



Lost for words?



Mike Deal reviews the DV-11 ENG Prompter from Prompter People

If you're anything like me, in the past you've probably tried to make various prompting devices due to the high cost of buying a ready-made unit. My first attempt, some years ago, took me around a week to make and cost £60.00 in materials. I even shaped its sides and sprayed it black to make it look really cool! It was designed to be totally collapsible, but nonetheless it was still very large and cumbersome, and highly impractical for real "in-the-field" use. OK - I got by with static work, and it worked very well, but its size was the real problem.

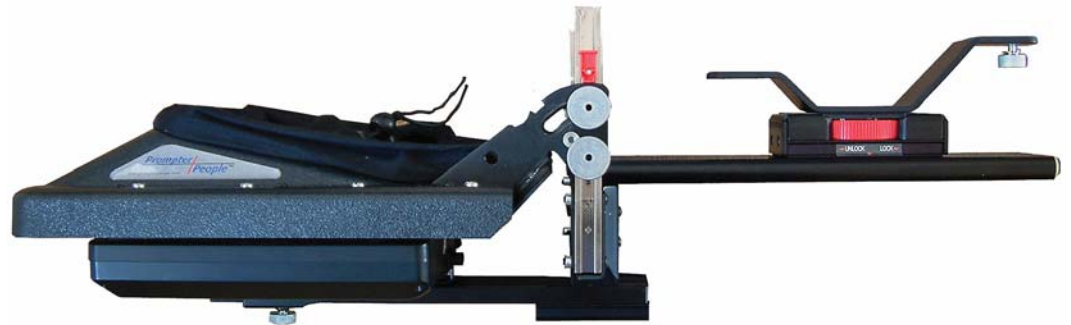
My latest attempt involved using a small 7" monitor positioned just below the lens with the bottom half of the screen masked off. This was to ensure the talent was looking towards the top of the screen, in an attempt to get them looking directly into the camera. The text was quite hard to read on the small screen, and the talents' eyes still seemed to look slightly downwards.

Having shot 13 pieces to camera on one day towards the end of last year for one of my regular clients using this latter method, (which I seemed to get away with!), I was very conscious that my prompter setup isn't really what my corporate clients should expect from a video professional. So I decided that it was about time I looked - yet again - at what was available in the marketplace.

Search for a Solution

So there I am on the Internet taking my umpteenth look around the various prompting websites, when in comes an email looking for a reviewer for a new prompter being launched into the UK and Europe, called the Proline DV-11 ENG.

So who actually produces this unit? Well, it's a company called The Prompter People, who are based in the USA. They are the manufacturers, and The Prompter People Europe Limited,



based in Milton Keynes, is now their new UK & European Sales and Support Office. A quick flying visit down to their offices soon saw me travelling back with what was the pre-production prototype and the only DV-11 ENG model in the UK.

Expectations

Having half expected to spend the best part of a day putting the unit together, I was pleasantly surprised to find it was pre-assembled. I assumed this was because it was the demonstration unit, but they will be despatching it pretty much assembled to purchasers as well. The only fitting not in place will be the glass head assembly, which, to aid protection in transit, will then need to be mounted by the purchaser. This is a very easy task as it simply slides on.

Once assembled, your time is then free to attach the whole unit to your tripod, mount and position your camera, and finally install the prompter software on a suitable computer or laptop.

In the Box

So what does the full package you receive include? Well, pretty much everything you'll need to get up-and-running and recording very quickly.

The main unit consists of a 10.4" LCD monitor with a slim-line monitor remote control, mains power supply unit, 12V DC lead, main glass head assembly, Velcro fitted soft black cloth for covering the lens, a camera bracket, an adjustable sliding

camera mount, a 2.5m VGA to 8-pin lead plus a 7.6 metre (25ft) VGA extension lead, a red/white/yellow phono to 3.5mm jack lead, a flash drive containing the software, a manual rotary controller (USB), and even a microfibre duster to clean the glass with!

The only items not included are a laptop or computer to run the supplied software, and a controller for the talent to use. The latter you may already have in the form of a computer mouse and other alternatives can be purchased as extras. I'll cover the laptop, software and accessories in more detail later, but for now let's concentrate on the main unit itself (as above).

The Main Frame & Front Section

You get a lightweight but very well engineered main frame assembly, plus all the prompter attachments shown. The main glass head assembly will need to be fitted by positioning and sliding it down the two vertical pillars. The unit when closed (as shown), measures 680mm long x 310mm wide x 205mm high to the top of the pillars, and weighs approx 10.6lb, so it is quite compact and portable.

