



Title:

**Lockdown in a film studio: the Sandstorm vs Lockdown story.**

**About:**

Established in 2000 in Soho Square, Sandstorm Films are an end-to-end production facility for advertising and film. With an on-site team, kit, studios and post we can manage and produce a project completely from end-to-end or facilitate at any stage of your own production.

**Synopsis:**

In March 2020, with 38 productions on-going, Sandstorm Films' MD Tom Ward decided the best way to safely complete the projects was for some of the team to move into the studios to finish the work.

**Body:**

To put this story into context we need to set one thing absolutely straight. Yes, we did live in our studio throughout lockdown, but our studio isn't a cold warehouse. So this isn't a story that deserves sympathy, it's simply a great chance to explore why, how and fundamentally what happened to us when our team moved into the studio, to live, full-time in March 2020 while Lockdown 1.0 blew over.

Back, before Lockdown, when people used to be able to be sociable, the thing I heard the most from visitors to Sandstorm's facilities was that they 'couldn't believe it was real'... as if the advertising industries' constant push to convince us of the superpowers of a brand was somehow being embodied in the promotion of our business as well.

So, why would you doubt 'it's real'? Well simply because it sounds a bit too good to be true. Our studio is a custom-built set of stages in the Cotswold countryside, with (a bit of) accommodation, luxury VIP spaces for clients, a bar, kitchens, sauna, massage therapy, a members club... you get the idea, it's not a World War II hangar that is holding on by a couple of rusty bolts.

Sandstorm is a small independent film production company, we're focused on commercials and digital content and we set the company up in 2000, in Soho Square.

Since then we have pumped pretty much every penny back into the full production process to make it ultra simple for clients to create films. From client experience, through production into post and delivery - we've meticulously evaluated why and how we carry out the process to make it very efficient... sounds boring right, well, it is, but in an industry that has changed a lot in our time, some 'old fashioned' practices are still essential and some, well, not so much.

Is this story new? No! Though unlike others in the industry, firstly, we actually achieved this goal, we created a real production facility where clients can come and make entire campaigns without leaving site, on the best kit, with a highly skilled mix of freelance and full-time crew. People say 'one-stop-shop' which albeit is not my favourite term, is technically correct.

We took complete and full control of the entire process and the experience, on one site in the UK. Where we own studios, a lot of cameras, a lot of lights, motion control rigs, a full post production department including audio mix and voice-over, a members' club, a cafe and a massage spa with sauna and therapy rooms. Even trying to explain it is a mouth-full. So you can sympathise with anyone who believes it isn't real.

In fact, even people who have been here, who know it is real still questioned me when I told them that we had moved into the studio in March.

More people believed that in fact through lockdown, rather than actually living at the studios we simply said we were, as a joke, to try and entice work in... maybe we missed a trick there. But in truth, in lockdown, when toilet roll seemed like a luxury item, why would you sit at home and wallow when you could move into a fully functioning studio complex with, well pretty much every amenity we could desire.

With on-tap beer and an in-house chef also staying at the studio, it was less a hardship and more a chance to enjoy hotel quality amenities while getting on and making films when the rest of the world seemed to just shut down.

In March 2020, we put a lot of very (seemingly dull) processes into place to mitigate any risks or disruption to business.

Two weeks before Boris made his announcement we had 38 projects on-going, with three to be shot before the impending (albeit unknown) lockdown came into force and a number still to be shot.

We decided to shoot these films with the bare minimum client attendance. With most decision makers logging in to the shoots remotely, as remote viewing wasn't really that new to a business based in the countryside... did that work? Absolutely! If anything we find it's actually more effective than having all the clients onset. A client watching the final film is a client not distracted by the wonder of a film studio.

It actually paved the way for us to feel so confident about lockdown that we opted to embed a five man crew at the studios, to live at the studios throughout the pandemic.

The five 'valiant' volunteers gave us a full in-house crew for all the productions we had booked in. It meant we could carry on with zero disruption for our clients.

Lockdown began, we settled in nicely, with evenings by the fire, the younger team playing Xbox, the older generation watching films in the cinema, or on Zoom calls to friends and family... and within three days 29 of the 38 productions were cancelled. Probably, therefore, time to go home and lick our wounds? Absolutely not!

It was a time of such uncertainty for clients that I felt strongly that the cancelled jobs could easily re-appear in a week, a month, or a year - who knew, no one knew.

So we carried on, we shot the remaining projects, all via live stream to our clients and their agencies. With the directors and directors of photography logging in remotely also.

Every day ended with an exhausted crew, including our chef, who stayed on-site, cooking up all our food (breakfast, lunch and dinner) and in between he became the cleaner and regularly helped out on set too.

With such a small team we had to use our wonderful Mark Roberts Cyclops motion control rig and SuperTechno TechnoDolly to control the cameras on every shoot. It was no excuse to sacrifice production quality and with everything in-house including Arri Alexa cameras and thus, the only person who had to leave the building at all was our chef, to queue up at the shops to get food - nothing else from the outside world made it in or out.

All the work we shot was pretty simple, predominantly it was food and packshot work.

Around six weeks into the process, we found a neat way to get presenters back into the studio too using motorhome rental to give them a place to stay on-site too. Which meant we could shoot 'single person' shoots... we say single person, as with motion control it meant many of our shoots seemed to have multiple cast on-set together, when in reality, they were all filmed independently.

