

Making Television: Best Advice

Specialties · By Simon Townsend · 12 min read

So, you have a great idea for a TV show. Now what?

By SIMON TOWNSEND

1. This guide for my students is negative, off-putting and discouraging. It has to be, because if you CAN be discouraged, you will be discouraged. That's good for the TV executives whose time you might waste. And that's good for you, because you can now get on with something else worthwhile in your life.
1. If you are not working in television, it's unlikely you can pitch a TV idea that will eventually be made into a show. If you're not working in TV it's unlikely that you know the million-and-one details of HOW to make a show, who to hire, what things really cost, and most importantly: how to exercise judgment. If you're not working in TV, network executives will be suspicious and distrustful.
1. The TV executive you're pitching to is passionate about television. He is deeply in love with television and believes it is a hugely enriching medium for humankind's comfort, education and entertainment. He is uncomfortable talking to people who are less passionate than he is. I know a man who started his pitch to a programming executive by saying: "Everything on television today is shit. But my show would be something to be proud of." Oops!!
1. If you're not working in TV, it's unlikely you can talk the lingo:
 - Ratings
 - Demographics
 - Timeslots
 - Timeslot histories
 - Programs competing in your timeslot
 - Histories of same-genre programs
 - Available or willing hosts and personalities
1. You need to know who's who in the industry. I've met people with "great ideas" but who can't name the owners of the Seven, Nine, Ten or Foxtel, or how the ABC and SBS are funded. Also

you need to be knowledgeable about facilities, available producers, directors and production companies, and current gossip and industry tittle-tattle.

1. A big mistake many people make is to think that all they have to do is present a brilliant idea, the network falls immediately in love with your idea, gives you buckets of money, and makes the show for you. No. YOU must solve all the problems of how the show gets made.
1. You'll hate my saying this. Your idea has been done before. Sorry, I know you think it's original and never-done-before. But it has been done, in some similar form, at least once before. It might even have had the same name as the show you're proposing. Nothing's new, and you're foolish to feel confident that you have created something new and never-done-before. TV is 50 years old in Australia, and 70 years old in America. Lots of creative and inventive people have similar ideas.
1. Never be so in love with your own ideas that you come to believe that no-one amongst the 6.5 billion people on earth has ever come up with the same idea. I had a bloke pitch me an idea for a reality TV show about the law called "Legal Eagles". I said I'd not only already had the same idea, I'd called it the same name. He called me a liar and an ideas-thief, until I reached into a filing cabinet and pulled out a thick file marked "Legal Eagles" containing much paperwork about exactly the same idea. He left (literally) with tears in his eyes.
1. It seems so obvious, you might wonder why I'm saying this: you must have a good idea for show. Your good idea must be a BIG IDEA. Not a complex idea, but a simple idea that is a Big Idea.
1. You must be able to express this Big Idea in one simple sentence. Read the TV program guide in a daily paper and see how an important two-hour show is summarised in a single sentence. See how a movie is summed up in just a few words. You must be able to do the same with your Big Idea.
1. You need to understand timeslots. It's no good telling Nine you have a great idea for 7.30pm Sundays. Nine has had a successful, prestigious program called 60 Minutes in that timeslot for 25 years and they won't change it. Before you pitch your idea you must decide on the timeslot and the network you're aiming at. A good idea simply doesn't fit anywhere.
1. You need to understand that network executives are not looking for great ideas. They're looking for solutions to timeslot problems. A network may have a problem with say 7.30 to 8.30pm Mondays. The problem may be sagging ratings. The problem may be that the current show is attracting the wrong demographic. It may be that the show is American and has been cancelled in the US, so the network's stockpile of shows is coming to an end. You need to ask around and find out what the network believes is its problem with that timeslot.
1. The six crucial points If you get through the door of a network to see anyone of significance, he or she will ask you many negative questions. But whatever questions an executive asks and whatever reasons the executive gives for being un-interested, he is trying to find your answers to six basic questions:
 2. What is the idea?
 3. What's the title?
 4. Who's the star?

5. What timeslot?

6. How much?

7. Who's the producer?

1. Many other questions must be asked and answered, but the above six questions are the basic ones, and must be answered strongly in order to even start to interest a network in your idea for a show.

1. WHAT IS THE IDEA?

2. In other words: what is the concept behind the show? You should be able to describe the concept behind a show in a sentence. For instance, if I was proposing any of these current shows, this is how I might describe the idea or concept in a sentence:

Today Tonight 6.30-7pm weeknight current affairs program, concentrating on consumer, health and crooks. Compered by the gorgeous Anna Coren.