On the front half (left in photo) is the monitor and 60/40 beam-splitter glass head assembly, and to the rear (right) is the sliding camera mounting block. The two pillars vertically mounted near the centre allow the glass head assembly to be adjusted vertically to suit the various sizes of cameras this unit

will accommodate.

The very well written and fully illustrated instructions show exactly how to achieve all aspects of setting up, whatever your camera. At the base of the pillars a fixing plate can be seen, and this is used to attach the whole unit to your tripod head assembly.

This bottom fixing plate is removable, and can slide and lock within either of the two rail sections. It has industry standard 1/4" and 3/8" mounting holes and is affixed to either the lower or higher rail according to the size of camera to be used. The plate should be mounted on the lower rail at the front when smaller camcorders are being used, and the higher rear rail for larger or ENG/Broadcast cameras. The positioning of this plate will affect the balance of the unit and camera when mounted on the tripod - as I found out!

You can see from the picture below, that when a larger camera is mounted on a set up designed for a smaller camcorder, it simply doesn't look right, and in working practice it is very 'back-heavy' - so you will immediately know something is wrong!



Because the fixing plate was in the wrong place for my camera, the degree of adjustment I had to use to try and balance the whole assembly can clearly be seen, and shows the very high degree of forward positioning necessary from the tripod's own adjustment plate. Although it seemed to be perfectly safe, it simply didn't feel right. It was so back-heavy that I couldn't even mount the hard-drive unit – there was simply too much weight to the rear.

The reason for this was simply because I hadn't received a set of instructions with the unit (being so new), so I assumed it was already set up for use. When the instructions arrived later by email, the problem was instantly apparent, as it is the very first item covered, so make sure the instructions are read first to ensure the tripod attachment plate is in the correct rail for your size of camera.

Once the fixing plate is set up correctly (as shown below) I was able to add the full hard-drive unit to the rear of the camera, creating both balance and stability. I was then a very happy man!

Rear Section

The rear section contains the adjustable locking slider mount for the camera. This slider, with its large red locking wheel, will take either a camera riser bracket or the quick-release camera plate used for larger cameras. Alternatively, for smaller cameras, you could attach the camera directly to the adjustment slider as an alternative, but you may find the lens too low.

The camera riser bracket is supplied with the unit, and is used for mounting the variety of



smaller camcorders and palmcorders. The knurled knob fitted to the bracket can be moved to either end of the riser to suit your camera's height requirement. If you have larger cameras, as I do, then the camera riser can be removed in favour of the camera's quick-release plate.



Locking the plate or bracket is achieved by turning the red wheel. This both tightens the plate to the slider and the slider to the adjustment rail at the same time, and is very clearly marked as to which direction the wheel should be turned.

By unlocking this to change position, the plate or camera bracket is also released at the same time, so it only needs loosening by the minimum necessary to slide the whole assembly.

However, once in its final position it is very unlikely there should ever be any need to adjust it further. I only had the unit for a short while and during this time I was able to engage and disengage my camera from its plate with ease. No additional adjustment was ever required.

Monitor & Head Assembly

The front section contains the 10.4" LCD monitor and mounting plate fitted to the front rail. This allows for the precise positioning of the monitor. The picture on

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the right shows the underside of the unit and you can clearly see the adjustment knob for the monitor assembly, plus the lead connection points.

This is how the unit arrived with me although I understand that the lead connection points should in fact have been facing in the opposite direction. I didn't feel any need to change this setup, and in fact preferred it. It meant that the leads could be neatly tied or clipped to the tripod/support, and are less likely to be pulled out.

However, and depending on your actual camera, it is possible that access to the connections as shown in the illustration could become a little 'fiddly' when this way round. Whichever way is chosen though, the ability to show the script output correctly is not an issue, as this can be corrected by using its remote control. This is explained later on.