Our weekends certainly felt quite long (we all remember those), the sun was out in the UK which was a bonus, but two solid days of drinking each week was maybe a questionable long-term past-time, thus we decided instead to use that time to shoot little update videos for clients.

This was certainly the big turning point for us, probably the one thing we were able to do over and above other companies, completely safely, was have some fun.

The more lighthearted the films became, the more views and the more, it seemed, that we were cheering up other people in lockdown.

So the series continued, and became ever more ludicrous. By May, most of our productions were complete, so we moved our 'weekend entertainment' into the week, and gave ourselves more than just a few hours to shoot each film.

In total we shot 11 separate Lockdown productions, the first three were really just piece to cameras, to update clients on our progress in the studio - as the comedy levels dialled up so did the adventure levels. By week 5, we ran a piece to camera that featured our motion control robots seemingly having a little battle. Something we'd discussed doing for years, but never had the time to produce. That film featured myself in front of camera, alongside the Cyclops and TechnoDolly. The crew was a grand total of two! Cam pre-lit the 5600sq ft stage by himself while I set up and timed the motion control rigs to dance correctly (using an Autocue as a timer to make sure everything ran smoothly in a one take film).

Then when the cameras ran, Cam was in charge of lighting and special effects, cameras, sound, autocue and two motion control rigs (and their emergency stop buttons!!!). In Week 6 we announced the reintroduction of actors on set, Week 7 was a very basic tour of the site as viewers wanted to see where we were living, Week 8 we shot a comedy food show, by Week 9 we were getting pretty fed up of lockdown and shot a dodgy horror parody to express our lack of enthusiasm for lockdown. Week 10 was a ludicrous take on Sky Sports 'Sandstorm VS Lockdown' the boxing match and, to me, that felt like we were pretty much out of time and ideas and should focus back on real work.

Luckily for us, around this time, other clients had also become utterly disillusioned with lockdown and began recommissioning work. June and July were exceptionally busy. It almost felt like normal, other than the budgets were tiny and we seemed to spend half of all shoots bathing in hand sanitiser.

My most vivid memory of lockdown 1.0 was the sheer amount of quotations and zoom calls - I'd never seen anything like it. At the time, it seemed we were the only fully operational production team out there - which meant everyone wanted a quote and EVERYONE was bored out of their mind, so any idea they'd ever had suddenly needed a quote. That was certainly the only part of lockdown 1.0 that felt soul destroying when, in essence, living in a luxury hotel with an array of the best film production kit in the world we were really just a giant quote machine. I live in the hope that some of those new clients remember us in the future. But we've all been there right!

Every call I took ended with 'you're going to make me a hero!' and after 280+ quotes had gone out and only 12 projects confirmed we started to wonder if we were achieving anything more than 'making people into heroes'... how could we do something for our clients other than send them quotes?

We decided to shoot, what we hoped was a final 'Week Whatever' lockdown film, using a set we'd built for a clients shoot (that did go ahead, you'll be pleased to hear) to say, in short, that we felt production was now at a 'normal' stage, you could get crews back in the studio once the governments 'if you can't work from home' started to become interpreted as 'get back to work'.

We had proven on 12 paid productions and 11 somewhat self-indulgent Lockdown Films that filming in lockdown was possible, and could actually be a lot of fun. What started as a bit of fun quickly became a well-followed and upbeat set of films, a chance for us to experiment and more importantly, an opportunity to try and cheer people up.

August was reassuringly quiet, old fashioned quiet, everyone seemed to be on holiday. Therefore we decided, if the world has gone back to that type of normal, we should too. Our team moved out of the studio and come September we were pretty much fully booked, October the same. Budgets were still a little tighter than they were, but you can fully sympathise with that in 2020.

We scripted a final 12th Lockdown episode, which we hoped we'd never get to film. It was both time intensive and probably unnecessary now we were all 'back to work'.

Sadly Lockdown 2.0 happened and very quickly, week one of November became a pretty open diary for production at least because our big shoot required a lot of models and freelance crew, all of whom needed to stay in hotels... hotels, which were shut. So we began the week with a very quick set-build, by the evening we'd shot the first scene, the next day scene 2 on greenscreen and scene 3 in our members' club, scene 4 and 5 the next day and we had it. The 12th film in the series, was shot and ready in under a week and we were actually pretty pleased we did it.

As for the future of lockdown, it's very difficult to say for sure - what made our company so resilient to 'outside' influence, having a full-team, all the kit and post in one place would make us completely immune to ever stopping, right? Wrong. In the end the biggest issue we've had this year has been access to hotels and food. What a strange world we live in. On a positive note, we will be putting a lot more accommodation on-site next year, to complete the experience here. If you're going to come out to the Cotswolds to make films, you should be able to relax and enjoy the site in the evening too.

#### Other subject points?

- What is Director Club
- TechnoDolly - the only production company in the UK with one
- Cyclops - the biggest motion control in the world, ready to go in our studio
- Remote viewing - we've had it for ten years, now everyone else can see why we liked it
- Full end-to-end process in lockdown - where were the gaps?
- Segway from serious to comical as lockdown didn't ease - why we did it and the metrics

Lockdown Series:

<https://www.sandstormfilms.com/lockdownseries/>

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