

## Hollywood glamour meets Southern hospitality

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Whenever a television commercial is filmed or a movie produced, a standard budget form must be filled out, detailing every dollar to be spent on the production. According to [movieforms.com](http://movieforms.com), the first line on that form is designated for the “producer,” line 172 is “props,” line 234 is “principal cast” and the list goes on. Line 204 — “production supplies,” is where Alton Butler’s Hollywood, Calif., equipment rental business — Line 204 — comes into play and it’s how his business was named.

Butler grew up in a small town in Alabama, playing football for the local high school team. After an injury forced him to give up football, he began to pursue another interest — acting. Following high school graduation, Butler moved to

Los Angeles in September 1993 to pursue an acting career.

Butler earned a theater degree at the Meisner Center for the Arts, where he learned Sanford Meisner’s technique of acting, joining the ranks of actors such as Sydney Pollack, Tom Cruise and John Travolta.

“I did a lot of acting for eight years,” Butler says. “One of my jobs was to go out and pick up some of the stuff that you use behind the camera, like the tables, coolers and chairs, brooms, pop-up tents, little generators for craft service and those kind of things. I looked at the invoices and I saw how much these people paid for this stuff and it was crazy. The stuff they rented was just normal stuff that you would see at any home or in any garage. I talked to this buddy of mine who was the prop master and I was like ‘Listen, we should do this. I could start renting it out of my garage.’”

At that time Butler says there was one rental company in Hollywood that served about 65 percent of the market, renting equipment for “two out of every three or four commercials that you see on TV.”

“Their stuff was really beat up, so I’d go to the [production managers] and I’d say, ‘Hey, listen, what if I could give you production stuff and it would be all brand new and if you give me a chance and you don’t like it, don’t pay me a dime and I’ll never mention it to you again. It might be a little inconvenient because you have to come to my garage, but we’re still local to the area.’ Nine out of 10 of them said, ‘Yeah, I’ll give you a chance.’ I would just grab one production and then I would say, ‘OK, if I can get just one job a week,’ and then every dollar that I made, I would stick back into the company. If you needed 20 tables and I only had 18, then I’d go buy two to fill your order. I just started growing the company that way,” Butler says.



"I grew up poor. I wasn't mistreated by any stretch of the imagination, but we were on food stamps. I could live off of Ramen noodles, mac and cheese, and tuna and it didn't bother me at all. I wasn't married at the time and I didn't have kids yet, so I could put everything back into the company," Butler says.

Then Butler started considering other lines on the standard budget form to see what additional needs he might fill and how he could expand his business.

"I would only give [the production manager] production supplies and she would go to someone else to get walkies. The concept was to have her call me, instead of making four or five different calls. I'm going to give you a motor home, I'm going to give you your grip and lighting, if you wanted golf carts I was going to fill that order. I could also give you a discount because the more you got from me, the better your discount would be," he says.

"We had another part of the company called Line 200 when I first started and that was the communications [equipment] because communication [on the budget form] was line 200. We started adding on different divisions, but you don't want to be known for Line 200, Line 204, Line 188, you know, where does it end? We kept [the name] Line 204 and everything fell under that," Butler says.

"It's a great conversation starter. People would go, 'Oh, is that your area code?' Whereas producers and production managers would go, 'That's so brilliant!' It's almost like it was an inside code that only production understood — their little inside game. It gave them a chance to kind of be a part of the company," he says.

Butler continued acting as his rental business grew. He would come home at the end of the day, sometimes late at night, and get equipment cleaned and ready to go for the next rental.

After two years, the business had grown to the point that he could no longer operate out of his garage and he relocated to an 800-sq.-ft. building in Burbank, Calif. He moved again in 2002 to a facility "right in the middle of Hollywood" and at that point, had three employees. That location happened to be right across the street from Hollywood National Studio, where television programs such as "The Gong Show" and the first season of "Jeopardy!" were produced.

"I just went to the guy [at Hollywood National Studios] and we started doing some equipment for him. It was convenient for him because we were just right across the street. The guy had been in the business forever, but the place was kind of run down and I told him, 'If you ever want to sell that place let me know. I'd love to talk to you about it,'" Butler says.

"About eight months after I was in Hollywood he came to me and said, 'Look, I'm done. Do you want to buy the building?' I actually couldn't buy it at that point, but I leased it from him for \$40,000 a month," he says.

After a \$2 million renovation, Butler began renting out the studio space, in addition to production



supplies, for the filming of movies, television, music videos and commercials. In 2003, Butler bought the building and later put another \$1 million into further renovations.

