important point.

If you are friendly, helpful and cooperative then you will do well as a runner. If you are pig-headed, miserable and arrogant then it's likely that you won't – it's that straightforward.

I'm not saying that you have to be a grinning idiot or a human doormat – on the contrary, the industry loves individuals with lots of character and flair – and I am not saying that you *have* to be able to get on with everyone either, because you certainly won't. It's just as any decent careers adviser will tell you: you must learn to arm yourself with certain interpersonal skills, which once grasped will carry you forward through every stage in your career, and never are those skills more important than when you are running and meeting new people all the time.

IN-HOUSE RUNNER

If you are working as a runner within the office of a commercials, film or TV production company, or anywhere that's considered the base of operations for the production, then you are recognised as the in-house runner.

The in-house runner's job falls into two halves. One half is your responsibility to make sure that everything in the office runs smoothly. This will include – but is by no means limited to – stocking the fridges with drinks, maintaining the stationery cupboard (reordering when necessary), buying flowers, newspapers/magazines and food for the kitchen, handing out/delivering post, replacing light bulbs, fetching lunches, making tea/coffee, ordering tape stock, taking out the rubbish, preparing rooms for meetings, covering reception, going on 'runs' etc, etc ... you get the general idea.

Each company has its own way of going about its business and your job therefore is to meet its needs in the best possible way, with the minimum amount of fuss, whilst trying to look happy about it.

Many companies give their runners a set of keys to the building, which leaves them responsible for opening up in the morning and closing down the office at night.

If you need to leave early at the end of the day or you can't make it in the morning for whatever reason then cover needs to be sorted out beforehand, but these are fine details your employer will discuss with you. What he or she doesn't always mention is that it is generally understood that the runner okays it with everyone before leaving in the evening, just in case someone needs something doing last-minute. This is not compulsory, but doing a disappearing act at exactly 6 p.m. to meet your friends for beers whilst leaving someone in the lurch isn't going to do your running career any

good. It can be annoying hanging around in the production office when you really want to be going home, but unfortunately that's one of the many crosses a runner has to bear.

When there's more than one runner, however, a rota is usually worked out so that there will be a late runner who arrives in the morning around 10 a.m. and stays behind in the evenings to do runs and lock up the building once everyone has gone home. The late runner alternates each week, so there's a chance for the other runners to catch up on their sleep and social life.

Depending on the size of the company there can be teams of anything up to eight or more in-house runners with additional freelancers on the books who will rotate shifts and provide support and cover when necessary.

When there are a number of in-house runners working in a company, there is often a runners' room or an allocated space – your own base of operations. Here you will be given your orders for running jobs, but you can also use it to do a bit socialising.

In fact that's something that I don't think many people take into consideration when first confronted with the prospect of working as a runner – yes, you'll be doing a load of crap jobs, yes, you have to be professional about it – but actually socialising with other runners is a lot of fun and takes a huge amount of drudgery out of the job.

It's not uncommon for runners to remain friends and end up working together later on down the line, which has certainly happened to me, and that's just the runners you'll be working with, not to mention the whole load of other people you will also meet, have a laugh with and hopefully do some work with along the way.

Needless to say when working you generally don't want to piss about too much, as people won't think you're taking it seriously, and a runner in theory should always be looking busy.

Production companies have different systems for allocating jobs to runners. In one company I worked in we had a runners' book

situated in the runners' room, whereby producers, production assistants (PAs) or the like would write down the jobs that needed doing, labelling them as urgent or otherwise. We then had to initial our names next to the job so that everyone knew who was taking care of what and that it was actually being done.

We also had a few telephones installed in the runners' room so that people could call us if it was too much hassle for them to write the job in the book.

Whichever company you end up working for though, you will learn very quickly how the running jobs are allocated. Furthermore, due to various health and safety regulations, you may be required to always sign out when going on a run, just so that people know where you are and what you're doing should the worst happen. Either way it's always a good idea to let someone know (usually reception or another runner) if you are going out on a run and won't be about for a while.

The other half of an in-house runner's job involves supporting the production. Runners can often be attached or allocated to a production as a pair of extra hands. Producers may ask for you specifically if you have demonstrated some level of competence in one way or another, or they might simply have taken a shine to you, but most of the time helping production with a job, even if it's not one that you're attached to, is just part and parcel of in-house running and you are simply expected to do your bit whenever asked.

Helping production with a job could necessitate anything from photocopying scripts or call sheets, researching locations, filming castings, doing the casting cut-down (which is essentially editing the director's favourite actors from the casting tape), logging tapes, booking/preparing kit, buying props and making travel arrangements such as booking hotels, flights, car hire etc.

The more you can be trusted to do the first half of the job, the more responsibility you will be given in the other. If you can prove yourself to be really good at helping out in production, then it won't

be long before someone wants you there in a more permanent capacity, and even if you don't want to get into production later on, then people will still be willing to give you a chance if they can see that you're a keen worker.

As a side note, it's not essential, but it helps if you know how to edit on software such as Final Cut or Avid, should you need to do any cut-downs, showreels or mood tapes*, as most production companies have their own editing equipment and the more things you can do to make yourself indispensable, the better.

* A mood tape is a film, usually no longer than ten minutes in length, of images or clips taken from other films, typically cut together in a montage style to music, in order to visually convey an idea or feeling to a client of what the director/agency wants their final film to look like.

LOCATION RUNNER

A location is used in a film, commercial, or TV programme simply to aid in the storytelling process. It puts us in context of a story within space and time, giving it credibility and an environment in which our characters or product can come alive.

Sometimes the location is an integral part of the story – a dangerous or hostile place which our hero has to overcome – or else it can be a backdrop used to enrich a scene, set a mood, or work as a visual metaphor for a character's emotions. It is the job of a location manager to help find the right location for a film, commercial or TV programme and because location shoots take place all over the world, people who work in this industry are often afforded the good fortune of travelling as part of their job.

Location shoots are often abroad, particularly if good weather is needed or the script requires a specific location not found in the UK. It used to be the case that production companies would take

their runners abroad for shoots, but that happens less and less now – you might get lucky and be taken off to a location for a week or so, but unfortunately budget constraints and the accessibility of foreign crews now play a big part in that not happening so much any more. Instead whenever there is a shoot abroad, the production manager, PA or producer will organise local runners to help out.

When shooting on location in the UK, should a runner be needed then a production will normally take along one or two of its in-house runners who may have been working closely with the production team on the job beforehand, or they will employ freelance runners to help out.

Some production companies like to use their runners for both in-house and location work, whereas some just keep their in-house runners for in-house work and use freelancers for location shoots. I even suspect some smaller production companies only use freelance runners, so before accepting or applying for a running job, find out what the deal is with the production company beforehand – you may find yourself working in-house all the time when really you want to be out on shoots occasionally too.

On location

Before you go on a location shoot or if you are moving on to a new location, the first thing you want to do is make sure you have a copy of the ‘call sheet’ or an equivalent. In commercials and television the call sheet is prepared by the PA, production manager or production coordinator a day or two before the shoot and then faxed or e-mailed through to all members of the crew and production. The call sheet contains all the essential information about the shoot, with maps and directions explaining how to get to the location plus everyone’s contact phone numbers.

Without a call sheet you’re in danger of being totally screwed, so if you’re an in-house runner working on the shoot then ask production to hand you one in the office, or if you’re freelance then

your diary service should forward any call sheets or you will be sent one directly.

When you've finally got hold of your call sheet, take a minute to read it through and plan your route to the location carefully. Make sure you allow yourself plenty of time to get to the unit base or location for whenever the unit call time is.

The chances of the shoot location being just around the corner from where you live are slim to none. It's more likely that the shoot location is going to be some distance away from where you live and not necessarily accessible by public transport, which is one reason why it is important for you to know how to drive.

Location runners often get asked to do a lot of driving around, so knowing how to drive is an essential skill and it's even better if your licence is a clean one. Owning your own vehicle isn't always necessary as production will sometimes hire a car for the shoot, but it would be to your advantage to have one nonetheless as hire cars or taxis are not always an option on small budgets, and the production team are more likely to employ a runner who has their own set of wheels.

If the production has hired a car, or they own a car, and particularly if it is a 'people carrier' type of car, then they will most likely take advantage of that and have you either collecting people or taking additional props, equipment or film stock with you en route to the shoots.

