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Getting funded

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Jason Robertson, producer of Furry Story for the BBC tells you how to be small unknown independent producer and still convince buyers to trust you with their cash.

Preparing your pitch

Your first task is to decide who are you pitching to? Bank/investor, arts funder, broadcaster/distributor or co-producer - each will have their own priorities and checklist (audience appeal, potential profit or local jobs created). Also talk to other producers. They can fill you in on important areas, as well as the eccentricities of specific buyers. Forewarned is fore-armed.

I'm going to concentrate on broadcasters and distributors in this article. We sold our concept to the BBC. We ensured the Furry Story pilot script had local elements and included a couple of industry in-jokes to appeal to the tv execs responsible for commissioning. They were our target audience.

Buyers find it reassuring to know you know your business, so read up on every report and key article you can. Research current schedules and prices. They change regularly. Broadcasters often publish well in advance what kind of thing they are looking for. A good idea is to meet the buyers and discover their specific interests. There are various trade and networking events (the BBC even organise special "meet the commissioning editors" days) and you should go if you can.

Ideas are intangible, so prepare good physical evidence. For banks and business funders I produce very detailed market reports and cost and sales forecasts. For commissioning editors I recommend producing a clear proposal, a good sample script, good graphics and storyboarding, and/or an animatic or pilot (if you can afford it) to tell the story visually. The more the project looks real and achievable the safer it seems. However, don't produce more work than is necessary, and certainly not a whole feature or series on spec. If you are unknown, you may need a good animatic or pilot, or a showreel of past successes, but any more can put you at a serious negotiating disadvantage as the buyers know you need to sell to cover debt. If they like the idea enough, they will pay for series development, so aim for a short trailer/pilot plus good support graphics and sales material.

Franchise names or phrases i.e. successful existing properties (such as a best-selling book) can make it seem a safer bet. If it is an original concept, then having established partners can reassure the buyers if you have a limited track record (one of our associate producers was an Oscar-winner and that helped us sell Furry Story). Use established actors for voice-over. Marquee value exists for tv as much as for film – many producers believe that audiences will tune in to see anything with certain popular actors – if you have one or more attached, it'll tip a good idea/script over into a sale.

Testimonials and PR coverage can help. When the grand poobah of Hollywood script gurus has just said your comedy script is “very dark, and very, very funny”, as Robert McKee did when he read Furry Story, then use it. Arranging big-screen screenings with audiences or festival screenings are better than review vhs tapes watched on a portable tv in a smoky noisy office, (especially if your own people are in the audience ready to audibly love the film). Prizes, positive reviews by critics or known celebrities, and good word-of-mouth all add value, and some festival showcases are based around pitching and sales events (like Sundance) so choose your festivals strategically. If you are going to sales events such as MIP, then identify the decision-makers and make your appointments well in advance, then organise fast follow-ups afterwards to close any final points on a deal.

Don't take an idea or a work-in-progress to pitch at market too early. We waited an extra year before going to the CARTOON Forum with a pilot promo reel of Furry Story. The film had glitches that we needed time to fix, and we also brought in big names for the character voices. An unsuccessful early showcase would have hurt the film, and it's very hard to bring a rejected film back to life – the maxim is a corpse never smells better the second time you dig it up. Buyers will figure that if everybody rejected it a year ago, then the whole world can't have been wrong. So be absolutely ready.

The pitch

It's a good idea to start with a great idea or script. It was the quality of our script for Furry Story that brought the BBC on board, and with the BBC attached we were then able to go for additional funding partners.

Be confident and enthusiastic. Execs are terrified of making mistakes, so you have to be seen to believe in your idea. Plus they want you to succeed. They want to discover successes, so act as if your idea can't

fail. The enthusiasm and certainty you attach to your idea may diminish as it is reported and re-reported up the chain, but at least you can enthuse the guys who pass on the idea, and if it's a good idea it will keep going.

Communicate concisely and knowledgeably. Keep it simple. Don't lose your key selling points amongst too much extraneous detail. Start with a good log-line. The phrase "Jaws in Space" sold *Alien*, and we used "ET from Hell via South Park" for *Furry Story*. Then elaborate in simple terms (make it easy for them to remember and repeat when they pitch it to their superiors). Outline the story, the talent involved, and the genre. Dov SS Simens suggests 15 – 25 words outlining the protagonist, antagonist and situation followed by "...and complications arise when..."

I asked one of our BBC Executive Producers, Gemma McMullan, what the BBC look for in a pitch. She suggested "keep the piece very focused, i.e a short paragraph that allows you to understand what is actually going to happen in the film. (A lot of people discuss sweeping themes - such as "...this is a film about love and honour!", etc. This is not normally the best way to pitch an idea). Give the person to whom you are pitching the idea the general story in a nutshell. (Keep this brief but highlight the exciting twists which will hook your audience. Also give reasons why it should be considered (for instance "After the huge success of other projects in this field such as xxxxx and xxxxxx I think my project is....." But also indicate what makes your project different and stand out from others. Aim the project at a certain slot and channel (is it primetime BBC1 or late night BBC2?) Also an idea of potential casting can be included".

Finally be ready with answers – key elements, length, target slot and audience, cost, etc. Talk with the buyers (not at them). The research you did in advance will now pay-off. More importantly if you leave gaps for them to come in, you make them collaborators. Also, be willing to compromise and think outside of the box. If they are willing to fund your project as a kids series instead of an adult comedy, ask yourself if this would be acceptable to make a deal? Most commissioning editors want to feel involved in the creation of any success - while some suggestions may make you want to scream, others will help. Try not to be precious. Pouting isn't a good sales tactic, and the buyers need to know that you can listen and that they can work with you. There will be plenty of time to argue later – close the deal and get the money first!

10 Golden Rules for Pitching.

- 1) Know the market – do your research thoroughly.
- 2) Know who you are selling to and what they want.
- 3) Recognisability sells (adaptation of popular property, involvement of successful co-producer or famous actor(s)).
- 4) Know what differentiates your idea from all the others. Be original or at least have a unique twist on an established successful concept.
- 5) Generate awareness in advance (but avoid annoyingly protracted teaser campaigns).
- 6) Ideas are intangible, so prepare good support materials (without breaking the bank).
- 7) Don't pitch until you are absolutely ready.
- 8) Be concise and explain in a memorable way (this does not mean dancing and juggling puppies or going on at too much length).
- 9) Be passionate and convinced that your idea cannot fail. (Or at least fake it well).
- 10) Talk to the buyers, not at them. Get them involved and excited.

Biographical Boxout – Jason Robertson is writer and producer of digital 3D animation Furry Story for Magic Stone Productions, The Brothers Dimm and the BBC.