



Reel Connections - Issue #2

The Betamax Inferiority Complex

A Weekly Sunday Newsletter from Stilson Video Services*The epic battle for home video superiority*

I've noticed over the years that people who bring in their old Betamax tapes are often a little embarrassed to present what they consider to be a mistake they made 40+ years ago. I often try to reassure them that their decision was sound. They didn't buy the inferior format - nothing could be further from the truth.

I say it's time to set the record straight and give Betamax some love.

I've been transferring tapes for nearly 20 years. Much of my learning comes from on-the-job training. For example, when I decided to include Betamax as one of our transfer formats, I needed to get some machines. I combed the internet for the best machines available and found a company that refurbishes Betamax players to like new condition. No other kinds of machines, just Betamax. I found this a little strange, I mean, why not VHS players too? After all, they're in far greater demand.

I decided to talk to the owner, an older gentleman who was all too happy to explain to a "young" whippersnapper like me why Betamax is superior, despite having lost in the market to VHS. I really enjoyed that conversation and respect his passion for preserving these old machines. He now refurbishes all my Betamax equipment.

Here's the short version of the story...

Sony introduced Betamax in 1975, two years ahead of when JVC introduced VHS. Not only did JVC's product arrive late to the market, but the quality wasn't as good, with fewer lines of resolution. So with all that going for Betamax, what happened?

Well, Sony wasn't delivering what was most important to consumers at that time. JVC's VHS format could record 2 hrs. vs. 1 hr. for early Betamax. Also, JVC opened up their format to other manufacturers which promoted competition and lower prices, while Sony was reluctant to do so. This strategy overcame the quality disadvantage and the market embraced VHS. Sony did improve Betamax to better compete but it was too late, consumers had spoken.

It's a timeless lesson - listen to the customer and deliver what they want.

As a small company, I get to talk to my customers directly, which helps me understand what's important to them. Increasingly, image quality from the old tapes is a major concern. I think I can hear the ghosts of Sony saying "Oh so now quality is important?"

Your old tapes can look better than ever

Displaying a typical analog tape resolution (640x480) on a TV screen of today (3840x2160) is not a pretty picture, if you'll pardon the pun. AI promises to be the answer, but results are currently a bit inconsistent. I spend a lot of time running tests of new or updated programs to find out the best way to effectively enhance the old tapes. Sometimes I can, and sometimes not. As always, my approach is honesty. If I don't think we can significantly improve the look of your tapes, I'll say so.

However, advancements in this technology are happening at an incredible pace. Sometimes, just keeping up weekly is a challenge. So stay tuned, it won't be long before a 1980s Betamax or VHS tape will look stunning on your 4K screen. Especially Betamax, since it looked better to begin with 🤔

Lives are important.

Our mission is to connect them to future generations the best way possible.

Finally, if you have a topic you'd like me to write about, let me know at stilson@stilson.com and I'll add it to the list.

— Bill Stilson
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