

Cara Hickson - Producer / Content Producer / Executive Producer



Cara Hickson is a producer who splits her time between the UK and South Africa. She has a wide range of experience from production managing on advertising shoots and assistant directing feature films, to producing big events. Her clients include some of the biggest brands in the industry - for example: British Vogue, VMAG, Versace, Ikea, Volkswagon, John Lewis, Mastercard, Martell OX, Carte D'Or.

Her passion is completing productions with high production values resulting in the best creative outcome, bringing productions in on-budget, on-time and with a smile.

www.carahickson.com

NB I spoke to her pre-Covid! Here is a lightly edited transcript.

DG

Producers, Art Directors, project managers - who else pulls in stylists and photographers for jobs?

CH

With stylists and crewing up generally, it's always word of mouth. For example on this last job the DOP (Director Of Photographer), he worked with a stylist, that loves working with them. Sometimes other crew members bring in the crew themselves or make suggestions to the director. The director has always such an important role to play in terms of pulling people in. I as the producer can suggest people, but the director will have his team. On this latest job I just did, we didn't have anyone booked, because we were moving so quickly that we weren't able to confirm people that he usually likes to work with. And the director said "oh, I found this stylist through a DOP friend." It's weird how people are pulled in, but it's almost like the roots of a tree, how it all connects.

DG

One of the hardest things for a stylist, is the constant struggle to get clients, because it's all word of mouth. And you've always got to be in the game constantly.

CH

Yes. If you are working you'll get more work. You need that first job which will help you then get more work. And if you're not currently on a project, you're not in the know with what's happening with who's doing what.

DG

Explain your job title and your job?

CH

I'm a producer. We're kind of a kitten herder and miracle maker in some ways. I get given a budget line and a creative idea. And in our budget, I'll put in timing plans, and then crew up. Obviously, if I am production company side with the director, I'll crew up that way. If I'm agency side, then I find directors. And it's managing the creative expectation with the money that the client has.

I manage everyone's expectations and also try and make sure that we get the best result possible. Some producers don't feel comfortable with working with a certain budget level. But that's not to say that a big budget is going to create a great creative, or small one will create a bad one.

It's also knowing where you can push and where you can pull from. That's where the miracle maker comes in - it's a sense of making sure you keep your contacts, because it's all about the people you know. That will make sure that you can think - OK fine, how can I do this differently? Who can I contact? I can't afford a crane, what can I do instead?

The best part of being a producer is connecting everyone together. And just being the middle person saying, OK, I see this DOP has never worked with this director, I think you guys will be a great team. Then months down the line you've found they've done every job together. And that's kind of nice, it's all about matchmaking.

It's about making sure that the creative still continues to be the focus. I think everyone has different focuses, but I need to make sure that what we're trying to do at the end of the day is not just the long end-frame; or not just a crazy shoot holiday; or not just that the creative or the directors, who are dreaming of capturing certain things for their director's showreel. I need to make sure everyone gets to realise their dreams together.

DG

Does your work need to be commissioned? Do you pitch your ideas? Or do you work to a client's brief?

Everyone starts off with working to a client's brief. In the commercial side that I'm in, there is a brief that exists. Sometimes when clients trust you, you can almost pitch. You can add to it, which then has the chance to really grow and be something amazing. I'm not saying my clients don't have great ideas, I just don't think that they know what the potential of a creative brief could be, but I like to realise its potential.

The best thing is having every department bring in their own expertise, and then the level goes up - like the DOP, the stylist, the art department, everybody just brings in another level, and it just grows and becomes this real magical thing.

DG

What kind of websites do you do you look at when you're researching for clients?

CH

First I would think - what am I interested in? Who would I want to work for? And then I just go straight to those websites. Sometimes I might be googling something else and you go from one website to another before you know it, you've done a deep dive and discovered something that you've never heard of before, but you think, oh, that's pretty interesting. Instagram or LinkedIn or direct with their websites. For example, right now I'm interested in sustainable production or sustainable things. And so I research who is doing sustainable well. Then you google 15 different companies which are doing that and before you know it, you see a job opening asking them if they need a brief.

