

The Weather Channel

Adobe® After Effects®

Adobe After Effects makes on-air motion graphics a breeze for weather news giant

ABOUT THE CUSTOMER

- The world's leading weather information provider since 1982
- Employees: more than 1,000
- Headquarters: Atlanta, Georgia

BENEFITS SUMMARY

- An in-house design workflow based on Adobe After Effects provides all the performance advantages of post-production houses while generating high-quality results and saving time and money.
- Intensive training helped the group maximize the value of After Effects quickly and easily.
- Creativity-enhancing features free designers to experiment freely and collaborate effectively.
- After Effects productivity tools combined with the rendering speeds of BlueICE PCI boards enable unprecedented responsiveness by the in-house design group.
- Core content created for broadcast is easily repurposed across all Weather Channel communication media to reinforce brand image.
- With After Effects at the center of its graphics workflow, The Weather Channel is prepared to accommodate future technologies such as HDTV.

www.weather.com
www.ledet.com

Travelers, athletes, outdoor workers, pilots, commodity traders, and parents all have one thing in common: a devotion to The Weather Channel, one of the most popular U.S. cable broadcasters, reaching more than 70 million households. Whether it's delivering routine forecasts or tracking major storms, The Weather Channel churns out live news stories around the clock.

Just four years ago, the station employed a small art department that created only still images. Today, its 20-member broadcast design group is an in-house post-production house preparing all the animations and composites for newscasts and special programs, including openers, bumpers, promos, backgrounds, "lower thirds," over-the-shoulder boxes, seasonal IDs, and brand packages. Adobe After Effects and other Adobe software have played key roles in the station's ability to produce high-quality, on-air motion graphics at hurricane speeds.

TAKING A FRESH APPROACH

"Our original animation system was a Flint that could only accept layers from the Macintosh computer one at a time, so we often needed the help of outside production studios because of performance and time limitations," says Carl Bradford, senior

design manager at The Weather Channel. "After Effects allows us to experiment freely, work collaboratively, and produce the strongest results in-house—faster and more affordably than outsourcing. A week's worth of production at a post-production facility can pay for a workstation with Adobe After Effects ten times over."

At The Weather Channel, After Effects has become the central component of a high-demand desktop workflow that includes Adobe Photoshop® and Adobe Illustrator® software, plus Ultra BlueICE hardware and interface software for accelerating Adobe After Effects processing. "During severe weather conditions, quality motion graphics have to be created quickly in order to support our live coverage," says Bradford. "With After Effects on ICE, files with 30 to 100 layers that used to take 20 hours to render overnight now take about an hour."

Since 1998, Sterling Ledet & Associates, an Atlanta-based training firm and Adobe Authorized Training Provider, has helped The Weather Channel designers and production artists become proficient in Adobe After Effects, customizing classes to reflect their workflow. "Teams like this one need



Openings and promos for The Weather Channel's daily *First Outlook* report include 5- to 30-second animations created using After Effects. The segments are visually complex, incorporating moving type, time-lapse video of blowing clouds, and other elements. To build these layered compositions, the team at The Weather Channel imports images in multiple file resolutions and gathers footage from a variety of sources—including 16mm and 35mm film, video, QuickTime movies, and sound files.

to get up and running on After Effects quickly," says Sterling Ledet, president. "We work with Adobe to help customers master the software in a matter of weeks, rather than over months of intermittent, self-guided study."

FEATURES THAT SMOOTH THE CREATIVE FLOW

Through training and daily experience, The Weather Channel designers routinely tap a range of time-saving, creativity-enhancing After Effects features. Projects typically begin as Illustrator and Photoshop compositions, and then move into After Effects for animation and masking. The three programs' tight integration helps make the process seamless. "One broadcast designer described the experience of using Adobe products as unconstrained as picking up a sketchpad," explains Bradford. "We can work in multiple programs concurrently and pull files right into the After Effects canvas and start animating. It's a powerful experience."

Typical projects include the openings and promos for the *First Outlook* report, which airs daily from 5 to 7 a.m. These

5- to 30-second animations are visually complex, incorporating moving type, time-lapse video of blowing clouds, a clock with a sweep second hand, and other elements. To build these layered compositions, The Weather Channel team imports images in multiple file resolutions and gathers footage from a variety of sources—including 16mm and 35mm film, video, QuickTime™ movies, and sound files. Says Bradford, "It used to be a painful process to incorporate disparate elements. The import capabilities in After Effects make it easy to manage and integrate it all with no intermediate steps, just drag and drop."

As *Atmospheres*, *First Outlook*, and other projects come together, broadcast designers at The Weather Channel appreciate having the creative freedom to apply as many as 128 masks per layer that automatically interact with each other, saving steps by using context-sensitive pop-up menus to add effects without moving up to the main toolbar. Along the way, the Render to RAM feature is used to view work in progress in real time, at full resolution. This facilitates effective collaboration between the design team and station decision makers and involves them in the creative process.

Online broadcast designers at The Weather Channel find it equally easy to implement changes. The Collect Files automatic archiving command and the Flowchart view help make sure that legacy work is readily accessible.

A SUNNY OUTLOOK

The Weather Channel's broadcast design group has earned increased visibility and regard throughout the organization. Now, to foster brand consistency, other Weather Channel teams look to the broadcast group to create core content for reuse on the Web and in print, advertising, PDAs, and pager communication projects. In addition, the broadcast group is now developing and testing graphics capabilities for emerging technologies such as HDTV, a format with which After Effects is already compatible.

Bradford forecasts a similarly bright future for design staffs throughout the broadcast industry: "Our After Effects on ICE workflow closes the performance gap between desktop and high-end systems and has proven to be the corporation that we can provide dazzling motion graphics more quickly, less expensively, and with higher quality in-house."

TOOLKIT

Software

Adobe After Effects Production Bundle
 Adobe Photoshop
 Adobe Illustrator

Hardware

Apple Power Macintosh G3 and G4 computers running Mac OS 9 with 1 GB of RAM
 Ultra BlueICE PCI hardware for accelerating After Effects processing functions
 Pinnacle TARGA 2000 SDX Studio
 Sony Digital Betacam recorders
 Medéa and Rorke Data disk arrays