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# A DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKER'S GUIDE TO PITCHING

How to prepare and present a persuasive pitch and successfully fund your documentary.

By Donna Meiklejohn

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## INTRODUCTION

Pitching face to face or in front of an audience is one of the most difficult parts of the documentary marketing process. In an industry where a documentary concept can raise US\$1.26-million in a short crowdfunding campaign, pitching is paramount. The producers of *Who the F\*%@ is Frank Zappa*, (the late free-spirited American musician), only needed half of that amount. But their pitching campaign on *Kickstarter*, had supporters throwing money at them. The hardest part is getting enough money to make the documentary. The reality is you're not going to get any money without a good pitch. Ironically, pitching is often the least valued and least understood phase in the production chain.

Leading Australian filmmaker Damien Parer described verbal pitching as a *slow trip to the gallows*. To avoid the pain of pitch rejection, you need to be prepared. It's critical that you know what you're doing. If you don't have the skills to do it, then you need to know someone who has.

If my own first time experience in the international marketplace is any indication, Parer is spot-on. As an in-house television network documentary producer and independent writer/director, I have had extensive experience in pitching. This included pitching documentary concepts for broadcast and approaching government and non-profit organisations for funding support. Nothing, however, prepared me for my first foray into the four-day global content market for television in the French resort city of Cannes. This experience and the period of deep reflection that followed are the catalyst for this handbook. The practice of pitching has had to change and step up to be competitive in today's dynamic marketplace. The reality is that pitchers now need to be agile and skilled in the practice of pitching to be successful. There are more factors to consider than ever when you're looking for ways to fund your documentary.

This handbook is researched and written by a practitioner for practitioners, particularly those who are new to the industry. It is designed to give you an insight into the documentary industry over the past few decades. It takes you inside the contemporary marketplace to explore the funding models practitioners use now, and unless anything changes, in the years to come.

As a documentary filmmaker, I have navigated the terrain and faced some tough challenges. I have talked to successful filmmakers and industry leaders, who have generously shared their expertise and experiences. The result is a flexible model for you to use and adapt when developing your pitch. I have called it the *5Ps of pitching* model.

Online databases offer fact sheets and e-books on pitching. Library shelves are lined with hard texts about the process of pitching in other industries as well as filmmaking in general. There are also some excellent textbooks specifically about documentary filmmaking that include sections on pitching. This handbook is different because it takes a holistic approach to pitching from prepping to presenting, in writing and in full voice. It comes in three parts: Part 1 sets the scene and explains the events that shaped documentary funding and pitching today. Part 2 focuses on the pitching process and the *5Ps of Pitching* model to help you to become a skilled pitcher. Part 3 is the step-by-step guide to written and oral pitching. Expert tips and in-depth interviews with experts are dotted through the handbook.

Part 1 begins with a background of the events that radically altered the industry as we knew it. The first few chapters describe the impact of Pay TV, an influx of American programs and reality television; and, significantly, the arrival of digital technology and subsequent audience fragmentation. The explosion of new online broadcast platforms coinciding with funding cuts across the board for documentary production resulted in the appearance of new funding models. These new funding models were markedly different from the traditional pre-sale model that most professional documentary filmmakers favoured. The new models rely on alternative funders and multiple investors, which impose greater pressure on practitioners and the practice of pitching.

Part 2 explains the entire pitching process, the level of preparation, the content, how it is researched, written and submitted or presented. The pitch presentation may take the form of a face-to-face encounter with a local broadcaster or it may be a *timed* live performance in front of an audience in an international forum. If any of this fazes, then this section is essential reading. It demystifies the process with a step-by-step approach to written and oral pitch presentation, which is based on my *5Ps of pitching* model. The *5Ps* represent crucial elements of the pitching process: preparation, practice, perseverance, presentation, and pursuance, all underpinned by reflection. The aim of this model is to help practitioners develop and improve pitching skills at every stage of the process.

Part 3 of this handbook explains the written and oral performance of a pitch. First it goes through what the commissioning editors expect to see in a written pitch; and how to compose it. This is followed by a breakdown of the essential elements of speech and body language, all of which can impact on the presentation of an oral pitch. Finally it takes you through the styles and places in which pitching can occur.