Certainly during the shoot day itself there is a greater chance of you having to drive people around, usually between the unit base and shoot location. Or you might have to go off and grab anything that the shoot urgently requires. There will be many occasions, however, when you will simply make your own way to the shoot, and not be asked to take anyone or anything along with you – so it's the luck of the draw really.

There are two 'times' that are always specified on a call sheet, one is the 'main-unit call time' or simply 'call time', which is when the

crew and production are expected to turn up for the shoot, and the other is 'breakfast' time, which is pretty self-explanatory.

There will also be times mentioned for the 'cast' and/or 'talent', depending on what you're working on, but it's the main-unit call time that you are expected to arrive at unless told otherwise.

At all costs you want to avoid being late for the call time, as that is not something taken very lightly by production. Not only is it considered unprofessional, but time really is of the essence on a shoot, so if it does look like you're going to be late for the call time because of means beyond your control (and it had better be beyond your control) then make contact with production as soon as possible, apologising for your delay and explaining the reason.

If you're sincere and the excuse is good enough then it shouldn't be a major problem, but that's provided you don't have all the film stock or the lead actor in your passenger seat ...

The 'unit base' is the where production gathers in preparation for the shoot. Lighting trucks, caterers, hire cars, toilets, Winnebagos, wardrobe, make-up etc all situate themselves at the unit base, which is always close by to where the shoot is going to be happening.

It will often be your first point of contact with the crew you're going to be working with, and your subsequent time and energy throughout the day will be divided between the actual shoot location and the unit base itself.

Once you arrive at either the location or unit base, the first thing I would always do is hand out any spare copies of the call sheet to members of the crew who for whatever reason haven't got one, and then most importantly introduce myself, just so that people know I am the runner and that I am there to help.

On a side note, it's good to make yourself known to the 1st assistant director (AD) and production team as soon as possible, as they will be relying on you throughout the day for assistance and you will be wanting to keep on their good side.

If you are running on a short film, feature or TV drama, then you or the 2nd AD will also be handing out 'shooting-script scenes' or

'shot lists', which are the scenes to be shot that day. These are usually worked out by either the director, the 1st AD or occasionally the 2nd AD the night before and typically include descriptions of the scenes, their location, their length, which actors are involved, and any additional notes on scenes to be shot.

Either way the crew understandably like to know what the agenda is and who's working on the shoot, so be ready with any spare call sheets or shot lists to hand out as and when.

On most location shoots the production will organise walkie-talkies to help facilitate communication on set. If you are responsible for the walkie-talkies then it is your job to find a power socket to charge them up for the day, hand them out to the appropriate people first thing in the morning and collect them all when the shoot has wrapped.

A good system to avoid losing track of walkie-talkies is before you hand them out simply tear off a bit of white camera tape, number it with a permanent marker, and then stick it on the walkie-talkie. Then when you give it to the person on set, make a note of the walkie-talkie number and the person who has it. At the end of the day you can then cross the numbers off as you collect the walkie-talkies and you should then know who has returned theirs or not.

The people who must receive walkie-talkies are the 1st AD (who acts as a mouthpiece for the director, so the director doesn't necessarily always get one), a producer or the production office, the 2nd/3rd AD, the location manager, the runners, the camera department, lighting and sometimes the art department. This does vary according to the size of the crew and the amount of available walkie-talkies, but when it comes to handing them out most people will make it clear to you if they want one or not.

Finally make sure all the walkie-talkies are switched to the right channel before giving them away and don't think of your walkie-talkie as something to mess about with. There is a code of conduct when it comes to using walkie-talkies on a set, which is basically

using them when necessary and sensibly. I have heard a few horror stories involving the misuse of them on shoots (one of them actually involved a runner uttering profanities about the director over his walkie-talkie to the other runner, and unfortunately the entire crew at the same time), so be mindful about yours.

Once I have handed out the walkie-talkies, I might then get roped into helping out the location manager to direct the cars or trucks as to where to park, or I might set up the drinks/snacks table (which is to be maintained all day) and offer up a few teas and coffees to the crew.

I could then be sent off to buy flowers and magazines for the talent, take breakfast to one of the actors or help the hair and make-up department get organised.

If at this point you are sent away from location for whatever reason, then make sure you are contactable at all times and that someone knows you're gone, so that again no time is spent worrying about where you are and what you're doing.

Whilst the crew are setting up for the first shot of the day, the location becomes a hive of activity. It is at this time that you can be pulled in all sorts of different directions by the various departments in their rush to get celluloid through the gate.

At some point I would've also endeavoured to find the catering truck and grabbed myself breakfast. As I've already mentioned, breakfast is scheduled on the call sheet and you're entitled to have something to eat as much as anyone else on set, so get in there when you can, even if you have to eat while on the move.

If there are other runners working with you on the shoot, which there quite often will be, it is always a good plan to work together as a team to get jobs done as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Runners need to cover each other when needed and to help each other out on a shoot because it makes a huge difference to the kind of working day you will have. A good example of this is when it comes to lunch or dinner, when the crew leave the set to go and eat.

Runners are normally some of the last in the queue for food anyway, as it just doesn't look very good to be the first in line to eat before the director, but that aside, someone usually has to stay behind on the location to watch the set in case of fire/theft, and that person is almost always the runner.

Unless allocated by production, the runners have to decide amongst themselves who is going to stay on guard and who is going to go and eat. Sometimes one of the runners will go off and bring you back a plate of food whilst you're sitting there, or they might eat quickly and come back to take over from guard duty so that you too can have a break. So getting along with your fellow runners is understandably important to the smooth operation of a shoot and to having an enjoyable shoot day.

It's worth knowing that runners are constantly watched on a shoot and people will soon notice if jobs aren't being done or particularly if someone is slacking. It is annoying if you do end up working all day with another runner who isn't quite pulling their weight, as I'm sure you can appreciate, but take quiet consolation from the fact that it won't go unnoticed and they probably won't be employed by that production again or be taken on any further shoots.

On either a location or a studio shoot, there are certain jobs that you are just expected to do throughout the day and there will be jobs that people will ask you to do. Again this includes and is by no means limited to: keeping the tea and coffee coming, maintaining a clean set, carrying equipment, helping set stuff up, watching the set at quiet times, stopping people or traffic passing through frame when filming and the set is locked off, driving around picking people up or dropping people off, cable bashing/wrangling (which means holding the camera cables and feeding or taking in cable slack as the camera moves about, as well as making sure no one trips over any cables), handing out sandwiches/biscuits, looking after the talent (actors/artists/extras), buying emergency props,

and helping to pack everything away at the end of the day when the shoot has wrapped.

You never quite know what will be asked of you on a shoot, which certainly keeps things interesting, but whatever you end up doing it is not good to be seen sitting around looking bored, or messing about too much – because as a runner on location you have to be proactive and diligent at all times.

If you ever find yourself at a bit of a loss as to what to be getting on with then ask the 1st AD or producer if there is anything you can do, as they will almost always have a job in mind for you.

You should also rely heavily on your own common sense, because in theory there is *always* something to be doing on a shoot and in the very quiet times in-between set-ups you should be picking up any crap that's lying around, offering drinks or asking people if you can help with anything – there are no excuses for not keeping busy.

On shoots you will also find that you are on your feet all day long, which is very tiring, especially on music videos which have notoriously long shoot days. Make sure you have enough rest periods because you're not a robot after all, but please choose the right moments in which to have a rest as you don't want to be caught sitting down at the wrong time.

When it comes to shoot days, on average a commercial can take anything from a day to a week. Music videos never take longer than a day or two, but TV dramas and features can go on for weeks or even months. So if it looks like you have a number of shoot days ahead of you then it is important to take care of yourself, because it is exhausting work and you don't want to burn out and become ill half-way through a shoot.

So get early nights when you can, drink lots of water and eat lots of fresh fruit and other good stuff to keep you going.

Whilst I was working as a runner, whenever a shoot came up we used to have to take along with us a 'runner's box' which was basically this huge flight case full of stationery, batteries, first aid,

bin bags, Polaroid cameras, coffee, tea – basically all manner of things for all eventualities. I have also heard it called a ‘shoot box’ or a ‘location box’ and despite its heavy, cumbersome nature, it came in handy many times.

