Much of the focus in production is devoted to trying to keep up with the dizzying array of new video formats, codecs and cameras, plus the maze of postproduction gear and challenges that we all must be aware of. New innovations in grip and lighting gear offer are overshadowed by producers, directors and DPs. It’s too easy for us to take grip gear for granted; isn’t grip gear all those C-stands and Hi-Rollers that mostly live on the grip truck? Whether you’re on a production that has a full grip department or are shooting an indie project with a small crew, grip gear is universal. We all use it and need it, no matter what kind of production we’re involved in.

The evolving technology of grip equipment recently has become the most interesting in the smaller-scale levels of the production industry. The good news is that grip equipment has begun to evolve and change over the past few years. Manufacturers are reacting to the changing production environment with smaller, lighter and less expensive gear. But most importantly, grip-equipment manufacturers seem to be thinking outside of the box with the design of a whole new crop of innovative grip tools.

In the quest to discover what’s new in the world of grip gear, I paid a visit to Matthews Studio Equipment. Located in Burbank, California, Matthews has a long history for innovating new categories of grip gear for all levels of video and film production. I sat down with Matthews CEO Ed Phillips to discuss some of the new solutions that he’s bringing to the market. Phillips responded, “Grips have several responsibilities these days. One responsibility is to move the camera safely from point A to point B. The other might be to come up with whatever mounting or rigging might be necessary for the production. The third aspect is lighting control.” As our conversation continued, I posed three different common production scenarios to Phillips to see what kinds of solutions Matthews could offer to overcome the challenges presented in each situation.

CAMERA MOVEMENT

In order to smoothly move the camera, the most popular solution is a camera dolly. Precise camera movement enhances production value and gives the shots a more visually sophisticated look and feel. Many productions can’t afford the budget to rent a high-end dolly like a Fisher or a Chapman. In order to transport a heavy dolly that may weigh hundreds of pounds, the producer must provide a box van or larger truck with a hydraulic lift gate. If you add the costs in time and money to transport a heavyweight dolly to and from the location as well as the labor needed to move it around the set or up and down stairs, the costs can be prohibitive for smaller productions.

On the larger end, there are the options of using a Doorway or Western dolly, or on the smaller and lighter end of things, there are what have become known as skateboard dollies. These are small, light dollies that ride upon PVC pipes using various combinations of skateboard wheels. A significant drawback to any of these types of dollies is limited flexibility for compound moves. Few of this class of dollies are able to use both straight track and curved track. Adding an on-board operator to a Doorway, Western or skateboard dolly also adds extra weight load and rolling resistance. Another challenge for lighter-weight dollies is the lack of smoothness in comparison to a heavy-duty dolly. Weight and inertia result in smoother moves.

CHALLENGES

• Provide a smaller, lighter dolly that is versatile in configuration and use, yet as steady and flexible as a heavy-duty dolly.
• Must be transportable with any camera package from a prosumer HD camcorder all the way to a 35mm motion picture camera.
• Must be affordable, yet still able to provide high-quality movement for straight or curved shots.

SOLUTION

Phillips showed me a new product called The Red Dolly (no relation to the RED Camera). The Red Dolly features a...
number of design ideas that are unique and innovative. Matthews developed an early version of this dolly for a well-known Hollywood key grip back in the 1970s. The key grip requested that Matthews build him a dolly that could give the camera the point of view of a character in a wheelchair. The production also needed the camera to track alongside the character in a wheelchair.

Matthews built a dolly with a camera mount and rider mount that was lower, lighter and more maneuverable than the large, heavy dollies of the day.

The original 28-year-old dolly surfaced this year and Matthews was requested to rebuild it to like-new condition for its new owner. Matthews decided to take the basic design concept of the dolly and refine it to a more modern-day design.

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