Each part of the handbook features interviews with experts - commissioning editors and decision-makers from the ABC and SBS, crowdfunding platforms such as Pozible, philanthropic organisations including the Documentary Australia Foundation (DAF), and a range of practitioners – Emmy award winning filmmakers Marcus Gillezeau and Susan MacKinnon. Program decision makers reveal what they are looking for, how they make their choices, why worthwhile concepts are sometimes rejected and the processes they employ when making their decisions. Practitioners discuss their experiences with online platforms and television networks in the domestic and international marketplaces, and share the insights they have gleaned. Funding organisations explain how they operate and recommend tips and strategies to improve and manage online campaigns.

But before we begin, I want to share my own pitching story from the front line. It was my first attempt at pitching in an international marketplace, and the experience that became the genesis for this handbook.

I took a deep breath at the base of the stairs leading to the big convention centre in the French resort city of Cannes. It is day 1 of the Marché Internationale de Programmes Communications at the Palais des Festivals. Known as MIPCOM, the four-day global content market for television is held annually in October. Weighed down by a laptop, satchel, umbrella and overcoat, I felt as awkward as Mr Bean at a posh party. I tried to conjure positive thoughts.

In less than an hour, this first-time pitcher will be cutting a deal with a leading cable network in America. No doubt about it! Clearly, the broadcaster is interested; the nominated representative responded positively to an email request for a meeting and obviously he recognises a good story when he sees one. Who would blame him? The documentary concept has all of the hallmarks of an engaging story. It is a journey into the prehistoric age, with the discovery of a massive creature buried deep under grazing land in the Australian outback. The documentary would be filmed as the dig happened and feature scientists, great characters working together in striking remote locations. Surely, this was it. For the first time, the door to a career as a serious international independent documentary filmmaker would open and beckon this hopeful producer to step inside.

Years of searching for a story *with legs*, one that would traverse international borders and resonate with a worldwide audience, was about to pay off. Finding the story, however, was only the beginning. Locking it in with all of the key players was an even greater hurdle. All necessary talent and crew had to be contacted and agree to be involved and dozens of logistics had to be investigated and taken into account.

An extraordinary amount of research had to be conducted into the various crucial components of the story such as its scientific accuracy, cast of characters, locations, politics, production crew and filming equipment. Scores of phone calls and emails had to be made to determine the financial outlay for development, production and postproduction, and CGI (computer generated imagery - animation to bring giant dinosaurs to life). Questions had to be addressed and resolved. How much would it cost to shoot and set up a crew in a remote location with accommodation, food, ground transport, a helicopter for aeriels and a crane? Would four weeks be sufficient time on location? What if the scientists failed to dig up enough bones or there was nothing to film or the weather turned nasty? Would production music suffice or should the budget include an original score? All of these issues had to be considered and factored in to the planning and financial calculations. There was no point trying to pitch a product that could not be delivered. Such a failure would put paid to a burgeoning career before it got started.



## INSIDE THE INTERNATIONAL MARKETPLACE

The atmosphere inside MIPCOM is heady and frenetic. Thirteen thousand attendees from more than a hundred countries are buzzing about, communicating in a multitude of different languages. Five acres plus of exhibits are intimidating and overwhelming. It is a relief to run into some Australian producers and try to elicit albeit the briefest of insights. Like all of the other attendees, they seem preoccupied and keen to get on their way.

First things first! Get a grip of yourself. Find a toilet, a stall that sells bottled water and, finally, somewhere to sit and search the MIPCOM sitemap for the scheduled meeting place at the cable network's display. It is not an easy task as there are at least 2000 exhibits to check. Some networks hold their meetings and *meet and greets* off site aboard hired luxury yachts moored a short walk from the MIPCOM venue, but not this broadcaster. This network had a display inside the packed convention centre.

As far as documentary funding prospects go, I felt mine was on the money. The narrative and potential of the project were strong, and I was armed with sufficient details to respond to any curly questions from the broadcaster. I had confidence in myself as a creative storyteller and a not-too-shabby presenter. But as I negotiated the heavily trafficked corridors to the network exhibit, perspiration began to form on the back of my neck and brow line. I reached my destination and am directed to wait in one of several small and somewhat stuffy cubicles, designated for meetings. Minutes pass. Momentarily my mind goes blank. Then I spot him walking in the direction of my cubicle as if in slow motion.