If the company you are working for doesn’t have a type of runner’s box, then it is always a good idea to take along a few extra bin bags, pens, paracetamols, bandages, tea bags etc in your own bag or box, just in case you happen to need them.

There could easily be a scenario where you’re out on location and a member of the crew needs a painkiller or bandage but the nearest chemist is forty miles away... It’s just being prepared and it also makes you look super efficient, which is essentially what a good runner should be. (Check out the back of the book for further suggestions of what to put in a runner’s box.)

STUDIO RUNNER

There are all kinds of different studios dotted about within the industry, from your huge film studio complexes like Pinewood and Shepperton, who cater for every kind of production going, to your smaller independent studios doing anything from animation to TV shows.

But not all studios utilise runners in the same way. Pinewood and Shepperton for example just hire out their facilities to production companies who bring their own runners along to the shoot. The studios themselves do not make the films, they just provide the means to do so, and so strictly speaking they are not in the business of actually employing runners.

On the other hand TV studios rely a great deal on runners to help out on their light entertainment, quiz and chat shows, and they will hire runners contractually depending on when the shows are in production.

The big film studios have a combination of ‘sound stages’, which are the large soundproofed interior spaces, and ‘back lots’, which are the huge open spaces from which exterior sets are built. Many have television production studios available too.

Most film studios now rent out their stages to productions as ‘four-wall’, which translates as just a huge soundproofed stage with nothing else in it. Once the production company has rented the four-wall stage, they can do what they want within that space, be it putting up green screens, using the underwater tanks (situated in the floor of some stages, accessible via removable covers), building sets, or hiring motion control-rigs. For productions with specific demands, some studios will have dedicated stages already in place for underwater filming or special effects shoots.

Commercials, TV dramas and promos utilise studios in a fairly similar way to features, which really is unsurprising considering that in many respects they are like a scaled-down version of a feature. In fact, as you might already know, many directors actually cut their teeth in the commercials, TV and promo world before embarking on features, and many will still turn their hand to directing commercials/promos/TV dramas if the product or band (and budget) is suitably right.

Feature films and studios

The way in which a feature film utilises a studio depends a great deal on the complexity of the film itself. A production may simply choose to shoot all their interior shots in a studio and then shoot the rest of the film on location. Another film may be based entirely around a boat lost at sea, and so many of the big scenes would have to be shot within the studio’s water-filming facilities. On the other hand it could be a huge science fiction film that requires shooting most of the scenes against a green screen and then having all backgrounds composited in afterwards... the possibilities are pretty much limitless, but achievable nonetheless.

For big feature films based solely at a studio, it's not uncommon for several different stages and a number of production offices to be utilised for many months at a time, straight through from pre-production to post-production.

Furthermore film studios now offer state-of-the-art post-production sound facilities and all manner of other production services to clients looking to use studios long or short-term. A lot of independent companies specialising in construction, props, special FX, camera hire, costume, casting, catering and so on have also set up shop within the studios, providing a further film-support infrastructure so that in theory a production never has to look further than the studio itself for any of its needs.

The runners who work on the set of a studio-based feature are called 'floor runners'. They will work closely with the 1st, 2nd and 3rd assistant directors on the shoot and amongst many other things their energies will be spent looking after the actors/extras and making sure people are in the right place at the right time.

The days are scheduled so that a certain amount of scenes are shot per day, and although the crew may sometimes be working six-day weeks, the hours tend to be relatively set – in other words the crew can often expect to be going home at 7p.m. most nights instead of 11p.m. – provided that filming hasn't slipped behind schedule.

Commercials/promos and studios

Commercials and promos never tend to shoot in more than one sound stage at a time, and whereas the sets on some feature films can take months to build, most of the sets for commercials and promos (when required) are built within a matter of weeks, if not days.

As I've said, filming for a commercial will usually go no further than a week, either because that's all that tends to be required or

because that's all that is budgeted for. Shooting for longer than a week on a commercial only happens when it's a truly massive job. Promos are generally shot in a day – but that can depend on the artist. Bigger artists equal bigger budgets, and that can either result in more shoot days or more production value added to the shoot day itself.

The runners on the commercial or promo will either be the production company's own in-house runners on loan for the duration of the shoot, or else freelancers chosen by the production manager and/or producer.

When there are any actors involved, and always when there is a band lounging about, the runners will be making sure that they are well looked after and in the right place at the right time, but they will also be expected to be hands-on in many other departments of the shoot and help out wherever possible.

Finally, due to the short turn-around on both commercials and promos, a lot has to be covered in a day. There will typically be an early call time unless it is a night shoot, and although most of the crew usually have a good idea of how long it's going to take (everyone anticipates a promo to be a very long day), it isn't always certain as to when filming will end.

On average a shoot day is ten hours, so if a shoot runs over these hours then the producer is more than likely looking at overtime for the crew, all except the runner, who very rarely gets paid any overtime, and this is particularly true if you're the in-house runner on loan to the shoot because you're already effectively 'owned'. If your company is fair then as an in-house runner working on a commercial shoot you should be given a little bit extra in your pay packet per shoot day anyway as it's probably within the producer's budget – but I wouldn't recommend making a big deal about it if you don't.

If you're freelance then you can choose to negotiate a bit more extra cash if you work into overtime and you feel you deserve it, but it might leave a bad taste in some people's mouths and possibly damage your reputation for any future jobs.

Obviously it's in the producer's best interests to try not to let the shoot run into overtime for the crew, but it should really make very little difference to you as a runner. You're there with a smile on your face until the shoot wraps, and if it's a late one then too bad.

At present a freelance runner gets £123.75 per shoot day on a commercial (APA suggested rates 2008), although some companies may offer a different amount depending on the kind of job regardless of these suggested rates.

Commercials however do have a reputation amongst runners of paying the highest amount per shoot day, more so than features, promos, and TV, and this makes commercial shoots all the more competitive.

Typically with promos when it comes to money you'll almost always be offered less, but take consolation in the fact that the rest of the crew are probably also on some kind of a deal.

Television and studios

As mentioned previously, the drama arm of television will utilise film studio sound stages much like features do.

Long-running soap operas that output several episodes a week such as *Eastenders* and *Coronation Street*, are filmed in either purpose-built studios or the back lots of already established film and television studios. Television also uses studio facilities for audience-based entertainment shows, quiz shows, news, sitcoms, current affairs and cookery programmes to name but a few. Many large broadcasters like the BBC and ITV have their own studios from which many of their own programmes are made and they will tend to employ runners contractually when shows are in production, which depending on the programme, can be for anything up to six months at a time.

With such a volume of studio-based programming coming out of television, the role of a TV studio runner can be very ambiguous.

Generally speaking, however, you are very often the first point of contact for any clients, actors or guests coming to the studio. It will be your job to meet and collect people coming to the various shows and escort them around the facilities whilst briefing them on the show's schedule, and then later making sure everybody is in the right place at the right time.

When clients or guests are involved then there is of course the usual hospitality side to the job, fetching drinks and food (plus anything else that is required), prepping any client areas or 'green rooms' and generally ensuring that the rest of the facilities are kept in immaculate condition. You will also be responsible for running tapes around and preparing/distributing technical equipment when necessary.

Although the days can be very long and the hours unsocial, I understand from the studio runners I have spoken to that there is a real buzz to be had when working in a studio, especially when a live studio audience is involved.

There isn't any room for things to go wrong, particularly when it's going out live or a certain amount of scenes have to be shot in a day, and so you've really got to be on top of your game and work well under pressure as soon as the recording lights go on. You will undoubtedly be working as part of a team and often dealing with the general public, so good communication and people skills are essential.

Finally, aside from being on the studio floor, there is also a certain amount of paperwork involved such as photocopying, general administration, sorting out studio passes and any other kind of studio documentation that needs taking care of.

A studio shoot day

In principle studio running work for films, commercials, TV dramas and promos is very much like location running work, except that many studios have certain rudimentary facilities on hand, such

as toilets, showers, kitchens, green rooms for the extras/actors/artists to lounge about in, rooms for the make-up and wardrobe departments, rooms with fax machines and Internet access etc for production and occasionally a cafeteria if the studio complex is large enough.