The monitor can be powered by AC mains, (power adapter supplied), or by 12V DC, and a slim-line remote control unit is also supplied with the monitor. A cigarette type connection lead is also supplied with the unit for DC connection, although in reality I did feel this was a little on the short side in use. A longer one, I feel, would have been more practical. I used lead-acid 12V power packs and the cable



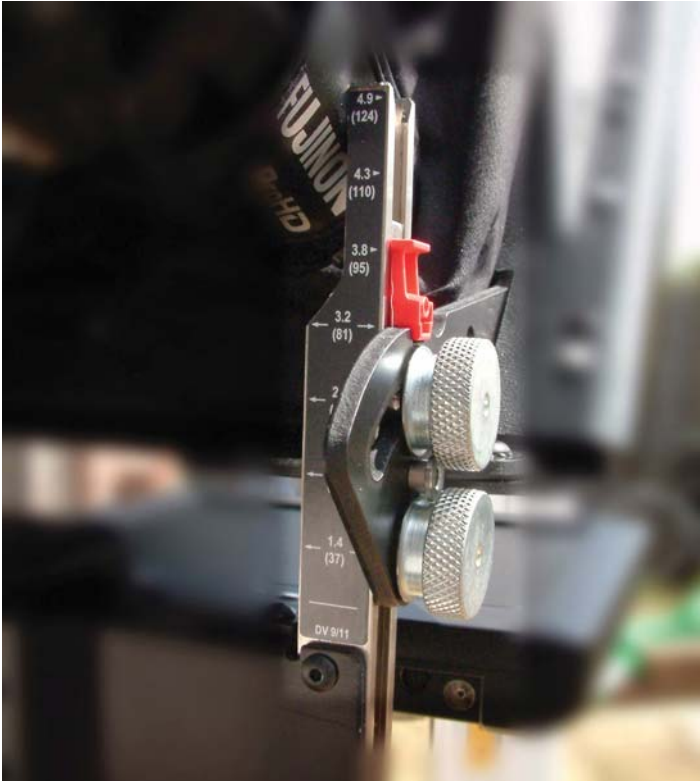
wouldn't stretch to the floor where the battery stood. It is also likely that if I found myself in the position of being on location and wishing to run power from a car lighter socket, then the lead supplied would likely not be long enough to be of practical use.

To be fair, though, in my initial tests the camera was set at shoulder height and stretching down to batteries, but when I shot at desktop level, the lead length was fine. I would guess that on most occasions the unit would be mains powered in any event.

The supplied software (more about the software later), allows you to mirror-flip the image feeding through to the monitor, but on a more than a few occasions I initially forgot to action this before running the script. However, this is where the monitor remote control comes into its own. It provides the ability to cycle through and flip the image directly within the monitor without having to go back into the software. This is a great backup option should you forget as I did, or, if as I suggested earlier, you would prefer to turn the monitor round.

The instructions supplied also provide very clear and concise details for the simple setup measurements required in transferring the centre height of your lens to the pillar numerals, in order to raise the glass head assembly to its final working position for your camera. Once in position the main head can then be raised to its usual final working position of 45 degrees, and the two red retaining pillar clips lock it into place.





If you have a need of an angle other than 45 degrees, this can also be achieved. Both head assembly height and angle adjustment are fixed by tightening the two large knurled knobs on either side as shown above.

The head section itself is made from a tough but lightweight, dark, acrylic compound material rather than of metal, to the back of which is fixed the soft black lens cloth that slips around your lens that will eliminate stray light from entering. This is pre-fitted to the head and attached by Velcro. Tightening a simple toggle drawstring on the cloth ensures it fits snugly around your lens. The use of Velcro makes for simple removal of this cloth for internal cleaning of the glass pane.

The glass pane used is already fitted within the unit head, and is 60/40 beam-splitter glass. This means that any camera filming through this will continue to maintain a high quality image, which the tests using my JVC GY-201E clearly showed.

The use of inferior glazing materials can sometimes introduce various distortions and differences in the final image being recorded, so it is really important that quality glazing materials are used. The Prompter People who manufacture this unit, only use the highest quality beam-splitter glass.

Computer & Accessories

Right! I've got the unit set up, so now let's take a look at the software which is going to run the script for our talent and some of the accessories included or available.

The software provided with this package is Flip-Q, and is supplied on a USB flash drive. Two versions of this software are available - Lite & Pro - and it is the Pro version that comes supplied with this unit. Both PC and MAC versions are pre-installed.

Being pre-installed on a flash drive makes using the software considerably more versatile. It can easily be plugged into any computer or laptop without having to directly install any software, so it can be used on just about all systems - including, perhaps, even a client's own computer!

An additional piece of software also comes pre-installed, and this is called PowerFlip - which allows users to work directly with PowerPoint presentations so presenters can use their own remote pointer to advance through it. PowerFlip simply lets them browse to the presentation, open it and then reverse the secondary output from the laptop for fast hassle-free teleprompting of PowerPoint Presentations. Not something I've found I ever needed, but for anyone who wants to 'ad-lib'

their script whilst showing a presentation, then this could perhaps prove quite useful.