Rove [Live] Australian adaptation of the well-worked US formula, with monologues, interactions of compere with studio audience, bandleader and studio crew, celebrity guest interviews, music and comedy acts, viewer involvement and general zaniness.

Burke's Backyard An entertainment program built around gardening, pets, nature, do-it-yourself subjects and celebrity homes, using high-personality reporters plus the high-credibility personality of host Don Burke.

1. The details can be explained later. But you MUST be able to describe the show satisfactorily in one sentence. To get a better idea of what I am talking about, read through the "program descriptions" as outlined in television program guides, such as "TV Week", or the guides in newspapers. Here the newspaper journalist, working with a program guide put out by the network, tries to distill the essence of the show down to a sentence. Not always successfully. However, you will get the idea.

1. Consider these matters:

- What TIMESLOT PROBLEM does the idea solve?
- List the people elements.
- In 30 words or less, describe the show as if for a program guide.
- What is new, exciting, different or unique about this show?
- What current (or previous) shows are similar, and in what ways?

1. WHAT'S THE TITLE?

2. In amongst all the hundreds of important matters involved in pitching an idea for a TV show, you might think that a name wouldn't matter too much. And maybe it doesn't matter. But come up with the right title, and it can go a long way to helping you sell the idea.

1. I once conceived, starred in, packaged and produced a TV show about TV. I had to mention the name only once and no-one ever forgot. I called it "TVTV". What more perfect name could you have? That name helped me sell a concept for a show that stayed on air for three years. But back in 1979 when I said I wanted to call my new afternoon program "Simon Townsend's Wonder World!", I had to fight and fight for that name. "It's too long! You don't need your name in the

title, you egotist! What's the exclamation mark for? Why can't Wonder World! be just one word? Why not call it something short and snappy like Pop, or Bang, or Zing?" In the end I got my way. Why did I want THAT name? Because first I wanted to fully promote myself, and secondly, the show was all about a world of wonder.

1. You must have a title for your show that the executives will remember, hours after you leave their offices.

1. WHO'S THE STAR?

2. If not "star", then who's in it? What's their track record? This may or may not be a crucial factor in whether the show rates and survives. But it will certainly be an important factor in selling the show to a network. Certain names will always cause the executives to sit up and take notice. Especially if their last shows or current shows were successes. Other big names might be less attractive because their most recent shows were not successes.

1. Consider these matters:

- Known, unknown star?
- If unknown, what advantages?
- Ways to sell this unknown star.
- Promotional opportunities.

1. If you don't have a star, then list the names of people who have agreed to make a pilot. If you have no agreements from possible stars, then list names of suitable stars, but mark it clearly as suggestions. Never hint at having interest from a star with whom you've had no contact, because it is a small industry and you'll be caught out and get a black mark against your integrity. If you have an unknown star ready to go, then make sure you have a VHS tape of him/her ready to show.

1. WHAT TIMESLOT?

2. Do not make the mistake that many have made in the past. They say: "Hey, I have a great idea for a program at 8.30 on Sunday night." That 8.30 timeslot is booked! Don't suggest a new program for a

timeslot where the network is already doing well. Look for timeslots where the network has a current problem or a looming problem.

1. Ask yourself these questions:

- Which network?
- Hour?
- Half-hour?
- Fringe time?
- Weekday afternoons?
- Weekday mornings?
- Weekday late nights?
- Midnight-to-dawn?

- Saturdays or Sundays?
- Primetime is 6pm-10pm seven nights a weeks
- Where is there a current slot for such a show?

1. Television programmers are not interested in programs. That is an overstatement. What you need to understand is that television executives mostly see their jobs in terms of solving timeslot problems. Your idea is not worth a razor if it can't be seen as solving a problem in a particular timeslot. This means you need to be aware of what programs your show would be up against, and the general ratings-patterns around before, during and after that timeslot. You must be able to talk ratings when you talk timeslots.

1. HOW MUCH?

2. You don't need an exact figure. In fact, an exact figure could instantly give the executive a reason for not being interested. Remember, the executive is looking for a reason not to become involved with your idea. It's better to be vague about an exact figure. Anyway, the truth is that costs are a moveable feast. Remember that there are two sets of costs:
 3. the above-the-line costs (what the production company gets from the network to pay its fixed costs and all the variable costs of the show, and to make a profit)
 4. the below-the-line costs (what the network pays for or supplies, such as: studios, tape, recordings, music rights, makeup, sets and so on).

