

The Proper Care and Feeding of Videotape

by Jim Lindner

Videotape is becoming an important media in most collections. As the investment in videotape grows over time, it becomes very important to take good care of the videotape to safeguard your investment. Whether your collection circulates or not, videotape has a much shorter life span than most people know. In fact, a videotape that is over 15 years old almost certainly needs careful attention, and most tapes over 20 years old need professional help. If your collection consists mostly of professional productions or films that are still in print, the least expensive protection is usually purchasing another copy. For a locally produced, old, or out of print videotape, proper care is the only way to guarantee the ability to view the tape in the future.

The following recommendations for the storage and preservation of Videotape are a combination of manufacturer's recommendations, experience with old and obsolete tapes, and good common sense.

Keep Videotape Cool and Dry... and away from curious fingers You are better off keeping the tape in a place which has constant temperature and humidity than in a cooler place with lots of traffic. Tapes left for the curious to handle WILL be destroyed, it is only a matter of time.

Give your tapes some "exercise" Tapes need to be fast forwarded and rewind periodically. The recommended interval for doing this process varies according to temperature and humidity, but a good rule of thumb for normal office air conditioned environments is every 6 months. I do not recommend tape rewinders for this purpose. Most rewinders are very inexpensive and subject the tape to questionable tension. Simply use your VCR and fast forward and rewind the tape. It is a good policy never to leave a tape stopped in the middle of the cassette. Always rewind the tape fully.

Protect your tapes from physical damage Cardboard sleeves and inexpensive "library" cases provide little protection for either the cassette or the tape inside. Often these inexpensive cases are made of materials that deteriorate over time. Protect your investment with a high quality shipping case or "Videotape Vault". These cases are inexpensive, reusable, and will last many years.

When in doubt, make a copy. You cannot recover from a lost single master. If you only have one copy of a tape, NEVER allow that copy to circulate. Copies are inexpensive to make and are your only absolute protection against the loss of

the program. Often you can recover if you have made copies, even if the quality is lower. Ideally keep copies in different places, and make copies at different times so that they do not all age together.

Make sure the machine works BEFORE you insert a tape. The biggest cause of damage to tapes is machines in bad condition. If you are uncertain about a machines condition, insert a tape that is not valuable to ascertain that condition. If a tape is damaged, do not insert it into a videotape recorder, the tape may damage the machine.

Keep Videotape clean, Keep Videotape out of the light, Keep Videotape away from strong magnetic fields. It may seem obvious, but then again do YOU store any of your video tapes at home on top of the TV? Dirt, humidity, and heat are the main enemies of videotape and can make the tapes impossible to play back in very short periods of time. A few security systems use very strong magnetic fields, which over time can severely damage the information stored on all magnetic media. Make sure that your tapes do not get passed through these type of devices on a frequent basis.

If you can - know what type of machine the tape was recorded on, and keep the machine! It may not seem important now, but 20 years from now, it may make matters much simpler. The practical reality is that there are many videotape formats that become obsolete quickly. Knowledge, and ideally possession, of the machine that recorded the tape originally can be extremely valuable.

Always label your tapes. Unless a tape is properly labeled, the only way to know the contents is to play the tape, and if the tape cannot be played back without restoration, how do you know whether the contents are valuable enough to justify restoration cost? Even a simple card system can go a long way in helping to know the contents of a tape, long after the tape has been completed.

Know when you need professional help. Many times local expertise is simply not qualified to deal with videotape restoration issues. Damage to a tape that is caused by well meaning people "trying to help" may be permanent. Become the organization expert, and know when to call for help.