So how do you use the software? Well, that could take up a review of its own! Having said that, the software isn't overly complicated, so for now I'll cover just some of the basics you'll probably want to know about setting up and running.

Firstly, you will need to extend your monitor to a second screen, and BOTH screens must be set at 800x800, 16-bit in order to match and run the script smoothly. I tried this out on two laptops just to experiment. One was a fairly modern and up-to-date widescreen model, (20GB hard-drive, 1.73GHz processor, 1.5GB RAM and USB2.0), and the other an old Satellite Pro4200, (6GB hard-drive, 547MHz processor, 64MB RAM and only a single USB 1.1 slot!)

The modern laptop was fine and very easy to use the software with. The old laptop was the first I had ever bought, and was part of my first home-made prompter. Unfortunately I couldn't get the screen to work in 16-bit for some reason, (probably memory), but it worked fine in 8-bit!

Being old it was painfully slow, the reminders popped up telling me I needed USB2.0, and also to set my screen resolution higher, but that apart - it still performed extremely well! So if you have an old laptop lying around that could be used specifically for prompting purposes, then there shouldn't be much of a problem running the software on it.

However, it will need to have at least one USB slot, and preferably two. Why? Well, the first slot is needed to accommodate the software flash drive, and the second is for any other additional controller accessory you might need.

Contained within the package is a manual rotating hard-wired controller (pictured below). This needs the use of a second USB slot, and possibly the use of an

extension cable, which is also supplied.

This particular controller requires the actual installation onto the computer of its own software. The software then allows you to link the controller to the Flip-Q software. Once linked, dedicated commands can be allocated to the controller, and either the talent or a prompt operator can control the script. For example, turning the controller right or left can increase or decrease the scrolling speed, whilst tapping the control can stop or start the scrolling.

I also had supplied a remote controller unit (pictured on page 22), which also requires a USB slot. I actually prefer the use of the remote. If the talent is being filmed at a distance, or in a full length or walking situation, they can simply stop and start the script more easily whilst hiding the remote in their hand. This removes the need for cables to be used.

The remote unit supplied was very easily installed, (no software needed), highly responsive, and a complete joy to use. However, for me, it did have one very important downside. Every time it was pressed to pause or play the script, you could actually hear the 'click' from the rocker button. This was quite audible, even at a distance, and was picked up by every microphone I tried.

This is an extra though, and is not supplied with the package. I understand that there are other similar remotes available that would perform equally as well, and perhaps less noisily, and I would thoroughly recommend having one as part of your kit.

Another extra that is available is a foot pedal. I didn't have one as part of this review so I can't comment on its use, but this accessory would allow, as implied by the description, the control of the scrolling functions by foot. This would no doubt be most suitable for under-desk, hands-free operations.

The only other accessories I was not able to review here are the carry cases for transporting this prompter unit, of which there are two. Neither was available to me at the time, but I am reliably informed that a flight case for shipping or airline travel will be ready by the time this review appears.

It's estimated cost is likely to be in the region of £200, and a quick telephone call to the distributors will establish price and availability. A padded soft carry case alternative is immediately available at approximately £75.



Setting Up & Software

Setting up and getting the image through to the monitor was pretty straightforward once the laptop screen setup was changed. Two connections only are required to the monitor. First, the power supply to the monitor – mains or 12V DC. Second, connect the supplied 2.5m VGA lead to the monitor from the laptop or computer's second graphics card monitor output, plus the extension lead if needed.

So, with power on and VGA connected the software was activated.

The screenshot below shows the screen Flip-Q presents when first launched. Much of the top tool bar will be familiar to you if you already use a word processor, so no real surprises here. Also the majority of traditional Windows commands and shortcuts can be used, and I would assume the same would apply with the Mac version.

When using my old laptop I had to use a PS2 mouse with extension cables, which was simply due to the lack of USB slots. By leaving the sensitivity control slider right over to the right as illustrated, this was absolutely perfect for my mouse. The slightest movement of the mouse wheel controlled the scroll speed, and it was very responsive and smooth, with no jerking. This degree of control was very comfortable, and very different from other software and alternatives I have used in the past, where the talent has to spend more time concentrating on controlling the mouse wheel than reading the script!

