

SLIDE ONE

Welcome to my paper on The Future of TV Development or in this case the future of unscripted TV Development.

SLIDE TWO

So, hi everyone, I'm Dan Twist and for the past twenty years, I've been a TV Development Producer for TV broadcasters and independent production companies, in Scotland and UK. This includes a time as Channel Executive at Channel 4 and working for the University of the West of Scotland. I even picked up a BAFTA Scotland and Royal Television Society Scotland award along the way – but you know, no big deal!

I have experienced what some might call 'development hell' in the TV sector and Channel side. Developing and winning unscripted TV series commissions in Factual Entertainment, Formats and Documentary.

So this paper will discuss my practice research, and as I still work in the TV industry, it will describe the myriad of TV Development that hopefully results in the sniff of a TV series commission and how this process could change to sustain the future of TV development.

SLIDE THREE

Here's a selection of TV series I've developed over the years. Some of them I went on to produce. Each one contains some of my blood, sweat and tears – I can tell you!

From early in my career, working on the production of entertainment TV series such as Ant and Dec's Saturday Night Take-Away. I've been known as 'Dan the ideas man'. I just felt the need to push TV ideas under the noses of my Executive Producers. Often getting short shrift from my superiors that my ideas were all wrong. Quickly learning to develop a thick skin.

Gone are the days when TV ideas were commissioned from the back of a cigarette paper. Most medium, large or super-indie production companies have teams dedicated to thinking of the next big thing. They're large operations and idea machines. They keep up to date with the latest TV development techniques to win a prize commission.

But let me tell you. It's not easy! For every one of my commissioned ideas. There's many MANY more ideas that are rejected.

SLIDE FOUR

So, my TV ideas go on a journey. A bit like a train journey that stops at different stations.

That's me at the start there – Development Producer. A team of Development Researchers and Assistant Producers also pitch ideas to me before taking them forward to the Head of Development. Without us dedicating our working hours to thinking of TV ideas, production companies would not exist.

Throughout the journey my ideas get prodded, poked, questioned, analysed, and changed as the idea slowly, goes up the ladder.

It's where you need to be passionate about your idea and convince this chain of command to say, 'yes' rather than 'no'.

It's here where you must be prepared to answer any question THEY throw at you.

That's why TV Development Producers are experts on so many topics. We must fully dive into the subject and learn everything about the area we're developing. I mean, that's why I'm pretty good to have in a pub quiz team.

For a Channel 4 pilot called Billionaire Blooms at Christmas. I was given one week to find high end florists who create incredible flower displays for billionaires.

I had to study forms of Architecture for a Daytime series on building homes. And I've been told to ask general knowledge questions to shoppers in Manchester for a quiz show idea to find Brainy Towns in Britain!

But at any point along the ladder someone says "no". The idea stops progressing. This can happen very early on when I'm pitching ideas to my Head of Development or all the way to Channel Controller. So, at every point I'm trying to get people to buy in to my ideas.

I'm lucky that I've been privy to meetings within a TV broadcaster too. Often commissioning editors are part of various genre teams such as; Daytime, Features, Popular Factual, Documentary and Entertainment.

These teams meet to discuss the direction of the Channel and what ideas they think should appear in the schedule. These meetings can be let's say - quite tense - because everyone has a point of view.

It's in these meetings where ideas live or die. Every Commissioning Editor has their own slate of ideas, and some try their best to push everyone else's ideas - out of the frame. Often the ideas that win the day are the ones that have a big headline and stand out.

As you can see. There's a lot of hoops to jump through before TV series end up on screen.

SLIDE FIVE

And here are some of the main reasons why ideas are rejected.

Timing... idea clashes... lack of the real world... too niche... in correct on screen talent... lack of confidence... and problems with budget or lack of it!

So timing - is a big key to success. Is the idea on trend or slightly ahead of the trend? It might feel too old, traditional or what some Commissioners call "trad". Or timing could simply be at what time you had the meeting with the commissioner, and if they enjoyed their lunch!

Idea clashes mean it's already been pitched by someone else, and boy does it happen a lot! I've pitched ideas that have just been commissioned by the channel. It's gutting!

TV is trying to change its culture, but it's still dominated by people from middle and upper middle-class backgrounds. Television workers are twice as likely to have attended a private school and only a minority of workers come from non-professional family backgrounds.

This means we are most likely talking with the same people, experiencing the same life stories, and developing the same ideas - this is a problem. It's why we get idea clashes, and why we develop ideas that don't resonate with a diverse viewing public.

There's a lack of the real world. The future of TV must come from a diverse industry from various class and backgrounds

But it's a fine balance of making sure the idea serves an underrepresented audience, but it doesn't come across as too niche.

As developers we can all have our own niche passion projects. I have pitched ideas about Drag Queens for many years and was told the area was "too niche". Then comes along world renowned drag queen Ru Paul to front a drag competition and suddenly the area is appealing again.

I remember in the first COVID-19 Lockdown. Broadcasters were desperate for ideas that could be self-filmed in people's homes. At the time, I was working for a company in Northern Ireland, and came up with a fun idea where a group of Northern Irish drag queens hosted a chat show from their living rooms.

Now... this idea wasn't quite what BBC Northern Ireland had in mind for their lockdown series. So, I went on to pitch it to Channel 4. They quite liked it, but it needed a unique twist. I adapted my idea to create a broader series by following a trend of people writing letters in lockdown. Letters in Lockdown was born and even included a young drag queen contributor. You can catch the whole series on All4 – sorry about the shameless plug.