When a production hires out a four-wall sound stage from a film studio, often that's all they will get – anything else with the exception of the toilets and perhaps a kitchen has to be paid for. Invariably big productions will pay for these things because they need them, although trailers are sometimes brought in for the film stars or as room substitutes for the hair, make-up and wardrobe departments. In contrast TV studios come as a package when hired out to a production, with the galleries, green rooms, specially rigged lights and seating for audiences all included in the deal.

Having all these facilities under the one roof makes life a little easier for the production, and in particular the runner. Everything is close to hand – you just need to familiarise yourself with the studio layout as soon as possible and for the rest of the day you'll know where to go if you are required to fetch the band, make a photocopy, fill a vase with water, grab a coffee, recharge a walkie-talkie or chase up the wardrobe department.

That's not to say that you don't have to work as hard when in a studio, but there will be times when you will be warmer, drier and really appreciate the convenience of the studio's facilities.

If you are based in a studio for a long period of time then everything will become familiar to you very quickly, and if you're freelancing then the more jobs you do, the more you will probably be making repeat visits to the same studios over and over again. It's just that initial stage of finding your feet within a studio and becoming part of the team which is a bit tricky, but if you ask the right questions and use your initiative you'll be fine, and each studio experience from then on will get a little easier.

A studio shoot day starts very much like a location shoot day, the only difference being that you'll be heading straight to the studio instead of a unit base for the call time.

If you're driving then you should have little difficulty getting to any of the studios, but getting to some of them via public transport can be time-consuming, expensive and a huge hassle, so again it really helps to have your own car or have production hire you one.

Upon arrival there will often be security at the studio, who you will either have to report to or meet at the gates. They will let you through once they have established what you're doing there – with lots of film stars and expensive sets about you can appreciate why security is a necessity.

Again if you're driving in then you may be expected to pick up another crew member en route, or take something along for the shoot like a runner's box or additional film stock. It's possible but unlikely that you will have to collect any of the artists or actors on your way in, as their call time will be much later than yours, plus it's not always necessary for the actors or artists to be hanging around first thing in the morning whilst everyone else is unloading trucks and eating bacon rolls. The chances are a VIP car will take care of all that as the last thing production wants is a star-struck runner behind the wheel of a car, and if the star is big enough they'll probably have their own driver anyway.

Nevertheless, as with location running you may be asked to pick an actor up or drive a crew member somewhere during the day, so never completely rule out the possibility of doing your chauffeur bit on a studio shoot.

Production will schedule for the band, extras or actors to arrive at a time that allows for the hair, make-up and wardrobe departments to do their job and then ideally go straight into the first shot of the day. Obviously some hair and make-up can take hours to do, but again that will all be accounted for by production, just as long as you're there at the right time and on hand to do what's necessary then that's all you have to worry about.

If lots of extras are involved in the shoot then again don't panic – it's not your job to grab as many of them as possible and squeeze them into your car either. Extras generally have to make their own way to the shoot, but it will be your job to help the assistant

directors in organising and managing the extras upon arrival at the studio and throughout the day, which can be very challenging and stressful if many extras are involved. Once you've gone through studio security and arrived on set, it's time to help get things organised. Again it's always a good idea to approach the assistant directors, show your face and say hi, just to let them know you've arrived and to see if there's anything for you to be getting started with or to talk over the day's shoot.

When I worked on commercials, if there was a production office, I would poke my head round their door as well and let the producer or production manager know that I had arrived and was on hand for any jobs. If you are the in-house runner on loan to the shoot then you will probably know the people in production already, so it's kind of a social call too.

Spare call sheets and shooting-scripts can also be found floating about in the production office, so grab a few of those and do a quick round of the crew and check that everyone has a copy and introduce yourself at the same time.

At the start of a shoot day a lot of the crew and production are very busy and absorbed in what they are doing, and unless they're asking you directly for help they won't always have time to be telling you what to be getting on with. Everybody has a job to do and knows that job well and most people will take it for granted that you're the same. If you are new to the job then it can be a bit intimidating at first trying to make yourself useful, but don't be afraid to ask questions or offer to be of help. People will be willing to help you, if you help yourself.

The main thing is to keep busy, dive in and be of assistance when you can, keep your eyes peeled and use your initiative. Even though you are theoretically on hand to help everybody, the people you are most answerable to on a shoot are the assistant directors and members of the production team, so if you are ever really stuck for something to do then approach them.

Also try to communicate with the other runners. The odds of it being everybody's first day are highly improbable, and so there will always be somebody you're running with who will point you in the right direction should you become stuck. If you watch, learn, and work as part of a team with your fellow runners, then you'll find that you get into the swing of things very quickly.

If you're working with bands, actors or artists, one of your first jobs will be to make sure that the private area or green room that they are going to be chilling out in is in good condition, and that they have all they need to keep them happy in-between set-ups.

Flowers or fruit may have to be bought and arranged, magazines or other reading material may have to be on hand, drinks and other refreshments will also have to be available. The production manager or producer will often instruct you to get these things beforehand, but if not approach someone in production and ask if you should be making a start with these jobs.

As a general rule, if you are going to be doing anything that involves spending money from your float or out of the production's budget, always clear it with someone in production first. Don't take it upon yourself to go out and spend a fortune on flowers, magazines and exotic fruit unless someone has instructed you to do so, as using your initiative is one thing, but taking liberties is another.

Some actors, bands or artists are more demanding than others, so if you get any outlandish requests that you're unsure about then double-check with production first that it's okay to go ahead. As with location shoots, when the band, artist, actors or talent arrive and start to get settled, invariably they will need to be offered something to eat and/or drink. Whether you take it upon yourself to politely ask or whether you are given your orders, it's usually down to you, the runner, to be on hand to grab whatever food or drink is requested.

Making sure that the band, artist, actors or talent are okay for refreshments is something you will have to keep doing intermittently throughout the day, but in the meantime it is also worth keeping

your eye on the 1st AD, director of photography (DOP) and director as well, just in case they might want something but are too busy to ask, which is often the case.

On commercials frequently to be found looming in the background are the advertising agency and client, who are there to see that their commercial is going to plan and also to find out where their money has gone. They can usually be spotted sitting comfortably in a row muttering amongst themselves or asleep in front of several viewing monitors.

Production love to keep them happy on a shoot because it makes life easier for everyone involved, so if you can, try to be attentive to their needs and keep them sweet all day long (as well as juggling everything else!) – production will appreciate your efforts enormously.

As for the rest of the crew, if necessary you and the other runners will need to set up a table stocked with teas, coffees, water and juices, which will have to be kept clean and maintained all day. Quite often the caterers on the shoot will help you out with all that, so it's also a really good idea to make yourself known to the caterers early on and to establish a good working relationship whereby you can give each other a hand with whatever needs doing. Usually at around 5 p.m./6 p.m. the caterers prepare trays of sandwiches or snacks that are then distributed amongst the cast and crew (respectfully prioritising certain cast and crew members) by the runners.

There will also be the odd times on a shoot when you are asked to get something that your average film caterer is unable to deliver for whatever reason. Your one saving grace in these instances might be the cafeteria situated within the studio itself, which hopefully will be able to give you what you're after, but failing that you may have to make a trip off set depending on what it is and who has asked for it.

As always if you need to make a journey away from the shoot, you'll have to okay it with someone in production or an assistant

director first. There may be times when it's more important for you to stick around and assist with the shoot than pander to somebody's whims, which is another reason why it helps to double-check with production about leaving the set.

With people consuming drinks and food all day in a studio, things can get very messy, very quickly. People soon notice if the studio looks like a rubbish dump and they won't hesitate to kick up a fuss about it, which is something you really don't want, because on a superficial level that's one way people can tell if you're doing a good job or not.

It is the responsibility of the runners to keep the studio clean from styrofoam cups and other assorted rubbish throughout the day, so in-between any other jobs you're doing, you will need to try and clean up as much as you can.

Gaffer-taping open bin bags to the drinks table and in a couple of other choice locations early on in the day helps encourage people to throw their own rubbish away, but you will still need to do a surprising amount of tidying up regardless.

At the end of the day when the shoot has wrapped, you will often be asked to help restore the studio to some semblance of how it was found, so it's in your best interests to keep a handle on the rubbish throughout the day, and save yourself the hassle later on.