1. It's not so important to have a figure, as to be totally aware of what costs are involved. If the executive asks: "What are the airfares going to cost over 13 shows?" and you say "Oh, I hadn't taken airfares into account" then will look like a dill. An exact figure can always be worked out later.

1. Consider these matters:

- How much to totally package the show?
- Variations on a total package.
- How much for a pilot?
- Who's paying for a pilot?
- Complete breakdown and precise costs.

1. WHO'S THE PRODUCER?

2. You may have a fabulous idea, a great star, the right timeslot and a realistic budget. The network may see your show as a real solution to some timeslot problem. But in the end the show has to get made. It has to be there, on-time and under-budget. Only a good producer can do that. Note I did not say an experienced producer. I was a very inexperienced producer when I took on packaging "Wonder World!" in the 80s. But I'd had enough television experience and I had enough appearance of confidence, that Network Ten took a chance on me.

1. But when a network is looking for an excuse to say no, the lack of a producer or a production house with a track record, is a good enough excuse. You must have a respected producer working

on your idea for a new show, and he should be there when you present it to the network heavies.
"Producer" means a person or a production house with a track record.

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1. Compose a rundown like the attached one. This shows the content in an easy-to-read LIST form and also the length of each segment.
1. If you get your meeting to pitch your idea, go in with ONLY two pieces of paper. Take along one copy per person. The top sheet explains the program and the other sheet is the rundown. PowerPoint presentations, bound copies of color photostats and thick documents are not welcome, believe me. They won't be read.
1. I can go on and on with advice like this. But in the end, no one knows what a network will buy, not even the network itself. It's all a crazy guess. But networks most often operate on best guesses.
1. And here's my best tip of all. You won't get much of a hearing if you're there to ask for \$50,000 to make a pilot. Once a network pays for a pilot, the network takes over and makes the show its way. Raise the \$50,000 yourself and make the pilot (or "proof of concept" tape or "5-minute sizzle" tape) to screen at your pitch meeting. Something on tape sells better than sheets of paper and talk - and YOU can keep more control.

Finally, Pitch To The Right Person

1. If you get into a network and you're pitching to the secretary to the second assistant to the deputy programmer, you're being fobbed off. You need to be pitching to the person who can probably say "YES!!!" - the network programmer.

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The Filthyrich Game Show

Item

Length

1. Opening titles

0.30

1. Compere: Hello! Promote tonight's show. Introduce 10 provisional winners. Give out \$10,000 "just for turning up" cheques

1.30

1. 45-second biographies of each of first four provisional winners

3.00

1. Compere outlines how a viewer tonight could win "The Viewer's \$100,000"

1.00

1. Compere explains "Most Deserving" rating by 1000 viewers and how "the worm" works

1.45

1. 45-second biographies of each of next three provisional winners

2.15

Commercial Break

3.00

1. 45-second biographies of each of the final three provisional winners

2.15

1. Compere chats to each finalist as "Most Deserving" scores appear, one finalist is declared "Most Deserving Provisional Winner" (but not THE winner)

2.00

1. Compere randomly phones live, the lucky viewer who may win "The Viewer's \$100,000"

1.10

Commercial Break

3.00

1. Provisional winners take envelopes, each containing a single digit, must swap twice.

1.15

1. Famous guest spins wheel, spins for 90sec, hype build-up

1.30

1. Wheel stops, 1 person is the Big Winner and 9 others win \$100,000 each

2.00

1. Big Winner makes agonising choices

2.00

1. Family rushes in?tears?exultation?short interview with winner

1.30

1. Important Guest taps computer, and Big Winner's prizemoney is instantly in Big Winner's bank account

0.30

1. Closing credits

0.30

30.00

AND . . . please, my esteemed student, don't ask ME to help you. This will sound cruel, but it's the absolute truth, and you'd prefer the truth rather than some bull****:

You think you need me, but I know I don't need you.

Sorry, I'm a TV producer and performer with a long and successful track record. I am brimming with workable ideas. Why would I want to work on your idea when I have more of my own ideas than I can find time to work on? Most importantly, why share the prestige, perks and profits with you when I can keep them all to myself? Sorry for the tough talk, but it's a jungle out there. Good luck !!!

-- Simon

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