DG

When pulling in shoot teams are you more keen to pull in photographers' portfolios, or are you interested in pulling in stylists as well?

I think everything is combined. I would have an opinion on styling and artists, as I would want to know if a photographer or director have an idea about who they would like to work with. I'd like to have an opinion on that because ultimately, I'm going to be responsible for making sure that the project comes in on time and on budget.

Say that the director walks off the job, the producer has to get it in the bag. You are the one who is contracted to make sure that it happens, and gets finished. Of course, if I don't have a better suggestion, then I would follow their lead. But I will definitely throw in my suggestions of people I've worked with in the past - I have a little "black book" of names.

DG

Do you meet with them? Or do you only look at portfolios - how does it work?

CH

If I haven't met them before, in the past I've met up with stylists and people before to see if this job would work for us - for both sides - if they feel like that's a project that they want to be involved in as well. But not everybody has the time, so it would be jumping on a phone call and discussing and sending a brief to them. Then if they're happy, and we feel that they could do the job, then that's great.

Sometimes they put a little three-page Keynote or PowerPoint together saying this is what they would do - in order to give the director or photographer an idea of what their look and feel would be for the job. Like a very basic interview process.

And if you are out of time you just go through word of mouth through people that recommend. I trust my other producers, they've all been there on the firing line, I trust anything they would say.

DG

It's the same with styling: It's mostly word of mouth, as the jobs are so quick, we need assistants that are good; Are up to standard; That know what they're doing. It's definitely word of mouth.

CH

The last job I was on in China, doing this job [Martel Cognac] and the stylist said to her assistant: OK cool, just pin the trousers, so we can just move on. And the assistant said: I don't know how to do that. The stylist said I'm thinking this is gonna be a long job...

DG

What are the key things that you're looking for in a stylist? Personally, what are you hoping to get out of them?

CH

I think it's so refreshing when even though you have a boring brief - not like a costume scene, or an alien scene.. but they manage to bring a normal look to life.

Also, having somebody who can problem-solve. There's always going to be PPMs (Pre Production Meetings) with a client who doesn't approve a whole person's wardrobe. What I like is if the stylist says "don't worry about it, I've pulled plenty of pieces - we are covered."

I think good stylists just have an ability to make everyone look amazing. And you just want to wear everything that they bring - and you wonder, would I wear that? I don't know. They create the personality on that person in line with what the director would want that person to act like. They have this ability to understand what the director wants from the look and bring the personality to life, but also it doesn't feel too separate from what that person will be playing on screen. At the same time bringing an element of magic to the project.

DG

When stylists contacted to do a job, do you have good negotiation tips, because, when I was first starting out, I'd always get caught out. And I didn't know what I was asking for.

CH

For me, as always, my dad being a First AD, I'd always been taught 'don't screw your crew,' because ultimately, it's going to be long days.

I always think that the biggest negotiation skill for a producer, when I'm really stuck on budget is don't speak first, stick to your guns. If they really want you, they will pay for your rate. And there is - thank god - in the UK there are the APA rates. It's a bit harder in South Africa. Sometimes people say that's fine, you know, I can recommend that maybe my assistant does a return instead of me that might help you - you can give something back. But as long as it's not gonna hurt you. And I think that's the thing is just to be honest and say: I appreciate that you want to put down the rate, but I don't think the rest of the crew would do that either.

There's also quite a telling sign that I always have. Every other crew, for example, a grip or DOP will be the last two people that would agree on a deal. You as a stylist might have to say, is the DOP or the grip agreeing this? Are the rest of the crew agreeing to the deal?

Obviously, like a short film or a charity film, then that's a separate conversation. A short film for a director that you frickin love. And you really believe that, you know, your time will be worth it. That's separate.

But if you say listen guys it's for a commercial, they have the money, if all the other crew are going to agree to that rate, then fine, but otherwise, I really have to stick to my guns. Because I can guarantee you that the grips and the DOP will never agree. And you are kind of being polite.