This leads me onto having the correct on-screen talent attached to an idea. Who is recognisable to the viewer or is an expert in the area? On screen talent must be realistic too and due to budget constraints, it's rare we'll see a huge Hollywood star front a daytime quiz!

But it sometimes can just come down to confidence. Are the production company confident in delivering the idea and is the commissioner confident in the production company delivering the idea.

Ultimately budget is the bottom line. We are experiencing tighter budgets and advertising revenue decreasing. If an idea is likely to cost too much and isn't in line with the broadcaster's tariff - it will fall.

These are just some of the main examples of a commissioner saying no and there are plenty more – believe me!

But there is some light amongst the darkness. TV developers are great at turning NOs into YESSSES.

SLIDE SIX

In television, no idea officially dies, and sometimes it can be resurrected in a different guise many years later.

A great example of this is the hugely successful quiz, Who Want to Be a Millionaire. Originally called Cash Mountain, it took over two years to be commissioned. It had been rejected by several UK broadcasters. But the show's creators didn't give in. They refined, changed and developed it into the well-known quiz we love today.

The change of title was the biggest sell and of course the chance to win a Million Pounds. Suddenly the idea became part of the real world. Cash Mountain said very little about the idea. Who Wants to Be a Millionaire? Explained the show to the viewers, perfectly.

So, time can be a great healer and it helps ideas to improve and grown. It's important to keep the faith, persevere and never give up!

SLIDE SEVEN

This year, there has been a terrific slowdown in TV commissioning.

In May 2023, the broadcasting trade union, Bectu polled nearly 2000 members and found 45% were in long term unemployment. A further 75% said they were struggling to make ends meet and unable to pay household bills. We are haemorrhaging freelance staff who are leaving the industry for new opportunities.

This resulted in BECTU, declaring an "Emergency" in the Freelance TV community due to "Unprecedented" lack of work.

Channel 4 and Channel 5 have both paused most commissioning recently.

Channel 4's Chief Content Officer, Ian Katz sighted a 10-20% decline in advertising revenue and more the channel commissioning more in 2022 due to the cupboard being bare post- pandemic. Channel 5's Director of Programming, Ben Frow, saying his channel was saving money.

Does the future of TV development look bleak? How can the rollercoaster TV commissioning process be avoided in the future?

SLIDE EIGHT

US development teams will always use an agent, like a talent agent, help sell their ideas. Agents often have commissioning intelligence they pass on to development teams.

The agent usually has access to on and off-screen talent. The agent will broker the deal if a network is interested in an idea. However, I have been told the presence of an agent can slow the process down. That most of their work can be done by the production company anyway.

Production companies pitch TV format ideas to various networks at the same time. This means if there is more than one network interested in an idea. The production company will let the parties know and it could result in the commissioning process being quicker.

Networks will compete by offering higher tariffs and almost all will offer money for a pilot before greenlighting an idea.

This is the difference between UK and US. There is an element of British etiquette where development teams will pitch an idea to one commissioning editor and wait for a greenlight or a no. Before taking it to another channel. I have been in situations where ideas have been left in commissioning limbo for 6 months to a year before a decision is made. The US is much more aggressive at pushing for a commission.

So what is the future for TV Development?

SLIDE ELEVEN

The emergence of creative AI platforms has made some nervous in the TV industry. Will using AI change the employment landscape? For me it's about turning AI into our advantage and how we work with the technology rather than against it.

I believe AI will improve considerably. But it currently, doesn't quite have the human touch. I often come up with ideas from my own personal experience, through contacts and making conversations. ChatGPT isn't quite capable of doing this... yet!

I also use an AI called Midjourney to create incredible art and graphics. A job that may have taken me hours, to trawl the internet for the right pictures. Can now be done in literally seconds. Saving lots of time.

But there's no doubt viewing habits are changing in a Multichannel, Multiplatform Digital era. This is having an effect on TV development.

Networks are being constantly challenged by Cable and by streamers, such as Netflix, Disney Plus and Amazon Prime. So series are now being uploaded as a box set and binge watching is a phenomena that is continuing to grow.

Although this is something enjoyed mostly in scripted series. The example of BBC's Traitors and Channel 4's Married at First Sight, illustrates, unscripted is bingeable too, as long as, there's an exciting story arc across the series. Some commissioners are asking for unscripted formats to tonally have similar storytelling to a scripted series.

Cable cutting is also an issue in UK and US. Cable TV subscriptions are in the decline and streamer subscriptions have now taken over costly cable subscription for the first time. Although Netflix is struggling with their current subscription model to capture new customers and Disney have made large staff redundancies.

Collective viewing is pretty much gone. This is where the whole family watch TV together in one room. Of course live sport, events and Strictly Come Dancing bucks this trend. But TV viewing has become segmented, and is spread across various channels and platforms such as YouTube and Tik Tok.

Ultimately - TV series and formats need to sell internationally for production companies to make money. The big bucks come when a great format is popular around the world - Pop Idol, The Got Talent franchise, and even the Masked Singer are huge format hits that come in various form and different countries.

All this has left broadcasters the delicate operation of commissioning series that need to stand out from the crowd, are noisy and entice viewers in a very competitive market.

But the flip side of this is we have many quality TV channels and platforms. And more opportunities to pitch and win commissions.

This is where I come in. It's like the painting of the Forth Bridge - once I win a commission - I start the TV Development process all over again! The important thing to remember - don't give up. Thank you for listening.