As with working on location there are always going to be those jobs that you'll be required to do on your own initiative, such as maintaining a clean set and keeping the refreshments flowing, which of course you will quickly get the hang of and eventually come to do without thinking about it. There will also be those jobs that you will come to expect to be doing, such as carrying equipment, wrangling cables, watching the set, or helping to manage the extras – jobs that give you a modicum of responsibility and a greater sense of duty.

Finally there will be those jobs that you can't possibly anticipate in your working day, jobs that come out of nowhere, such as being asked to be a background extra in a scene, or to hold the boom

mike for an afternoon, jobs that you can't really prepare for, but which will keep things incredibly exciting for you.

Out of all of these things it's often the most mundane but arguably important jobs that are the hardest to be enthusiastic about, and the easiest to become most complacent in.

It's funny, because you can sometimes spot those who are new to a running job because initially they are really enthusiastic – always bringing trays of drinks, rushing around collecting empty cups, eager to please everyone... Of course I'm not saying that it is a bad thing as that's how it should be, but after a time, (and I know this from experience), it is a struggle to keep animated about doing those routine jobs as your mind wanders about when you can stop being a runner. That, I suppose, is only natural, but it can be a problem if people start to notice that you're not taking care of the little jobs and you're spending all your time hanging out with the camera crew.

The only thing I can say is that each shoot, whether on location or in a studio, should pose new and exciting challenges and possibilities for all the cast and crew. No matter how long you've been working on shoots, or how much you think you know, there is always an element of uncertainty, sparkle and apprehension as to what that day will deliver.

Being a runner, despite the long hours and tedious nature of some of the work, is actually an incredibly important job that contributes to the overall success of a shoot.

Crew members will depend on your high spirits and continued enthusiasm when morale is at its lowest, and actors, bands, artists, directors, DOPs, producers, 1st ADs and all the rest of them will always be grateful (even if they don't always show it) for your concerted efforts to make sure they are OK and well taken care of.

The best you can do is to maintain the right kind of attitude that will carry you forward through any of the challenges and obstacles you face on a shoot, to keep positive in a job that is often undervalued, to expect the unexpected, and to

really enjoy and learn from the experience, as it certainly won't be forever.

RUSHES RUNNER

The rushes runner is not so much a job title in itself within TV and commercials, however on feature films they do have what are called 'dailies' runners who take the exposed film to the labs for processing every day.

The 'rushes', or 'dailies' as they say in America, is the name given to any film or videotape that has simply been shot on. When a feature, commercial, high-end TV programme or music video which has been shot on film wraps for the day, someone needs to take that film to a lab to be processed in what's called a 'bath'. Labs have 'day' and 'night' baths and they will process the film in whichever bath depending on when they receive the rushes.

Once developed, the film is then dubbed with a matching time code onto tape and then those tapes are sent off to the editor. The production may also get viewing copies of the rushes on DVD just to make sure everything is looking good. The lab will then hold onto the original film until it is given instructions as to where to send it next.

When filming on tape there is obviously no need for any film processing and so the tapes automatically become your masters. Depending on when the shoot has wrapped, the producer, production manager, AP, director or whoever is in charge will arrange for those master tapes to be taken off to the editor, so that again they can begin logging and loading the material.

I realise my explanation of what happens to film or master tapes once they have been shot on is a little bit on the general side, particularly within the many facets of television where the master tapes are handled according to the production's requirements, but

I think you get the general idea – at some stage someone has the responsibility of transporting the exposed film or master tapes from A to B, and that job is a huge responsibility. If the negative or master tapes get lost or damaged then it's likely to be a re-shoot costing thousands of pounds and someone's head will roll.

On many of the film shoots I have been on it has usually been the runner's responsibility to take the rushes over to the lab at the end of the day, which I have always found a bit odd, simply because the overwhelming responsibility of transporting the day's work is given to the most junior person on a film shoot.

You wouldn't expect the director to do it themselves of course, but at the same time I always found it a bit much asking the runner at the end of a long shoot day to take the rushes to a lab. True, it's not a big deal in the sense that they are just dropping something off, but it could be an hour or two out of their way and if they have got to get up early for the next shoot day then they won't be getting much sleep that night. Nevertheless, someone has to do it, and a runner isn't going to say no to a producer for fear of retribution – which is another reason why I think it is a bit of a raw deal.

Freelance runners might be offered a bit of extra cash if they are asked to do the rushes run, but if you are working full-time for a production company then you probably have little choice in the matter.

Of course this is not always the case with the rushes and you may never be asked to take them anywhere as a courier or unit driver might do it, but many runners are given the responsibility.

On a few occasions a runner may be required to take or pick up rushes abroad. I was once sent to Paris with a load of film rushes for a post-production company. It was the production company that put me up in a hotel and gave me per diems, and once I had dropped off the film I was then allowed to enjoy a couple of extra days in Paris! Naturally I didn't mind that so much because it wasn't at the end of a long shoot day and I was in Paris, but it was still a big responsibility for me at the time and I remember that I couldn't properly relax until I had made the drop-off.

If you are required to take rushes abroad, it's important to find out whether the film has been developed in a lab beforehand, because if it hasn't and it is still in its raw negative form then some airport X-ray machines can potentially damage that film negative. Your producer should be aware of that sort of thing, but you don't want the blame if something does go wrong, so get all the details and follow any instructions given to you by the letter. You don't have to worry about airport X-rays with tape, but the weight of responsibility is the same nonetheless.

POST-PRODUCTION RUNNER

Post-production now is a massive deal. Over the last thirty years the technology to change a film after it's been shot has taken enormous leaps and bounds, to the point now where you're only really limited by your own imagination and budget.

The knock-on effect has been to change the way in which productions are put together, with post-production producers now involved in pre-production meetings and post-production supervisors or operators having a real presence on set to make sure specific shots are being filmed in the right way.

Editors can now be found on shoots putting a rough cut together on a laptop whilst filming is still going on, and actors are frequently performing their scenes in front of a green screen so that any background action can be dropped in seamlessly afterwards.

You only have to watch TV or go to the cinema to see the magnitude of post-production on our screens and it's not just visually – post-production sound has also evolved in such a way that it has transformed the whole experience from simply watching something into feeling like you're actually there.

Post-production has also made its presence felt in many universities and colleges, as the demand for people wanting to

learn more about it intensifies. Nowadays most film or media degree courses with practical facets will at the very least have some kind of non-linear editing kit and a sound studio to play about with, and increasingly more colleges are now offering very specialised courses in subjects such as special effects or computer animation. In fact I think post-production is one of the few areas of the industry where actually having an industry-related degree can be to your advantage, as a lot of graduates are leaving their courses with increasingly impressive showreels and a strong knowledge of how to use various pieces of post-production equipment and software.

Regardless of the course you have graduated from however, without the necessary experience you have got to be prepared to start off as a runner before you can put any of your skills to use. It's fair to say that you may not be a runner for very long if you show talent and a willingness to learn, but there's a good chance that you will have to graft it at the bottom for a number of months until you can demonstrate that you're ready to move on up.

There are no hard and fast rules as to where the post is done on a job because all productions are different, but factors such as budget, talent, reputations, favours and personal preferences all have a say in the matter.

Most feature films, music videos, high-end TV programmes and commercials will spread their post-production work between small boutique-type companies that specialise only in editing, sound, or special effects etc and/or larger-facilities houses that can complete part or all of the post under one roof. Completing all the post in one place is something that suits most TV programmes and corporate films, as it's light on the budget and the workflow is easier to manage. Plus other than the editing, grading, titles and some graphics, the post isn't often that heavy in most television programmes compared to the demands of commercials and features films.

Consequently some post-production companies will have a greater television client base than others, which is fine if you want to work in TV but perhaps not so great if you don't – so it's always worth doing your research into the kind of work each post-production company does before applying anywhere.

New post houses are popping up all the time and so it can be a bit overwhelming when making decisions about where to apply for work. Some of them are huge and well established, whereas others can simply be a one or two-man outfit.

Websites provide lots of information and are good for sussing out places, but if in doubt make some inquisitive phone calls or write some letters. Generally I think if you are interested in post-production but have no direction then your best bet is to try and get running work for one of the larger post houses, as not only will you gain a broader sense of the actual post-production process, there will also be many different departments for you to explore, more people to meet and a wider range of career opportunities available to you.

