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## Visual Inspection of Video Assets

When we think of inspecting AV assets, we usually think of film. We envision winding through reels, attaching leader, repairing splices and perforation damage, etc. But when we look at a videotape one might not think there is much to tell about the asset. For most video formats the tape is trapped in a cassette. What's going on in there?? But just by visually inspecting a tape you can get a lot of information about the asset's condition and history.

### *Identifying the Format*

When looking at a videotape the first thing to know is the format. If you have trouble identifying the format, check out the pdf on our website that gives names, pictures, dimensions and other information many of the common videotape formats found in archives by [clicking here](#).

### *Physical container*

Do a visual inspection of the tape housing. This could be a box, case, and/or cassette. Examine the outside for signs of damage that compromises the structural integrity of the container itself. If the container is damaged, the tape inside also is likely to have suffered damage or contamination. Is there any damage to the case? Are there things like dents, cracks, breaks, signs of water damage or mold? Is the case particularly dirty or dusty? This can tell us what kind of an environment the asset was stored in. If in a cassette, can you hear anything loose and rattling around inside the cassette when moved? Also, for a cassette based format this is also a great time to make sure the record inhibit tab is out. On a Umatic tape, this is the red button on the bottom of the cassette – pull it out and discard. For Beta and DV tapes, there is a little tab on the side of the tape that you push. VHS is a black plastic tab on the spine that you pop off. This will protect your asset from being accidentally recorded over. There is no record inhibit for open reel formats – that setting is on the tape deck.

One special note, If your asset is on an open reel, it's also important to examine the flanges – these are the metal or plastic sides of the reel . Are the flanges in good condition? Are they bent or damaged? If you have Quad/2-inch materials, look on the inside of the flange. Is there a foam lining? This can be very troublesome. Has the foam deteriorated in any way? Oozing adhesive backing? Has the foam dried out, or is it crumbling? Many times these foam pads ooze adhesive which sticks to the tape. It's very difficult to remove and repair these tapes. The good news is that by the time 1-inch materials came around, manufactures solved this problem and in most cases the foam lining is fine on 1-inch tapes.

### *Smell*

Sounds silly, yes. But give your tapes a whiff. This can be a helpful indication of where the materials were stored and what physical issues the tapes may have. What does it smell like? Wax or crayons? Moldy and dank like a basement? Dusty like an attic? Waxy or crayon smelling tapes can be a sign of tape deterioration. Moldy or dank smells can indicate possible mold contamination or binder issues due from

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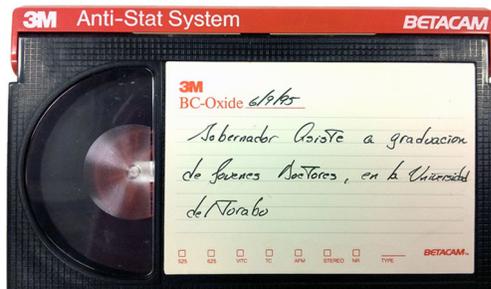
storing the tape in a humid environment. Is the odor faint, or over powering? Keep notes of what you're experiencing. Plus the image of you smelling videotapes will scare your coworkers.

### **Tape Pack**

The tape pack is the physical roll of videotape. Examine how it is wound onto itself. For many formats you only have a little window in which to examine the tape pack. Is the pack smooth? Are their popped strands – meaning are there areas where the circle of tape is higher than the rest? If there are sections sticking up, are they sticking straight up or are they damaged or folded in any way? Are there gaps in the pack or places where the tape is folded back onto itself? Note any physical damage.

### **Contaminants**

Look at the pack for contaminants. Flakes of oxide (can be black or brown)? Look on the case and pack for signs of water damage – large gray or white splotches. White or brown mold? If you are seeing mold – segregate these materials immediately and handle with care. These tapes will need special mold remediation to remove the contaminant. Are there any tapes with white dots that look like powder on the tape pack? These white dots may not be mold – although many times it is mistaken for mold. Most prevalent in 1-inch video reels, this is actually dried binder that has seeped out to the edge of the tape and then dried. Don't fret! This can be easily removed when the tape is cleaned. As I mentioned above, many times you only have a small window in which to see the tape pack and sometimes things are not what they seem.... For example:



**CLOSED**



**OPENED**

When the cassette is closed, you can't see the mold that has contaminated both sides of the tape. But when opened, it's easy visible. Now, opening every single video tape in the collection may not be feasible. Plus, opening a cassette tape is tricky. There are lots of small parts, and things need to fit back together just so. BUT – by doing a visual inspection of both the cassette and the case, this client was able to tell us that mold was probably a problem with this collection. Because we were on the lookout with these tapes, we were able to flag this tape, open it, and perform mold remediation. This tape was successfully digitized with no damage to the asset or equipment.

Videotape inspection is an integral part of any digitizing project. It only takes a few moments and it can tell you a lot about your collection. While handling your materials, it's also an easy way to prevent damage.