The downside with a mouse is the obvious need to run extension cables. However, I've found that with the talent sitting behind a desk, a mouse can work very well indeed and can be hidden from view. If you already

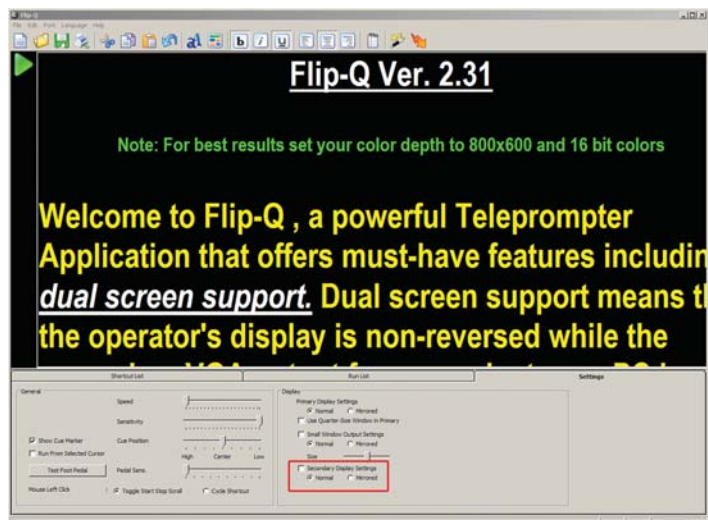
own one, perhaps a wireless mouse could be more effective instead? I don't have a wireless mouse, and rather than buying one I'd prefer to find and invest in a remote control unit.

The Secondary Display Settings option (outlined in red below), needs to be selected accordingly. This is in order to show the reversed display required for the monitor screen. On a number of occasions I forgot to set this properly, and so used the monitor's remote control to correct this.

Scripts can be imported from Word, RTF or TXT files, and I found I could easily access most of the fonts installed on my system. I could change both font style and size very quickly as well. Being a word processor it also means that last minute alterations to scripts (which I always seem to have thrust on me at the last minute!), can be done on the spot.

Also as shown below, it is possible to colour the text. This is a great feature if you use, say, dual presenters, as you can provide them each with different colour text. This removes the need to add some form of alternative marker for each within the script, which on occasions can be missed. The black background, in the main, will be fine for most occasions, and there is the ability to be able to change background colour if required, which I had to do in my tests.

The green cue marker can also be turned on or off, and positioned for personal preference up and down the left hand side of the screen. Now I know that some operators like to set the cue marker about 1/3rd of the way down the screen but, in practice, I found that when using different cameras this positioning can be slightly out. ESP



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Of course, the software will easily adjust this up and down, but I also found that by facing the mirror from the talent's perspective, and with the cue marker showing, it is a very simple matter to slide the monitor itself backwards or forwards so that the marker is where you want it in relation to the lens position, which can be seen behind the glass. This way, should the talent then start to read ahead of the cue marker, they should still appear to be looking directly into the centre of the lens.

The other two tabs are for 'Shortcut List' and 'Run List'. The Shortcut Section is used to create, edit or delete shortcuts. Shortcuts can be used to jump to a specific line or paragraph within the script, even whilst the Prompter is running. The Run List Section can be used to quickly open up multiple text files or scripts whilst still within the Main Screen.

All of these useful and versatile features are fully explained from an easy to read contents file which is accessible directly from the software screen.

The Prompter In Use

OK! That was quite straightforward. Got the prompter mounted to my tripod, camera fitted, mirror head neatly aligned, software set up and script loaded. Now I need a presenter...

At the time I had this prompter I unfortunately didn't have any work that required the use of a presenter. I did have a voiceover artist come into the studio to lay down a commentary though, and I persuaded him to give me a quick screen test whilst he was here. I also got my wife to read a script as well – which she did flawlessly (she has never, ever, done any presenting

before!). Her performance was rather 'wooden' – but don't tell her that if you see her!

Controlling the prompter was simplicity itself, and just as it should be. It worked admirably in static mode, and even when panning, tracking or being dollyed. However, depending on the distances involved and the particular setup in use, for the latter two options I would ideally prefer battery power plus some additional extension cables for the laptop.

I haven't tried it on a jib, (that's the next item on my shopping list!), but I'm hoping it might work here as well. It will no doubt have to be one of the larger models, and will depend on the mountings provided.

One key and very important feature for me to consider was the unit's versatility over varying distances. The unit has been designed and is recommended for use up to 12-feet with the 10.4" monitor, but in practice I actually achieved well in excess of this – which surprised and pleased me considerably!

To test this out, I set the unit up at one end of my lounge at home, opened the French doors and went out into the garden. I could still read the screen pretty clearly and just about fluently – so I measured the distance. I was 26-feet away! So I increased the font size and was then able to read it perfectly at this distance.