DG

Exactly. That's the thing. It's not trying to tread on people's toes and be rude. But also, you know, telling them your worth, it's so hard to do, definitely.

CH

And you just have to remember, especially producers - that this isn't your money. I'm not going to get a pay-check, because I saved them cash. You're being realistic with what the budget allows. And that goes back into the producer being able to do their job properly to say, to the client, I'm sorry, but we can't do that for the money. Or to the creatives: we have to think about this in a different way. Or to the director - the producer needs to manage that instead of making the crew work in conditions that aren't fair. Unless your hands are completely tied.

And it's different to saying listen, it's going to be a slightly earlier call time but please can you not charge me night-time rates, or over-time. And I know, there's nothing I can really do about like, the journey. Or maybe I get you guys a driver.. a producer needs to be thinking about, how does somebody do their job properly to the best of their ability, but also realising that, post-tax and not having permanent work all the time. There's nothing wrong in saying to somebody: sorry I really can't go back on that, because I can't guarantee that through the next month I'm going to get a job, so my day rate is really important.

Producers shouldn't ask for that. They do, because clients are ridiculous. But I just say as a producer. I just can't do that. This is my opinion - not everyone agrees.

DG

When you're looking at pulling in stylists, do you look for stylists who are editorially interested in the job and very passionate about it?

CH

I think it's different. For some photographers, like when I was working with Mario Testino, they were passionate, but they were passionate about the lifestyle they were surrounded by. I've been on jobs where someone's getting paid 10 grand a day and all they had to buy was a Burberry coat, which was what we were shooting. And didn't even pick up shoes for the model. They brought something else, instead of making the model feel comfortable and making the photographer feel comfortable.

Yes, it was horrible for producer to deal with somebody having to go run off to John Lewis, while we're waiting for it to open, to get a pair of shoes.

But you can't always understand what those kind of personalities bring to a film set. Sometimes your hands are tied and you can't do anything but hire the person the photographer wants to work with. But with experience, you do find that backup stylist or the assistant or whatever that you can trust.

Personally, I would always want to go with somebody who I feel is passionate about the job. But I do feel there are other times that your hands are tied - but it's not going to be the end of the world, you'll survive. It'll bring in a different kind of passion that will be good for the job in one way or another.

DG

Is there is a set calendar for campaign shoots for high-end fashion shoots? When's the best time to contact producers to try and show your books?

It's always going to be six months before the season comes out. I find that January and February, it's always a slow time, and the end of the year is a sort of slow time. But otherwise, I think from March onwards to November, I just always have to keep an eye open and quite a few irons in the fire because you just never know. And nowadays with Instagram, all that sort of stuff, there might not be a specific timeframe for campaign coming out. You still get Spring Summer Autumn Winter. But I do feel like there's a lot of like, in-between stuff.

Christmas ads start in January, but now there's so much more. Fashion brands are going to do big ads, you know Burberry do all those big Christmas ads as well. You just never know, what their timings are. I wouldn't say that anything was too quiet ever. I think you just have to keep messaging people, you never know what the timing is going to be.

DG

Do stylists work through photographers, or can they go direct to producers?

CH

Go direct to producers as well.

DG

What is the best way do you find for people getting in touch with you or other producers? Is it email? Is it phone calls? Is it direct messaging on Instagram?

A bit of everything. Instagram, direct messaging, WhatsApp. I mean, I find people don't call that much. I think it's more like email, message, Instagram.

On Instagram. I feel like don't have to find these details and I feel comfortable that way. Maybe this is my personality, maybe more than emails. Text messages - people do that a lot. I feel like sometimes that's the only way I communicate with some people. I think that people just don't like picking up the phone anymore. I still in some instances prefer that, but if I'm busy on a job I just I feel bad I haven't been able to answer but then you lose that opportunity, you know?