## HOW IT WENT DOWN

Suddenly, I am face to face with the commissioning editor, shaking hands and exchanging pleasantries with the dealmaker, the network buyer who would launch my career as an international documentary filmmaker.

**Network buyer:** *Take a seat.*

**Me:** *Thank you.*

**Network buyer:** *What have you got?*

(He is looking at his watch.....already!)

**Me:** *Well I've got this great story about the discovery of a giant sauropod bone in the outback of Australia. A local farmer found the bone, which scientists identified. Now they want to mount a full-scale excavation of the site.*

Network buyer is starting to fidget and look around.... *Stay calm!*

**Me:** *This is a very rare find and the farmer is a real Aussie character. The story has got all of the ingredients to make it engaging: striking outback scenery, a team of scientists and volunteer helpers*

Now, he is checking his mobile for messages. *Deep breath!*

**Me:** *And it's been in the news in Australia. Actually, one of these volunteer helpers is an adventurous senior citizen from the US. The dig site is a sheep station and this dinosaur would have stood two storeys high.*

(Anxiety is engulfing me; my delivery is gathering speed ... Network buyer interrupts.)

**Network buyer:** *We did dinosaurs last year. What else have you got?*

**Me:** (totally unprepared) *You did? ....What else have I got? ((My heart is thundering inside my chest and my mouth is dry.)*

**Network buyer:** *Yeah, what other projects have you got on your slate?*

(Under my breath: Slate, what do you mean, slate? Other projects?)

My perspiration beads turn into a waterfall and my brain goes into meltdown. I try to regain my focus and salvage something from the deep recesses.)

**Me:** *Well I've got an idea for a doco with a horticultural theme and another about an island on the Great Barrier Reef.*

(Network buyer is looking decidedly unmoved)

**Network buyer:** *Nah, not even close. (He is already on his feet.)*

The meeting is over shortly after it began. I am left in a near catatonic state. In fact, the experience still sends shivers down my spine. The lessons learned, however, are immeasurable.

Though my preparation and research had been exhaustive, I had given little thought to the actual pitch. Perhaps I assumed the project would speak for itself or that I knew it well enough to wing it on the day. I had also failed to examine the cable network's programming schedule, the types of documentaries it sought and the level of the representative with whom I was meeting. When I finally confronted him, I announced that I had a *great* story then persisted in relating it in spite of his apparent disinterest.

Pitching meetings are notoriously brief. Time is always tight. Network buyers generally have back-to-back meetings for the duration of these trade fairs. They have set agendas to procure new programs of a particular genre. In this case, the virgin pitcher would never know what type of documentaries the network buyer wanted because I failed to ask questions. Even when the buyer gave me a second chance by asking what else I had, it was clear I was a Mipcom rookie. I had only one serious project in which I had invested all of my hopes.

These are common mistakes, which I now know, can be overcome with sound preparation, appropriate strategies and practice.

Diligent research into the storyline, characters, potential content, logistics, production and post production budget calculations, phone calls, emails, follow-ups and contingencies had amounted to nothing more than a year-long labour of love. I had become so emotionally invested in the project, I had barely thought of anything else. Raising thousands of dollars for travel, food and accommodation in France and the hefty MIPCOM registration fees compounded the loss. The network buyer's indifference and curt dismissal, however, struck the most galling blow. I had two choices: either give up, enter a convent, (which wasn't going to happen) or reflect on what went wrong, analyse, evaluate and move on. With 4,500 buyers and a world of opportunity at my fingertips, giving up would not be an option.