These larger post companies also tend to employ a lot of runners, so your chances of initial employment are generally pretty good compared to your chances with a smaller company that might only employ two or three runners at a time.

You might however already have your heart set on working within a specific area of post-production, in which case it would make more sense to work for a company that *only* does the editing, or sound, or animation – basically a company that specialises in their craft. That way you'll just be working in the area you want to be in as opposed to being spread thinly over lots of different departments. The other advantage is that in a smaller company with fewer runners your profile will be a lot higher, plus there's a good chance you'll be more hands-on and involved with the work, which can often lead to early career opportunities.

Having said that, some of the larger post houses own equipment worth millions of pounds and have specialised departments that

you simply won't find with smaller companies, so you may end up having to work in one of the bigger post houses anyway.

Jobs of a post-production runner

Whether you end up working as a runner in a small off-line editing company or a huge post house, the main focus of your running work is going to be on looking after the 'client'.

It's a service industry, no two ways about it, as any post-production runner will be the first to tell you. People from advertising agencies, record labels, production companies, film studios – in fact people from all over the place – will be coming to your work for whatever reason, and it is going to be your job to make sure that they are properly looked after and leave feeling that they want to come back.

For many post-production runners the main base of operations is in the kitchen. From there you'll either be asked to go out on runs or to take food and drink to the suites and back. Although you're essentially based in the kitchen your culinary skills won't usually have to go beyond making toast and arranging a few biscuits on a plate. I have heard of a few rare instances where runners have been expected to do a bit more than that, but don't worry too much about that sort of thing unless you have to – and only then agree to do it if it is something you think you can handle. The only fancy thing that will be expected of you is to hand over any food to clients in a presentable way, and that will mean on a tray, with plates and cutlery wrapped in napkins plus any salt, pepper and condiments – which isn't an unreasonable request.

There's a good chance you will be out food shopping either once a week or once a day depending on the size of the building and whether the company provides food for its staff or not. Milk, bread, butter and the usual basics will have to be replaced as and when, but if you are buying food for breakfast and lunch every day then crisps, cheese, cereals, salads, cold meats, and sandwich

spreads etc will also have to be bought. You should be given some idea of what to get and how much to spend, the only proviso being that virtually anyone who eats out of the fridge will have a different opinion as to what that should be.

On the whole when most clients come to a post-production company they are happy just to have a drink, but there is an element to post-production running that will involve you having to get *a lot* of takeaway food.

Some of the very large post houses actually have kitchen staff who prepare quantities of food and drink every day so that you don't have to go out of the building every time someone wants a cappuccino or a sandwich, but for the majority of post houses without kitchen staff, and in addition to those that do, there's typically a broad selection of takeaway menus available, which, come breakfast, lunch or dinner, you'll have to take orders from. Needless to say that over a very short period of time you will become unusually familiar with all the local cafés, restaurants, takeaways and coffee shops in your local area.

I even believe that there is an art to fetching food for clients – the art of timing. You may not think it's a big deal grabbing takeaway food for a room full of people, but when you're pre-ordering from four or five different restaurants at their busiest times of the day, for any number of clients, running out to get the food in whatever the weather, carrying it all back and serving it in a presentable way so that it's all still hot and everyone has what they ordered ... then that's no mean feat!

Being able to juggle lots of food orders is a skill that gets a little easier with time and experience, but having the patience to make repeat visits to the same place within a lunch hour, being prepared to go back straight away if something is wrong, not always being thanked, and holding off from having your own lunch until everyone else has had theirs never gets any easier.

With all the running about getting food and drink I have often heard post-production runners complain about being glorified waiters or waitresses, and whilst I can sympathise and relate to

what they are saying, it is easy for a post-production runner to overlook the importance of their work and the role that they play in the success of a good post house.

There are going to be some dark hours in whatever kind of running work you do, times when you wonder what you're actually doing with your life, and although it may not seem that making tea and delivering food is of any great importance to anyone, it is actually all part of the service. If the quality of that service is bad then it reflects poorly on the company and it detracts from the work that everyone else is doing. Sometimes clients remember if their food arrived cold or if the runner was miserable above everything else, which seems ridiculous, but that's what sticks in the client's minds and a happy client is a regular client.

Everybody knows it's a tough job to do on a daily basis, but try not to get caught up in any self-pity as it will only hinder your progress. The job is a stepping-stone, you won't be doing it forever and if you can grin and bear it with good grace then you will definitely survive a post-production running job.

Obviously it isn't always going to be a culinary nightmare as sometimes you may only have to grab a couple of sandwiches, and there will always be help from other runners if you end up with a massive food order.

In-house running for production companies also involves fetching a modest amount of food, but the big difference is that the food you get working as a production runner will nearly always be for the people who work within your company, and it will usually be at lunchtime. With post-production running you are fetching food for the clients as well as people you work with all day long, from breakfast through to dinner.

Generally I think if people can find the time to go out and get their own lunch or wander into the kitchen and make their own sandwich they will. It's just the operators stuck in front of a machine with the clients behind them all day and night who you'll mostly be out getting food and drink for.

You will of course be entitled to a lunch break yourself, although I think 'lunch opportunity' is perhaps more fitting, simply because you will be too busy grabbing everybody else's food at lunchtime instead of eating your own. As to how long that break lasts it can vary, but if you're lucky then your work will afford you a free lunch of some description, which certainly helps when on a runner's wage, although sadly that's not something you will encounter at every post-production company.

The other jobs of a post-production runner

As with in-house running, the transportation of tapes and packages is all part of the norm. If your destination is too far away to hand-deliver then a courier will be called, unless the company specifically requires a runner to deliver personally, which could mean going abroad, and that is a rule applicable to in-house running too.

The transportation of film to and from the labs is also a job that post-production runners have to undertake, more so than in-house production runners because it is only certain post companies and labs that are insured to hold exposed master film.

Be aware that film cans collectively are very heavy; in theory your work should supply you with a trolley to make life easier for you when running them around. Also as you can imagine the film inside those cans is incredibly precious, so when taking them out and about make sure they are strapped securely into your trolley because believe me you don't want them spilling out onto the street. If possible take someone along with you if it looks like a job for two people, as there's no point in struggling on your own.

Presentation is well thought out when it comes to post houses as you'll no doubt discover for yourself.

Many modern companies are very cool and funky with huge flower arrangements, bowls of fresh fruit, contemporary art or movie posters on the walls, soft lighting, expensive sofas, plasma

screens and so on. From the outside it may seem a bit excessive, but when you factor in the amount of time and money spent at post houses, it's actually quite a small price to pay for creating the right kind of impression when it comes to clients and the right working environment for employees. With the competition being so high, as well as reputations to maintain, there's a great deal at stake, and companies simply can't compromise on looking the part in such an aesthetic-driven industry. This obviously has knock-on implications for the runners, who have to work incredibly hard behind the scenes to keep everything looking so good.

Similarly to in-house production running, flowers are bought on a weekly basis and arranged by the runner around the building. There will always be a display on or around reception and in any client waiting areas.

Before you start getting creative you will probably have to remove the previous week's flowers on the Monday morning and clean out all the vases. Some of the larger post houses will employ the services of professional florists to come in and create grand impressive displays, in which case you needn't worry about whether your fuchsias match the receptionist's lipstick.

Fruit on the other hand needs to be bought, washed and arranged every day. Again, it's usually the client waiting areas and the suites that will require a fruit bowl and it will need to be maintained as it is grazed on throughout the day.

Each company will have a different set of rules when it comes to spending cash on embellishments such as fruit and flowers. You will always be allocated a set amount of petty cash or 'float' to spend on flowers and fruit, so you should never be in danger of spending too much or not enough. Companies also tend to go to the same places for their essentials, so you'll be pointed in the right direction and if you're unsure about what to buy then have a little chat with the fruit seller or florist about where you're from and how much you've got, and I'm sure they will be happy to sort you out.

The upkeep of the suites is another major requirement of the post-production runner.

Making sure there are enough tissues, pads, pens, mints, magazines and so on at the start of each day and in-between bookings is something a post runner should always keep at the back of their mind.

