

When Videotapes Don't Speak Our Language

A Weekly Sunday Newsletter from Stilson Video Services



If your video was created somewhere else in the world, it can still be transferred.

A customer recently visited our studio with a single tape in hand. She sheepishly admitted she had used another service to transfer the rest of her tapes because they were cheap. It turned out to be a neighbor who did this as a side hustle. The neighbor told her this particular tape was “bad” and wouldn’t play.

At first she accepted his diagnosis. But because there was supposed to be important family history on the tape, she decided to bring it to us in order to be sure. She told me these were recordings of her relatives overseas. I immediately guessed what was happening and inserted the tape into a PAL VCR. She was stunned to see her “bad” tape play perfectly.

It’s fairly common for a customer to hand us a videotape that won’t play in a standard VCR sold here in the United States. There can be many reasons for this, but one of the first troubleshooting steps is to try it in a VCR that can play formats from around the world. If it plays, the mystery is solved. This tape was recorded in another country using a different video standard than ours.

There were three main standards developed around the world for analog video formats:

- **NTSC (National Television System Committee)**
USA, Canada, Japan, Taiwan, and most of the Western Hemisphere
- **PAL (Phase Alternating Line)**
Most of Western Europe, Australia, New Zealand, parts of Asia, Africa and South America
- **SECAM (Sequential Color with Memory)**
France, the former Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and parts of the Middle East

But wouldn't it be easier if there were just one video standard for everyone? Definitely, but here's why there's not.

The NTSC standard was officially adopted in 1953 as the broadcast standard in the United States. While incredibly advanced for its time, it was not without shortcomings, most notably inconsistent color. That's how it got its nickname "Never The Same Color".

In Europe, the color issue was going to be an even bigger problem because of their broadcast conditions. There was also the issue of a different electrical standard in Europe—50 hertz vs 60 hertz here in the USA. This meant that the frame rates had to be different.

All these incompatibilities led to the development of a new system for that part of the world called PAL in 1963. So now you have two world standards using different frame rates and resolutions. Then, there became a third major player, SECAM, developed by France in 1967. While it boasted technical advantages, the broadcast landscape was becoming too muddled and it never became as dominant as NTSC and PAL.

So, without going into a detailed history of how we got into this mess, there are good reasons why we did. Now we have old video tapes scattered around the globe that were recorded on one of these three formats. To look at a tape, you'd never know the difference unless a label, or customer input, might provide a clue.

Reputable transfer services need to be able to play and record the various formats. Unfortunately, many don't bother to invest in the proper equipment to handle these tapes because it's expensive and they are far less common. It's easier just to tell the customer the tape is "bad" and move on.

Not surprisingly, some of the big national companies will send them back as unplayable, even if there is nothing wrong with the tape!

Other big box companies will transfer PAL/SECAM tapes, but require the customer to mark their tapes accordingly before sending them. The problem is, I've never encountered a customer who actually realizes what format their tape is in. How would they know? The tapes all look exactly the same and haven't been played for decades.

The message is, if you are in possession of video tapes that may have been recorded in another country, make sure you let a service like ours take the time to identify what you have, and transfer it properly on the correct equipment.

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.

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