When practitioners look back, they can view their journey through the shifting accounts of their reflected experiences – like peeling back the layers of an onion skin to see things for what they are and to explore their significance in terms of the whole.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> (Johns 2000, 61)

## PART 1 - *IT'S ALL ABOUT THE MONEY!*

When television began broadcasting in Australia in 1956, people with enough disposable income to buy one of the early clunky wooden sets, couldn't get enough. Like a big magnet in the lounge room, the television set drew all eyes and ears in its direction. The standard of programs had little to do with the ritual nightly fixation on the small screen, often referred to as the *idiot box*. Viewers watched anything the channels dished up. Television viewing 50s style is a stark contrast to today's array of offerings, choice of providers, distribution devices and viewing habits. However, it didn't take long to expand and evolve. More commercial broadcasters soon came on board screening new content with innovative American programs flooding in and ultimately dominating their schedules. By the 1990s, multi-channel television and Pay TV began to flourish followed by digital television and a proliferation of Internet content providers in the 2000s. The impact in terms of viewer choice and accessibility was revolutionary. For independent documentary filmmakers, it was seismic.

Television networks suddenly had multiple channels to feed, which meant that the once hearty funding pie for program development and acquisition had to be split several ways. Revenue from advertising that commercial channels once relied on began decreasing, with much of it migrating to the Internet. Where once independent documentary filmmakers would secure sufficient production finance from one broadcaster, now they had to work very hard to source it from a number of investors. Documentary filmmakers still work very hard to finance their projects and pitching has never been more critical.

The 2007-2008 global financial crisis, which was said to be the worst since the Great Depression of the 1930s, struck another blow to embattled independent producers. UK television chief executive and former president of National Geographic TV International, Ian Jones, says the one big issue that the credit crunch affected was cash flow. Producers may have had multiple broadcasting outlets to approach for investment, but the *unpaid* pitching process took time and a large chunk of their workload. According to Jones, cash flow became a really big problem for independent filmmakers. *Certainly in the UK and the US, a lot of small, medium and large independent producers have suffered enormously because broadcasters may be slowing down their payments.* In Jones' view, the key effect of the credit crunch is

that *producers need to manage cash flow, secondly they need to manage cash flow and thirdly they need to manage cash flow.*<sup>2</sup>

A radical change in viewing choices has only added to the woes of documentary filmmakers, as audiences acquired a taste for so called reality shows. Though the authenticity of these shows is questionable, it matters little to aficionados. The popularity of reality shows has turned the industry on its head, with fly-on-the-wall style formulaic productions on subjects as diverse as dating, lifestyle, science, history, survival and adventure.

For documentary filmmakers, marketing and distribution have been described as being in *constant crisis* since the 1990s when reality shows began attracting the bulk of network funding.<sup>3</sup> Shifts in areas like commissioning models, network schedules and audience engagements have intensified the crisis.<sup>4</sup> Today, in conjunction with these shifts, practitioners are facing possibly their biggest ever challenge from *digital disruption*.<sup>5</sup> The digitisation of television and film production, distribution and screening has revolutionised the industry almost beyond recognition. It's a phenomenon that has already changed the way our mail is delivered, how we read books and access our music.<sup>6</sup> Now audiences are spoilt for choice. We can watch our favourite TV shows and movies on television at the regular times or online anytime we choose either through a download, an on-demand provider or a streaming platform. For many budding filmmakers the opportunities presented by this digital revolution are exciting. Digital modes and equipment options have lowered the costs of production and delivery, and streamlined the production and distribution processes. The result is that any one with a desire to be a documentary filmmaker can become one, without any training or experience. All they have to do is buy a cheap digital camera; download an editing program for their computer; and go. They can even use their mobile devices such as iPhones or iPads to shoot, though experienced practitioners may question the quality of the end product. Many established filmmakers, who have strived for best practice in production and delivery, find aspects of this new digitised working environment daunting. Funding their

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<sup>2</sup> (Jones 2010)

<sup>3</sup> (Roscoe 2004, 288)

<sup>4</sup> (Bonner 2003)

<sup>5</sup> (Boston Consultancy Group 2016)

<sup>6</sup> (Cunningham and Iordanova 2012)

projects is no exception. The business, funding and distribution models are either *blurred or too complex and audiences are fragmented*.<sup>7</sup>

## TRADITIONAL FUNDING MODEL

Traditionally, filmmakers followed broadcast marketplace principles and a funding model that assigned all rights to the telecaster. The pre-sale model was basically a contract between the filmmaker and a broadcaster. This contract guaranteed a licence fee so that the filmmaker could start production. In return, broadcasters often demanded absolute control over the content and style of the filmmaker's production. The producer, filmmaker or documentarian was usually the *last on the revenue chain, leaving little or no chance to recoup costs, let alone enjoy significant revenues*.<sup>8</sup> In Australia, a pre-sale deal with a public broadcaster such as the ABC or SBS meant the filmmaker could apply to the peak industry funding body Screen Australia for additional financial support.<sup>9</sup> The pre-sale may have included a domestic co-production partner or an overseas network partnership to meet the budget and expand the broadcast footprint outside Australia.