"In Hollywood it's completely different from what you think. You think movies and TV shows are the ones to have all the money and they want the nicest things. Well that's not the case. The commercials are where all the money is. I say that because people are coming out from Arkansas for Walmart, they're coming out from Minnesota to do a Target spot — they really want the nice facility," Butler says.

Butler's goal was to provide a place where actors and production staff could feel comfortable in nice dressing rooms and production offices — something he says the big studios that have "been around forever," don't necessarily offer. The same facilities are available, whether it's for a television series that will be using everything for eight months or a music video that will just be there for a few days.

"Like today in our studios we have a music video in one, we have Hollywood Reporter in another and I think they're prepping some kind of Taco Bell job in another one of our stages. Those things turn around quick. Let's just say a Taco Bell spot — we load in for them on Tuesday, they're shooting on Wednesday and we have to wrap and clean the stage out Thursday to have somebody else come do another commercial. We're turnin' and burnin' pretty quick. It's lots more work, but it's more lucrative," he says.

Eventually Butler purchased another studio down the street and tore down the first building from which he operated in Hollywood — across the street from the former Hollywood National Studios. In its place, Butler put up a 24,000-sq.-ft. three-story facility with 30 underground parking spots and an 8,000-sq.-ft. rooftop shooting/event deck.

"The rooftop deck overlooks the Hollywood sign, the observatory, downtown, Westside, all of Hollywood is down there," Butler says. "I sat on the board of directors for the Hollywood Chamber [of Commerce] and we just had a big mixer up there for the mayor and the Hollywood Chamber."

Butler has rubbed shoulders with some famous people in both his acting career and through Line 204. Television shows including "The Bachelor" and "American Idol" have used his sound stages — and contrary to popular belief, Butler says Simon Cowell is a really nice guy. He's met William Macy, Tim Allen, John Travolta, Martin Lawrence, Vaughn Miller and Tim Conway — one of his personal favorites. He says he doesn't get "star struck" because "they're just clients," he says.

From its humble beginnings in his garage, Butler says Line 204 has grown to become one of the most recognizable rental houses from the east coast to the west coast, has 150 employees and now serves about 75 percent of the market.

Believing that it would be difficult to win over that last 25 percent, Butler decided it was time to branch out. He began to study up on the event rental industry and found that more than \$1 billion a year was being spent in California alone for events. As a result, he launched 204 Events in a 3,000-sq.-ft. section of his Hollywood location, renting equipment such as stanchions and tents.



The fastest growing part of his company has been 204 Events, which now occupies its own 40,000-sq.-ft. building in Pacoima, Calif., employs three full-time seamstresses and has a full-time welding department, a full-time wood department and 40 trucks.

Although Butler's business has been successful, he says it also has had its share of ups and downs. One of the first things companies tend to cut during a recession are advertising budgets and, in turn, that can affect companies like Line 204.

"During a recession, they can just run the same commercials, so during that time, you'd realize you saw a lot of commercials that you hadn't seen in a while, but you saw them before. These big companies just go into the archives and pull out those [older commercials] so they can keep their employees working," Butler says.

"[The recession] did affect us, but we didn't have to lay anybody off. The good thing for us is that we own all our buildings, so I can lean on them a little bit to kind of keep us going. At one point we had to cut people's hours back, so we could keep everybody employed," he says.

The company managed to make it through and then continued to grow. Next up is another new building — this time on a 10-acre site in Sun Valley, just eight minutes from the Burbank airport. At 240,000 sq. ft., Butler says it will be the largest studio lot to be built in Los Angeles in the last 25 years and will house state-of-the-art sound stages as well as equipment.

The way Butler sees it, the success of Line 204 is all about his upbringing, his southern roots and a bit of personality.

"Out here your accent is very endearing. It makes people feel comfortable. You're just taken as a really good guy. When you treat people well it travels very fast. When you treat people bad, it travels even faster. We took good care of people, we gave them good equipment, we always gave them good service and it just really grew," Butler says. "A lot of times it was hard to keep ahold of it because it was growing at such a rapid pace. It was almost like riding a bull. You did everything you could to hold on."

After about eight years of juggling a rental business with acting, Butler says he had to make a choice and decided to put all of his effort into the rental business.

"I did miss acting for a long time, but I don't regret it," he says. "I just believed in my company and it did end up paying off. Do I miss it? Yes, I do, but not half as much as I used to. It's all for the best and I have a great time doing it."

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