As the day progresses the suites will fill with mugs, plates, glasses and all other kinds of crap, so it's a good idea to keep on top of cleaning the suites at fairly regular intervals and especially after meals. An operator only has to look around a cluttered room to think that you're not doing a very good job, and because they don't always have the time to call you for a tidy-up, it's down to you to be conscientious about the state of the suites, particularly if you have already been running in lots of food and drink throughout the day.

However, although it is a prerequisite for you to come into the suite and clean up every now and then, from an operator's point of view it can be a bit distracting to have you in the room, so use your common sense and choose the right moments. If you are called to the suite for any reason then just grab any empties on your way out – it's not a big deal, but if they are in the middle of a presentation or a time of heightened stress and you fly into the room for a clean-up, then your presence won't necessarily be appreciated.

As a tip, certainly within commercials, a presentation tends to happen within the first twenty minutes or so of a client entering the room. Once the editor, flame operator, sound engineer or whoever has made their presentation, there will be a short period of discussion after which they will begin to relax into further changes, and that is a good time to enter the room.

So it's okay to give a bit of breathing space to begin with – you obviously don't want to take forever bringing people their drinks, but even though the client may have ordered something as soon as they have walked through the door, their mind will initially be on the work at hand, not where their cappuccino has disappeared to.

If you can get drinks to the client before they enter the room then great, but otherwise you are going to have to gauge it a little.

If the room was quiet and I only heard the TV then I would assume they were still presenting something and I would wait outside until I heard voices again. I would know that if it was just a thirty or sixty-second commercial I wasn't in for a long-wait, but if they were presenting something long format like a film or documentary then I would have to get in quick. It's not something you're always going to get right – I didn't on a number of occasions, but that's just a hazard of the job. The main thing is that if you can be considerate about when you enter a room and not disrupt the workflow, then your operator will appreciate it greatly.

Other than that, the rest of the time you'll be making sure that the bathrooms have soap/toilet paper/clean towels, that any blown light bulbs are replaced, that toner is in the printers and paper is in the fax machine etc.

When it comes to working hours, a great deal of post-production running involves shift work. In smaller companies with fewer runners there will be the usual late runner who will be responsible for staying behind to answer the phones, grab food and lock up the building etc. But some of the larger post houses operate on a twenty-four hour basis, which entails staggered shifts starting at different times of the day and alternating each week.

The normal working day is supposed to be about eight hours for a post runner but more often than not, particularly if you are the late runner, you will have to be at work for longer than that and the occasional weekend too.

Amongst other things this business is notorious for its late nights and unsocial working hours, but post-production is especially demanding in this respect, so if you choose to work in this side of the industry then be prepared to deal with the repercussions it can have on your social and home life.

FREELANCE RUNNER

There's a huge pool of professional freelance runners out there working on feature films, music videos, short films, commercials, corporate jobs and TV programmes as in-house production runners, location/floor runners or studio-based runners for periods of anything from a day to twelve months, depending on the type of production.

The Skillset 2006 Employment Census for the Audio Visual Industry, has found that freelancers make up over six in ten of the industry workforce and that runners are the highest occupational group employed on a freelance basis.

It estimates that there are 650 runners working full-time and 1,450 working freelance. The Census also suggests that commercials have the highest freelance workforce with nearly seven in ten freelancers (68 per cent) working in commercials production, followed by pop promos and then independent television production.

Skillset do stress that 'the Census counts only those freelancers working on Census Day' and therefore 'understates the proportion of freelancers in the wider labour force, for each occupation', but nevertheless it certainly gives some indication as to how many freelance runners there are in the industry, and who is employing them.

On a side note, I am sure there are a number of freelance runners scattered about who work in post-production, but without a doubt the majority of freelance runners are found working in production offices, location shoots and/or studios.

When it comes to freelance work there aren't any set rules, but it is fair to say that a feature film runner won't be working for six months on a feature and then doing a couple of days on a live studio show for broadcast and vice versa.

You make a decision as a freelance runner as to whether you want to work in TV, commercials or films, and invariably the work you do is dictated by that decision. That is not to say that you can't mix it up, but over time freelancers do build up a reputation and make contacts in the areas that they predominantly work in, which allows for their continual employment. Freelancers therefore tend to stick with what they know and where their career path lies.

Many freelance commercial and feature runners are registered with a diary service that manages their timetable, negotiates money and generally looks after their best interests for a small monthly fee. Any requests for work by a production company will have to go through their diary service first, whereas freelance TV runners and obviously those without a diary service are contacted directly by a production company and the terms of employment are then negotiated personally between the two.

There are recommended rates of pay and working hours for freelance runners as set out by BECTU, PACT and the APA, which vary according to what you are working on and where (check out www.bectu.org.uk for full up to date listings). If you are a freelancer fending for yourself then it will be important for you to have an idea of what these guidelines are.

Freelance in-house production running

As a freelancer coming into a commercials production company you're going to be getting paid a lot more than if you were in permanent employment.

The current rate at the time of writing for a freelance in-house commercials runner is about £89 for a ten-hour working day compared to an average of about £50 for a permanent in-house runner.

Generally I've found that it's a good idea never to discuss money with anyone you're working with, as someone always comes off

worse, but everyone pretty much knows that freelancers get paid more than permanent staff anyway.

The hours for freelance in-house runners in commercials will usually be between 8.30 a.m. and 6.30 p.m. and if you are required to stay later than that then you may be entitled to more money, which is something your diary service is probably better off negotiating.

In terms of in-house freelancing, commercials production companies are more likely to employ you for the shortest periods of time, not only because the turn around on a commercial or music video is very short, but also because they tend to have a substantial amount of full-time runners working in-house and several more on their books as back-up (not to mention people doing work experience) already, so the demand for freelance in-house runners is generally not so high within commercials.

That is not to say that there *isn't* a demand for freelance in-house runners, because as I mentioned before different companies work in different ways. It's just that production companies as a whole are more inclined to use their freelance runners on shoots rather than for in-house work.

Also when dealing with companies that have a healthy roster of full-time in-house runners, if you are asked to come in on a freelance basis then it can sometimes be just to cover for an absent employee, in which case the notice to come into work can be very short – either the day before or on the actual day itself – which is not an ideal situation, I know, but is to be expected with freelancing and most people are quite happy to work for one day rather than not at all.

Across the broad spectrum of television programming freelance runners are relied upon heavily, but similarly to commercials the demand for freelance in-house runners is far outweighed by the demand for freelancers to do shoot work.

Again, most TV production companies (certainly the larger, well-established ones) have enough in-house runners working for them

full-time and many more on the books to justify not using freelance runners for their in-house work.

With feature films most runners in the production office are either hired contractually on a loose freelance basis for however long they are needed, or they are simply just given a full-time job. Contracts can be so long on a film that the term 'freelancing' can seem a bit redundant for in-house runners.

It's worth noting that the life of an in-house features runner is predominantly office-bound and although you may make the occasional visit to a location or set, for the best part you will be helping the production team and be based in one location for the duration of the film. With any luck and with the right contacts you might get the opportunity to run on a set or location at a later stage should you want to. It may not be the film you are currently working on now, but it could well be the next.

Similarly if you work in a commercials or TV production company as an in-house runner and you have never been on a shoot, then speak to your producer or production manager, as they might be willing to see what they can do for you when the next shoot comes up.

Freelance location/studio runner

A shoot day for a freelance commercials or features runner earns them substantially more than a day of freelance in-house running. For this reason alone many freelance runners for films and commercials choose to work exclusively on location or studio shoots and give the in-house running jobs a miss.

Also many freelance runners in commercials and features are simply not interested in pursuing a career in office-based production – they want to be 1st ADs or DOPs and by working exclusively on shoots they can reach their career goals a lot sooner.

In television a great deal of the work is contractual, so those runners not afforded full-time positions are employed in a freelance

capacity anyway, working a day here, a few weeks there, or however long their contract is.

With the many different kinds of programmes available – factual, reality, children’s, documentary, sport, comedy, studio-based, wildlife, not to mention soaps and dramas – there are far more runners working in television and arguably many more opportunities for freelance work compared to the somewhat exclusive world of feature films and commercials – although that doesn’t necessarily make it any easier to get into.