British producer and founder of Docos Communications, John Marshall paints a gloomy forecast for television. He says *television is dead, at least for financing serious documentaries*, though it may *linger on for a time as a distribution system*.<sup>10</sup> If this is the case, then we as documentary filmmakers in Australia, who still have the chance to secure a public broadcaster pre-sale deal, ought to reflect critically on our future in the industry. Marshall warns that filmmakers and producers will have to acquire new skills because they will be *completely on their own, there is no gospel and the priests have departed*.<sup>11</sup> New skills, including how to pitch successfully and creatively for alternate sources of finance such as crowd funding or philanthropy, are part of the recipe for our longevity as documentary filmmakers. International film and television strategist Jonathon Olsberg describes the marketplace as a supply-push environment in which producers spend an inordinate amount of time trying to get a

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<sup>7</sup> (Wilson 2009 cited in Ryan 2010, 7)

<sup>8</sup> (Vicente 2008, 273)

<sup>9</sup> (Screen Australia 2016b)

<sup>10</sup> (Rosenthal 2011, 124)

<sup>11</sup> (Rosenthal 2011, 143)

buyer to invest in their projects. Olsberg suggests that producers need to be smarter about the way they operate and research what the market reaction will be.

What I'm seeing in Australia is a decreasing trend in government financing and more reliance on this piecemeal financing. If you look at content generally, what you see is fragmented financing and fragmented development because producers can no longer develop just for TV or just for DVD. At the concept stage, they either think what is the brand extension on this particular project? How can I develop it so that it has a website application? How can I develop it so that the YouTube viewers can watch it? How can I develop it so that it might have a mobile application or a games application? <sup>12</sup>

Stricter funding model regimes, increased marketplace competition and a heavy emphasis on rapid turn-around have already squeezed budgets and shooting schedules. *Documentary filmmakers can no longer pitch one project that they have been working on for a number of years, and have invested in emotionally and intellectually.*<sup>13</sup> Now, many are being forced to confront convergent media concepts, technologies and terminologies that were once alien to them. Experienced producers can usually tap into market intelligence and use well nurtured relationships within their network of contacts to secure money, even in a multi-channel environment.<sup>14</sup> But not all documentary filmmakers have this sort of access to established contacts. To safeguard their survival, filmmakers must develop and improve their pitching skills. They must be proficient enough to adapt and streamline their written and oral pitches to cope with the complexities of practice in the current marketplace.

The documentary filmmaking marketplace is fragmented and fluid in ways that many traditional practitioners could never imagine. The series of events since the 1990s, in particular digital disruption and the proliferation of modes and online platforms it spawned, have caused a major shift in the industry. Even the long-standing staple – the pre-sale funding model– has had to hybridise to survive. By necessity, practitioners explored new models for financing their projects, which were *characterized by being creative.*<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> (Olsberg 2010)

<sup>13</sup> (Roscoe 2004, 290 )

<sup>14</sup> (Jones 2010)

<sup>15</sup> (AIDC 2012)

This creative and flexible approach involved alternative investors and funding sources, such as:

- crowdfunding via the internet;
- tapping into philanthropic organisations, advocacy groups and private investors;
- securing commercial or corporate investment and contra deals; and,
- screening on an internet broadcaster, at a film festival, or cinema release.<sup>16</sup>

## THE MODELS

Trying to determine how many funding models practitioners are now using is not an easy task. It seems that many independent filmmakers are trying everything they can to cobble together sufficient finance to get their projects underway. After all, no funding, no production! Between 2011-2016, I began investigating the documentary marketplace to gain insight into the world of funding and deal-making. I wanted to know if practitioners were embracing online platforms to attract investors or soldiering on in the more orthodox ways, often to their detriment. I attended a number of documentary film markets and trade conferences in Australia and overseas to observe and interview traditional and non-traditional filmmakers, commissioning editors and representatives of other funding organisations. The result was the identification of six *main* funding models in addition to combinations or hybrids of the six.

