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How To Sell Your Reality TV Show

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The proliferation of reality TV shows is obvious to anyone channel surfing today's network and cable TV channels. One obvious reason for this is that reality TV shows are relatively inexpensive to produce. It seems that nowadays everyone has an idea for a reality TV show. I have represented a number of clients who have taken ideas for reality shows and successfully gotten them on the air. This article will discuss what it takes to successfully sell your reality TV project to a network.

I. The Basic Idea

Of course, having a great idea is the first step. However, many network executives say that they have heard it all and anything you can think of has already been pitched. Don't be discouraged. A great idea always is a good place to start. However, it is not enough in today's market.

A lot of ideas fall into several categories such as talent-contest shows (American Idol, America's Got Talent etc.), athletic-competition shows (Amazing Race), dating shows (The Bachelor), and shows dealing with different people living in a house together (MTV Real World, Big Brother, Flavor of Love). In any event, once you have your basic idea you should write a short summary, sometimes called a "treatment." This is usually a few pages long. Or some people prepare a promotional reel called a "sizzle reel," which shows a few minutes of what the show would actually look like.

To protect yourself you should register your written concept and/or reel with the Copyright Office in Washington D.C. and obtain a certificate of registration. You can go on the U.S. Copyright Office website (<http://www.copyright.gov/>) and download the forms and the instructions on completing the forms.

Many clients tell me they have registered with the Writer's Guild and they think that is sufficient. That is certainly better than nothing and gives you some proof of when you created your work. However, registering with the Copyright Office gives you some additional protection such as the right to file a copyright infringement action and the right to statutory damages and attorney fees if you win your copyright infringement case. However, copyright protection may not be afforded to some non-scripted TV shows. Many court cases end up as "story theft" claims instead of copyright infringement cases. In any event, I still recommend registering your concept with the Copyright Office.

II. Celebrity Attachments

In today's world, the buyers of reality TV shows are very interested in celebrity attachments. However, in the reality TV world it does not necessarily have to be an "A list" celebrity. Once you have a celebrity attachment it really gets people's attention. How do you get celebrity attachments? Often, it can be through your contacts, friends, and acquaintances. Sometimes you can get a celebrity to sign a brief letter expressing interest in your project or agreeing to be attached to your project. Also, a celebrity can become an executive producer of the project in addition to being on-air talent.

III. Production Companies

The networks have production companies that they are comfortable doing business with and believe can deliver a TV show. Certain producers are called "show runners" and they are individuals the networks believe have recent, relevant experience and can actually produce a series. If you are an inexperienced producer who has never produced anything it will be hard for a network to believe that you can actually produce a pilot or series on your own. However, if you are lucky enough to set up a meeting with a network executive and they actually like your idea, they might suggest a production company you can work with.

One positive step you can take is to partner up with an established production company and enter into a collaboration agreement with them in order to try to get your show sold. A simple collaboration agreement may only be three to four pages and will indicate who owns the show, how executive producer fees and other fees are split, credits, back-end participation, etc.

Once you have created your great idea and attached a production company or show runner, it is time to pitch your show.

IV. Pitching The Show

There are several things you can do to protect yourself when pitching an idea for a reality TV show or any other type of television show or movie. You can have the person you are pitching to sign a non-disclosure agreement. However, many times this is not politically correct or possible. For instance, if I were pitching Steven Spielberg an idea for a movie, I would not ask him to sign anything. I would feel lucky to be meeting with him and would not want to do anything to cause the meeting to be cancelled. However, there are several other precautions you can take to protect yourself from having your idea/concept stolen. Bring another person or persons with you to the pitch meeting as a witness. Get a business card from the person you meet with and confirm the meeting afterwards in an email or letter stating, for instance:

"It was a pleasure meeting you on August 7, 2008 to discuss my reality TV project entitled, "American Doctor." You indicated that you were interested in my project and you would discuss it with other people in your company and get back to me. This will also

confirm that I left you my sizzle reel and three page treatment for the project. You agreed to keep my project confidential and not discuss it to anyone outside your company without my written permission. You also agreed at the meeting that in the event your network uses my idea you will pay me reasonable, industry standard compensation and guarantee me an appropriate credit."

V. You Have A Potential Buyer

If the network makes an offer to buy your project, you will need an experienced entertainment attorney to handle the negotiations. If you're a first time producer, you can expect to get an entry-level offer. Don't expect to make millions of dollars on your first reality TV show. But hopefully it will be a stepping stone to your career as a television producer. Nowadays, networks often use "step deals" whereby they can shoot some test footage or a pilot before they decide if they want to take the next step and order, for instance, 8 episodes. The network will always have the option (not you) to decide if they want to produce additional seasons or spin-offs.

It will be very difficult for a novice producer to keep ownership of the show. The network will usually insist on full ownership. But you should try and "lock" yourself for the life of the series and any subsequent productions. This means that you should try to negotiate that as long as the series is being produced, you are attached as an executive producer and you receive your executive producer fee and credit. Also, if there are any subsequent shows or other exploitation of the series (such as a "spin-off" series) you are attached as well.

The network will usually not want to agree to lock you for life but it is a negotiation. A compromise could be locking you for two or three seasons or, if the network does a third season, you are then locked for life. Sometimes, if you are not locked for the life of the series and the production company terminates your executive producer services, you can negotiate to receive a "consulting fee" which could be, for instance, fifty percent of your executive producer fee.

VI. Conclusion

You can increase your chances of selling your reality TV show by having a great idea, attaching celebrity talent and collaborating with an established production company. Remember to protect your concept by taking the precautions discussed in this article.

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