

TV Presenter Advice

Specialties · By Simon Townsend · 7 min read

A career as a TV presenter

How do you establish a career in television? People ask me this all the time. I don't know.

Though I had a wonderful career in television, my way in would not be anyone else's way in. There is no single piece of advice about getting into television, because everyone who is IN or ON TV got there by a different route. There is no one answer. Except that you have to do it yourself. Being good looking doesn't guarantee it. Having a "television degree" or formal qualification, doesn't guarantee it. Being James Packer's god-son doesn't guarantee it. If you're truly interested, you're already aware of ways in, and that luck always counts. Good luck. - Simon

Television's "catch-22"

The expression catch-22 comes from the famous 1961 novel *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller. The novel's hero, Yossarian, is a soldier who wants to resign, but in order to be eligible to resign he has to prove he is insane, but any soldier able to prove insanity in order to get out of the army, must be smart enough to be considered sane!

The alleged television dilemma, the catch-22 of television goes like this: "You cannot get a job in television without experience, but you cannot get experience until you get a job." Do you believe this?

Sorry. I have to explode a dopey myth. There is no such thing as television's catch-22. Think about it. What if it was true? What if no one could get a job without experience and no one could get the experience without first getting a job? Then no one would be working in the industry, because no one would have ever started.

Okay, so is TV's catch-22 a bit of an exaggeration? "You cannot get a job in television without experience, but you cannot get experience until you get a job." This simply isn't true. TV's catch-22 does not exist.

What really happens is this. Television executives usually don't have a vacant job for an applicant. When there is a vacancy, executives often don't have a definite reason for rejecting a particular person. Or, the executive may not like the applicant personally. Or, TV executives often don't want to tell an applicant he or she is a dill. So, looking around for some kind of excuse for rejecting the applicant, the TV executive says: "You need experience. Come back when you've got some experience."

The rejected person then goes around claiming to be a victim of TV's catch-22. But what's happened is this: someone has failed to get a particular job because the executive couldn't bring himself to say the real reason for rejection, such as "I don't know why I don't want you . . . I don't like you personally . . . I think you're a dill."

If you go around claiming to be a victim of TV's catch-22, you will make yourself look pretty unprofessional in the eyes of many professionals. The way to overcome TV's catch-22 is to realise it doesn't exist, and don't ever try to hide behind it.

The ways in

I wish I had a dollar for each time a young person has asked me: "How do you break into television?" Each on-camera personality in Australia has his or her own, individual story, and it's not quite like anyone else's story. Examples. These are some of the people and their mixed ways that I have been told of for breaking into on-camera roles in television:

- A woman who was dared by friends to try out for a screen test
- A youth whose father owned the station
- A man who slept with a woman boss
- A man whose former boss, a politician, asked for a favor of a network boss
- A girl who accompanied a girlfriend to a screen test to bolster her confidence and ended up being asked to audition (they never spoke again)
- A youth who was so personable, so intelligent and so good-looking that TV bosses created a job for him
- A girl who door-stopped a producer-comperes office until he agreed to audition her
- A youth who took out a newspaper advertisement begging for a particular job
- A woman who complained to newspapers that she was being black-banned
- A man who was put on air, untried, in order to embarrass him, to stop him constantly applying, only he passed with flying colors

They don't know who they're searching for

Remember that producers don't always know who they're looking for. They conduct auditions to see who's out there, to see what unknown, unexpected person may bob up . . . and that may be YOU.

Producers and directors and casting agents may tell lies like: "We're looking for someone who's versatile enough to sell saucepans or to interview the US president."

But someone who can't do either well, might be the final choice. Huh? So what was all the nonsense about selling saucepans and interviewing the president? Well, auditionees need to be told SOMETHING to make them feel comfortable.

While producers may not know who they ARE looking for, they can be certain about who they are NOT looking for.

But regard ALL auditions as a time to SHOW producers your individual talents, even if you've been told that those talents are not being sought at this audition. Some people say that all producers are waiting for someone to show them what they are looking for.

Does being pretentious help?

Sometimes . . . You may find this hard to believe. I find pretension revolting. But sadly pretension does help. It is true that some people get into television by using a lot of pretension. They pretend to know a lot more than they really do. They pretend they have had a lot more experience than they really have. They pretend to know a lot more people than they really do.

Viciousness. It is a dangerous path to tread when you are being pretentious in the television industry. On the one hand you are pretending to know so much and on the other hand you are inexperienced and lack knowledge and contacts. One of the ways around this problem is to appear very, very superior. The best way is to be extremely cold and rude to ordinary people, suck up to more important people, and always (always) dump on everyone. Say nasty, disparaging things about every person who comes up in conversation. Say degrading and sarcastic things about everyone else's work. This convinces a few, but enough people that you must know what you're talking about. People don't question you too closely when you're being loudly cruel and rude about other people and their TV work.

Vicious about everything: these pretenders go further. They are nasty about everything. Somehow they get invited to parties and opening nights, and they stand around complaining about anything and everything. The drinks are no good, the food is foul, the staff isn't fast enough, the decorations are appalling. They will say negative things about anything and everything in order to make themselves appear more superior. They engage in appalling gossip about people, because this saves them the time and energy of trying to say something constructive about a television show or a television personality.

How do they get away with it? The above may come as a surprise to you. You are probably asking: "How do such crashing bores and such nasty people get away with it?" Well, it always amazes me. They do it mostly by creating a myth around themselves.

They are never actually working at anything worthwhile in television, but they keep dropping gossip and hints. They curry favor with certain journalists and columnists who report their gossip and hints. They would kill to get their photograph in the social pages. Then they always complain about what a rotten photo it is. These pretentious people are always giving the general impression that they are building up to something really big. Something really big never happens, but these fleas keep turning up around town.

Making tapes helps

Be a video-camera user. It won't hurt your ambitions in television one tiny bit if you become keen about using a camcorder. However, keep in mind that if you are keen to sell yourself as an on-camera personality, then you should invent ways to put yourself onto tape, rather than other people.

Learning from video-camera courses. If you'd like to learn about the most effective and creative ways to use a video-camera, then you should join a course. Most video courses are short. Many are run by makers and distributors of the equipment. If you contact any big retailer of video gear, the retailer should be able to put you onto one of these courses. Or look up a brandname on the Internet. Some courses are offered free when you buy certain brands of video-cameras.

Learning from tapes. I have not seen any of the "how to use a video-camera" courses available on videotape, so I cannot make any recommendations to you.

Learning from books. There are some excellent books currently available. Ask your newsagent or bookshop to order one in.

Learning from magazines. There are some really first-class magazines now coming out that are aimed directly at people starting out with video cameras. Ask at your newsagent for any of the following, or ask the newsagent to order it in.

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