DG

So if people phone they've got more chance of actually speaking to you directly, but there's a chance that you might not answer because you're busy. But there's more scope to actually get your attention isn't there? Because then they can text message you after that and say, I just tried calling and, and so they've kind of followed up on themselves.

CH

Yes exactly, absolutely. Because for me, if I see a number I don't know come up on a really, relatively busy day. I think do I have to answer...? You might get lucky. But yes, try and call and if doesn't work, text message or send an email.

DG

Shoot-wise, what are the problems that you foresee on a job as a producer? Before, during, and after?

CH

How much time do you have...

I think the more experience you have, the better you know. There are so many things I think about before the shoot. How long is a piece of string: location not being signed off, items not being picked up. On one of our last jobs, the visas not coming through in time. Every job has its own microsystem of: OK, what is the issue? Will the cake be ready in time, or do we have ice cream that's fake, so it doesn't melt under the lights? Do we need security so that no one can see the cars? Do we have a driver for the car, do we have insurance for the driver for the car? Does it switch on? Right hand drive, left hand drive. The list can be amusing. But I think every single job will be different - there will be always something that you will never have come up against.

A job in China, we had to have last-minute security guards because of the celebrity - how to organise our security guards at 9pm at night for a shoot the next day. You can never foresee everything. You have to just be calm and just know that things are going to change. And you will do whatever you can. The more experience you have, the more you can pre-empt some things and other things, you think I don't know how to sort it, but let's go for it and we'll figure it out.

It's kind of like playing chess all the time. That's the best analogy I can use. I can't tell you what will go wrong in the next three, or five steps later. See what I need to do in the next three and not get checkmated, and every three steps will reveal another three. All you have to do is keep going. I think as long as you have enough time, that kind of helps. But there's only so much time - not enough time, not enough money.

And then during the shoot, I think I just want to make sure that we touch everything up, it looks good. We get everything in the can and everyone is safe on set and has pitched up.

And then after. I think just post-production, making sure that we just get everything done. But yeah before - it's an absolute minefield.

DG

What about budgets? What problems do you have with these? Are budgets getting lower and lower?

I think it's interesting. This last job I did felt very 80s, budget-wise, and production-wise. I do think that clients will spend money on things that they feel would be worthwhile to their campaign.

And I think what is difficult in how people consume media, is different. So that's where we're going. And I think the budgets have been reduced, but if you look at Netflix and shows and that sort of stuff, that's a completely different world. I think that's where maybe more people are moving to.

Then it becomes a much bigger question about what is the industry is going to be doing? I think there'll be Netflix shows where the advertising will be subtle - the Coca-Cola on the counter kind of thing. That's what brands will be interested in.

I think the most important thing for me - it doesn't mean you'll make something bad just because of the small budget. If you know how to work on a small budget, a big budget is easy. You know, I've made some of my best work on small budgets. I made three Apple ads at the beginning of the year, with tiny budgets. And I got them out really quickly. And it was really satisfying. Although it was a small budget, it was a very current piece of work. And that was what was important.

Sometimes the bigger budgets become this big monster that only come out a year later and could not be anything to anyone by then. So, it depends on what you want to be. I think it might be tougher on styling, or on specific things that need time to create what their vision is. But from a producer side, or like a director side, if you have to run fast and get some great work up there, the budget won't be great, but if you turn the project around in two weeks, you'll probably get the same rate you would have done for commercial. Maybe not as a director, who has a fee - but in terms of day rates. I do think that there's some very exciting times ahead with TV and stuff if people want to go there. Those have the budgets. I think it just depends on what people are interested in.

DG

Do you expect stylists have their own insurance? Or does the clients cover the insurance? If you're traveling abroad would the client cover that?

CH

It depends. There are a lot of third-party indemnities that producers are required to have now. I think maybe it'll be something that starts happening more and more. For a shoot abroad, there'll be travel insurance that the agency took out, but the production company should also have insurance, which should cover everyone. So where it's not a big job which has gone to legal paperwork and that sort of thing. I think people and I think a third party liability is more like this is the job of the person that you are contracted by.