

Brief: Sound Design

This brief provides a quick introduction to sound design for non-media professionals working with a production agency to produce a social and behavior change (SBC) campaign. A checklist is included at the end of this document to help you evaluate the sound quality of your spot and identify areas for improvement.

Sound design is the process of creating, manipulating, and arranging audio elements, including sound effects, dialogue, and music. By influencing how listeners feel and experience things, sound design ensures the sound fits well with the visuals and story to make the whole piece more impactful.

Sound Quality

Sound quality refers to the clarity, richness, and fidelity of audio. Good sound quality enhances the piece's realism and emotional impact, ensuring that the intended message is effectively communicated to the audience. The following qualities are important to sound quality:

- **Equalization:** Boosts specific frequency ranges (e.g., mid-range) where vocals are most prominent, making them stand out in the mix.
- **Compression:** Controls vocal dynamic range, ensuring softer parts are audible and louder parts do not overwhelm the mix to create a more consistent vocal sound.
- **Reverb and delay:** Adds depth and space to the vocals, making them sound more natural and immersive.
- **De-essing:** Reduces harsh or unpleasant sounding sibilance (e.g., "s" and "t" sounds) to create a smoother vocal sound.
- **Harmonic enhancement:** Adds subtle harmonics to enrich the vocal tone, making it sound fuller and more engaging.
- **Noise reduction:** Reduces any unwanted sound such as background hums or static (use caution to avoid altering the audio).

Sound Elements

The following sound elements are the individual components of an audio composition that come together to create the final output:

- **Dialogue:** Spoken words or narration.
- **Sound effects:** Audio that mimics realistic sounds (e.g., footsteps, door closing).
- **Music:** Background or theme music.
- **Ambient sounds:** Background noises like wind or crowds that make the scene feel more alive.

Together, these elements create a cohesive experience and contribute to the overall storytelling, mood, and immersion of a project, helping to engage the audience and enhance the narrative or emotional impact. During sound design, remember the following:

- **Use sound judiciously and sparingly to enhance the message. Overuse of sound effects can distract from the main content.**
- **Ensure balance when using background music and sound effects to ensure they do not overshadow the spoken words.**

Mastering

Mastering is the final step in the audio production process, when the spot is prepared for distribution. The original design format is important to ensure a high-quality source, and additional formats may be needed for different distribution channels. For example, audio projects should be designed using the waveform audio file (WAV) format, which can be converted to a smaller MP3 file. This audio sounds best at a sample rate of 4410 Hz and bit depth of 16 bits. For video, MP4 is an acceptable format as it can be converted to other formats (e.g., WhatsApp, digital or social media). TV stations also have specific formats, so be sure to check them.

Sound Quality Checklist

Use the following checklist to evaluate your spot and discuss any areas for improvement with your production agency.

- Were all parts of the approved script included without deviations?
- Is all dialogue audible and intelligible?
- Are any whispers audible? Are any voices too loud?
- Is the overall clarity of the audio good?
- Are there any unintentional hums or static?
- Are there any harsh “S” or “T” sounds when someone is speaking?
- Are there any unintentional pauses or silences in the audio?
- Is the background music balanced with the actors’ voices (not too loud, not too soft)?
- Do the sound effects align with the style and content of the spot?
- Is the use of sound effects appropriate?