



Focus On Technology

Cable Keeping

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Every production company has cables—endless numbers of them—from data cables to AC power distribution. And like most newbies, you all start with the usual whatever-is-handly approach to transporting them—old roadcases, milk crates, suitcases, steamer trunks, plastic totes, etc. This article describes the art of cable keeping, and how the big production companies do it.

Sometimes we never learn, but typically, plenty of clues are dropped by those persons witnessing your load-in ritual. Sayings like, “How many trips are you gonna make?” or, “Hey, it’s getting cold in here; wanna hurry up?” What those less-than-polite comments should be telling you is that you are not very efficient about getting your gear from the gig rig into the venue.

So, to resolve this, the natural way to do it is consolidate those suitcases, tubs, whatever, into bigger storage items. And the natural path to this resolution are work trunks, work boxes or work cases. Whatever you call them, it means cases on wheels that hide all those cables for fewer trips in and out. And you do not have to go my way with custom cable trunks, as many case makers and music retailers offer standard-size trunks that are nothing more than spaces to fill with the necessities of gigging.

The important things to look for in a good cable road case are size and construction. You want to make sure a case fits your standard truck pack. Most tractor-trailer rigs are 102 inches across on the inside of the trailer, but most box trucks are 90 inches wide or slightly wider. If you want them to fit efficiently without room to roll around, that means you need to make sure you can fit two, three or four across, depending on what type of cable is in them. Feeder cable is exceptionally heavy, so a three-wide truck pack would make them 30 inches wide for a box truck or 34 inches wide for a big rig. Also with feeder cable, you want to make sure the case is built using $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch plywood instead of $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch ply, or it will buckle and bulge with the weight of the feeder cable. Dolly boards and castors are a must, and castor cups for stacking multiple cases comes in handy, although with cables it would take two to four roadies to stack them.

For smaller distro cables and data cables, ½-inch ply is okay, and you might even consider separate wells for sorting out different types and/or lengths of cable. You can even have a tray on the top for breakout boxes, adaptors, connectors and whatever else you might need on a long haul.

Cable Rolling

For smaller cables like XLR data cables, I teach my cable-rolling helpers to coil in about 7-inch circles using the over/under technique. The technique is better shown than described, but uses a lot of common sense and a bit of Navy seamanship. Generally, you will attempt to get the cable loose from all others and lay it out in somewhat of a straight line. Then, grab one end with your left hand (if you're right-handed), and with the other hand, grab the cable about 2 feet in front of you. Coil the cable one loop at a time, alternately twisting the cable one way and then the other. With your thumb and fingers, you should make the cable turn as each coil is formed. Alternatively, you can grab the cable with your left hand (if you're right-handed) and using your right hand, grab the cable a couple of feet in front of you. Then twist your wrist 180° so that the loop goes under the previous loop. Alternate between twisting and not twisting. You will notice that the far end of the cable will not be twisting if this is done correctly, as it prevents looping and tangles.

Now, on to the subject of cable ties. My cable ties have been evolving since I started rolling cables in the early 1970s. Back then, Velcro was still too new, and tape left way too much residue. And if you knotted your cables, you quickly found out they would not last very long. But being of practical means—and also an office janitor between gigs—I had a ready supply of yellow Glad garbage bag plastic ties; perfect for small cables. As my occupations improved and my source of free cable ties dwindled, I switched to Velcro ties.

But the yellow Glad ties were easy to spot after gigs, and they had reasonable life spans; even today, I still have a few in use. But now, I have given up the fancy cable ties for “gecko tape.” My half-inch yellow gecko tape is still made by Rip-Tie Inc., but it comes in 150-foot rolls with hooks on one side and loops on the other. By cutting 6-inch lengths of this tape, I have cable ties that cost barely a nickel each and last through dozens of gigs. I make it a habit to stash all ties near the cable box for easy tracking at the end of the night.

Finger Twisting



Wrist Twisting



Power Distro Cables

My multi-core cables with black jacketing get a similar treatment as XLR patches, but in a 12- to 15-inch coil size. Feeder cable is much beefier and harder to handle, but most adults can wrangle it with a little patience and perseverance. Remember to make figure-8s with excess feeder when it's in use, or you might end up with a lump of copper and rubber, not to mention a big PD problem.

I have a little tip to share with you to help wrangle bigger cables. If you can get some theatrical black "trick" line, cut healthy lengths of it (about 2 feet) and square-knot the middle of the trick line on one end of these kinds of cables next to the connector. If you can tie your shoes, then you can tie off the coiled cables quickly and toss them into your cable trunk. If trick line is not handy, then black boot laces will make a nice substitute.

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