I am aware though, that there may well be an issue with scripts containing long words that fall one after the other. By increasing the font size with the smaller screen, long words could end up either sitting on a line on their own, or be split over two lines. This may perhaps prove more difficult to read depending on the ability of the presenter. Ideally, for regular use over longer distances, the use of a 15" or 17" prompter would be more practical, and The Prompter People Europe do have these in their range.

I also tried it outdoors in really bright sunshine and at a peak time of day, around lunch-time. I found it quite difficult to even look at the prompter when the sun was behind or in front of me, which is not really surprising, but when positioning it to one side, and with a bit of shielding to the whole front section (I hung a dark cloth around it), it could still be read. However, it wasn't overly clear using white text on a black background, so I changed this to a white background and used both red and blue texts. These worked

much better and could be read more easily.

In the really bright light I couldn't get more than 12-15 feet away – but it did prove that the unit will work over these sort of distances even outside, so its versatility is excellent. On an overcast or 'average' day, I reckon the prompter could work outdoors even better.

Now, I wear glasses, and I wouldn't call my eyesight exceptionally brilliant, but I found that the text was extremely bright and clear, and easy to read even outdoors. This, I am sure, is in no small part down to the high quality of glass used in the prompter's produced by this company. If your talent has less than perfect vision, the clarity of text to be read will be vitally important.

Now I know its not really designed or perhaps suited to outside use, but by stretching the DV-11 ENG's capabilities for the purpose of this review, and accepting the compromises of using larger text and outside limitations, it showed me that it really can cope if stretched, and with the text remaining clear and easy to read. A surprising and excellent added bonus for me.

Conclusions

As this was the pre-production model, I am aware that there have been a couple of very slight last-minute alterations to the final product, but these don't effect the value of this review.

Just as a reminder, the model reviewed here was the DV-11 ENG, which shouldn't be confused with the original DV-11 which has a shorter sled and is only for small camcorders. Bearing in mind also that this is an entry level prompter, it will have certain limitations if compared to larger screen models, although I hope I have shown it is still extremely versatile.

The downsides? Apart from the lack of a case, the only real disappointment to me was the talent's remote control unit not being silent in operation. This was my only concern from everything provided. However, as this is a third party item and an extra anyway, and with other alternatives available, it's not an issue that would affect my overall feelings or decision.

Based on its well-engineered professional appearance, fittings and design alone, the DV-11 ENG version wins hands-down. By having the added benefit of a longer sled for larger cameras, and with its high degree of overall functionality, versatility

and adjustment, when I come to upgrade my camera equipment again I can be pretty sure whatever I buy could still be used.

So should you invest in one? Well, a lot will depend on the usage you are likely to get from it, or the new opportunities it may open up for you. Speaking personally, I know that I have a number of productions coming up that would really benefit from having a 'live' presenter at certain points, rather than just opting for the traditional voiceover throughout. This alone would make the investment worthwhile whilst improving each production considerably. The client would certainly see the difference!

This prompter certainly looks the part compared to many I have seen, and is light enough to take on-location when needed. Some smaller prompters I have looked at carry a higher price tag than this unit does, so for me this seems to represent the best all-round prompter investment. Even if I were to hire a prompter and operator, it would probably cost me the best part of £300+ per day, so I only need to use it 3 or 4 times and it's paid for!

So, what does it cost? The basic DV-11 retail price is £1029 plus VAT, and the newer DV-11 ENG with all of its added benefits that I've mentioned, sells for just £70 more.

I think this particular unit is most definitely worthy of serious consideration as both a useful and vital piece of entry level equipment for the smaller studio or video business. Larger concerns also couldn't go wrong by contacting The Prompter People Europe if a bigger prompter unit is on your current wish-list. There is a full range of prompter products available ranging from the entry level DV-11, right through to a 17" studio based prompter at under £3K!

In my opinion the DV-11 ENG is admirably suited for the use it was designed for – and more! For ease of use and the prospect of opening up improved opportunities from the use of this unit, the DV-11 ENG is certainly now at the top of my shopping list as a must-have prompter. ■

**Mike Deal M.M.Inst.V.
Mirade Studios**

Notes: To find out more, or perhaps even persuade them to come and demo the unit for you, call The Prompter People Europe on +44 (0) 1908 637527. At the time of writing this review their website was under construction - but it might be worth trying it - www.prompterpeople.co.uk