Currently the weekly runner rate in television is about £325 – £350 a week, and for a day’s work a company might offer either £75 or £50 plus your expenses. Again the working hours for TV runners vary enormously, but expect to do a twelve-hour day in a studio (first in and last out) and eight hours for a production-office day.

Due to the nature of their work, freelance runners generally have to be very adaptable in their roles and able to thrive in all production environments, so it really helps to have as much experience as possible.

In most cases, particularly if you work within the features and commercials sector, freelance shoot runners already have to be ‘in with’ certain crew members like a 2nd or 1st assistant director or various production companies in order to get any work and to be considered by a diary service.

Film crews and producers unofficially like to work with people they know they can get on with and trust to do a good job, and it can be too much of a gamble for a production to take on a freelance runner they have never worked with before, so often they will just play safe and stick with the runners that they know – which is another reason why it is such a tricky industry to break into.

If you’re now wondering how you are going to get the experience if no one is going to give you a chance, then the answer is that, unless you’re incredibly lucky and someone takes a chance on you, then really the only other way in which you can gain people’s

confidence is to do some work experience or do the first few jobs unpaid.

It's worth considering that many freelance shoot runners also have their own car and a first aid certificate, so if you are seriously considering becoming a freelance shoot runner then be sure that you've got enough contacts and employable attributes in order to make a living from it.

Furthermore if it is mainly film and commercials work that you're interested in, then look into approaching a reputable diary service for advice and possible representation.

Finally an absolute must if you are working freelance or starting out in any part of the industry is to join BECTU (the Broadcasting Entertainment Cinematograph and Theatre Union). The first annual subscription is £120, but if you are a graduate then you only have to pay £30 for your first year, or if you are earning less than £12,000 you only have to pay 1 per cent of your earnings. Understandably you may be reluctant to part with your cash if you're not earning much, but the advantages to being a member of BECTU include:

- Information for individual members about copyright and moral rights issues
- Discounts on car hire, the British Film Institute and the BFI Southbank
- Discounts and help with financial services and loans
- £3 million public liability cover (for an extra £20 per year), plus professional indemnity insurance and holiday travel insurance
- Jobs, news, training and career advice for freelancers
- 25 per cent discount at www.productionbase.co.uk
- Free periodic listings of upcoming productions, plus your own free listing in a region-by-region production directory
- Legal services that include a 24-hour/365-day helpline of free advice on all non-employment legal matters, a comprehensive service on all legal matters arising from employment, as well as

free legal advice and assistance on personal injury or accidents whether at or away from work.

And much, much more... it really is a smart move to make, as it's reassuring to know that a union has got your back should anything happen to you. You can apply online at www.bectu.org.uk.

INSIDE VIEW: MANAGING DIRECTOR OF A DIARY SERVICE



I get calls from people who have just left university looking for work and I say, 'Why didn't you ring me in January if you were serious?'

It's the ones who write to us saying I am currently doing a media or communications course, do you have any ideas about what I could be doing... that tend to get work. There is no point them ringing us in September or October, when they have had four months off and are now looking for a job.

We always look for people with experience – not being biased, it's just that we've got about eighty runners on the books at the moment and that number doesn't fluctuate much. It never gets to a point when we can't chat to new people looking to join a diary service, but we like to keep it to a certain number.

We get twenty - fifty CVs through a week and we will then either get people in for interviews or give people a call about how we work etc. But we do like runners to have cars – it doesn't necessarily have to be a clean licence as long as it hasn't got drink driving on it – and first aid, things like that, and the more experience they

have, the more they have on their CV, the more we can help them. Because the difference between diary services and agencies is that we don't proactively go out and get work for them, we use our contacts to network runners, so it does make our lives easier if they have got experience and qualifications.

What do you look for on a person's CV?

I don't know really. When they were handwritten I could tell a lot from a person's writing. Nowadays that has all changed, so I don't really know what I look for, but I do obviously look for experience.

We usually take on people either because we like their CVs, or because they have already worked for a company we deal with on a regular basis. They'll say, 'We have had so and so in the office, they are absolutely brilliant, is it okay if they send their CV to you?'

So we go for recommendations or what we like the look of. But the right level of experience, knowing Final Cut Pro or Adobe Photoshop and those sorts of things, and as I said having a car, a licence, and speaking a language – just all the things we know production companies ask for.

They also have to be, and I know that this is my age speaking, not too casual. We have one runner who comes in with his underpants pulled up and his trousers halfway down – it really is funny, but what he forgets is that there are producers in companies who are my age who might not find it so amusing. On a shoot, yeah that's fine, but you don't really want that in an office. I remember one runner who went on a shoot in the New Forest with flip-flops and he couldn't understand why I was telling him that he shouldn't have done that...

What advantages are there in using a diary service to find work, as opposed to going it alone?

We have a flood of information and we know the companies that are busy, which for a runner is good as it saves them knocking on a lot of doors.

I am not a believer in selling diary services, because if people feel that they can go out on their own, then good. The thing is though, people do miss out on calls for work.

Unfortunately production companies now have a tendency to contact crew members direct and not bother with diary services, which is a shame because if a crew member has a phone switched off, which is often the case on set, they could have missed out on a job. With a diary service we are able to say yes he/she is available, and don't worry, we will get the call to them. A lot of the time it is easier for a production company to talk to us rather than a crew member, because people don't always have their diary on them.

We can also tailor an individual to a job. For example, if a production company wants a runner with first aid then we know which runner to get. We are also a point of contact in emergencies; if there is an accident on set we have phone numbers of parents, wives, details of next of kin.

Another advantage to using a diary service is that you look more professional. If you are new to the industry and trying to network, a diary service can give you a bit more professionalism. People will feel that you are serious about the job: it can really help you get your foot in the door.

We also have very good runners on our books and therefore we have a very good reputation.

What makes a good runner?

They are the first to ring in the morning, they ring at lunchtime and they ring in the evening asking about work. It's their professionalism that gets them on our good side. The ones that ring most often are constantly on your mind.

Also, interest is important. You have to be interested if you're on the floor for twenty-two hours on the most boring shoot in the

world and you're only being paid £100 and you're a long way from home. Interest is what production companies want.

The main criticism we have from production companies is about attitude. When they ask for a runner, they want a runner – they do not want tomorrow's director, producer or cameraman – they want a runner and that is what they are paying for. So when we do take runners on I instil in them that the right attitude is important. Companies don't want someone thinking, 'Well, really I was a 2nd AD last week or I should be a clapper loader'. They are paying you to be a runner and that's what people forget, and OK you may have done your own film and it might have been accepted into a festival, which is great, but when you're a runner on a commercial and it is a busy fast shoot with lots going on, then people are just not interested.

Also keep yourself busy. There is never nothing to do in an office – make a list of what stationery is running out, list the DVDs alphabetically, just make yourself useful.

What do your runners earn?

£89 for an in-house day, £135 – £150 for a shoot day, but if they are working on a promo then it is often around £100.

Some companies only pay £60 for an in-house day, but we usually push for £89. The APA actually provide us with recommended rates for all of the crew so we advise everybody on what the rates are, but we try never to turn down work, so if someone wants to pay less than £89 we never make assumptions, we always present options to the runners and if they say no then fair dos, but if they want to do a job for less then that's up to them.

Some people who are on our books and who are not busy may think it is a waste of money having a diary service. They will look at their bank statement at the end of the month and see charges from us and think, 'They are not doing anything for me, why am I paying them?' When in actual fact we are working hard for them behind the scenes – sending out CVs to production companies

when we haven't been asked for them, sending out CVs when the crew member is unable to from wherever they are, working through websites etc. Ultimately people pay us monthly to look after their diary and to take their messages.

Any other words of advice?

Do a lot of research, not only on the business but also the companies. It is hard work, and you have to be prepared to put every ounce of effort in.

Running is long hours for not much money, so be tolerant, patient, driven and motivated and all the things that you have to be when you start a new job. You have to carry on your momentum and be enthusiastic and personable and it is also a question of trial and error.

Go to different companies and see if they like you. You have to push yourself and the main thing is not to wait until you have finished your degree. You should already be ringing around, looking in *The Knowledge* or production guides, e-mailing the production companies and asking for work experience. You have to really want it and go the extra mile that another runner wouldn't, so people remember you for all the right reasons.