- Pre-sale
- All-media or multi-platform
- Crowdfunding
- Philanthropic
- Low budget
- U.S. deficit

Acquisitions are not included as the model is relatively straightforward. Some practitioners prefer to fund and complete their documentaries, then sell them as

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<sup>16</sup> *ibid*



acquisitions. This can be risky. The acquisition fee may fail to cover production costs, and the film itself may not meet the broadcaster's criteria in genre, content and duration. Alternatively, some films are sold as acquisitions after their initial screening usually when the licensing period has ended.

Of the six main models identified, the one thing they had in common was the need for additional funding sources. The second thing I discovered was how much these new models relied on pitching. Multiple fiscal partners are acquired through multiple pitching sessions. Crowdfunding, for example, depends on the support of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of online donors. To reach their fund raising target, practitioners have to pitch creatively and continuously to keep the donors interested. I concluded that skilful pitching is crucial to successful deal-making, especially in a fragmented, dynamic marketplace.

### **MONEY UP-FRONT – THE PRE-SALE MODEL**

When a broadcaster or distributor decides that your film concept is worth producing and screening, a pre-sale is triggered. The parties sign a contract, which sets out the terms of agreement including the treatment, content, format, delivery and any other conditions. Under the terms of the agreement:

specific amounts will be paid on specified dates during production, on delivery or at a set date after delivery. They can be licence fees for broadcast rights, or a deposit for securing exclusive marketing rights. These advances are non-recoverable.<sup>17</sup>

A pre-sale with an Australian public broadcaster such as the ABC or SBS means the filmmaker is eligible to apply to Screen Australia for additional funding support.<sup>18</sup> A pre-sale can be arranged with or without an overseas partner, though having one on board means more funding and wider coverage.

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<sup>17</sup> (Jeffrey 2006, 173)

<sup>18</sup> (Screen Australia 2016b)

## WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY

### **Jennifer Collins, Executive Producer *Screentime* and former ABC Head of Factuals:**

An Australian producer will come to the network; they will pitch their projects and once we decide 'yes, we want it', we give them a pre-sale. There are pretty standard rates for pre-sales, and that triggers screen agency funding. In Australia, the screen agency funding is quite generous. Once the pre-sale comes in, the screen agency will at least match what we're putting in and, in some cases, put in a lot more. There are also opportunities for those producers to go to their regional agencies to top up a little bit more. In Australia, we have a tax offset so that brings up the budget.<sup>19</sup>

(The tax offset known as QAPE<sup>20</sup> is guaranteed income at the end of the production. It is a rebate to filmmakers, paid by the federal government and administered by Screen Australia, based on expenses for goods and services provided in Australia.)<sup>21</sup>

### **Screen Australia:**

For any eligible project, the offset is paid by the government to the production company through the company's tax return after the project is completed, and represents a secure government contribution of up to 40 per cent of the cost for feature films and 20 per cent for television and other projects.<sup>22</sup>

For further information, check the Screen Australia website:  
<http://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/funding-and-support/producer-offset/at-a-glance/producer-offset-101>

### **John Godfrey, SBS Head of Non-Scripted Content:**

We only commission Australian production companies. That's what a lot of international producers don't realize, so you need to form a relationship with an Australian company. But that can trigger a lot of money. AUD\$120,000 from us, AUD\$200,000 from Screen Australia plus the Australian company gets a tax rebate which is 20% of that budget. That could be half a million so it's a significant sum of money. It's worth trying to find an idea. (SBS is) a weird broadcaster with different audiences on different nights. We want programs that make a bit of noise. The ABC, we like to think of as being more traditional and old fashioned than we are, so we like

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<sup>19</sup> Collins at WCSFP, 2011

<sup>20</sup> QAPE: Qualifying Australian Production Expenditure

<sup>21</sup> (Screen Australia 2016b)

<http://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/funding-and-support/producer-offset/at-a-glance/producer-offset-101>

to be the channel that pushes things a bit further. We try to grab those factual shows that are doing the same kind of subjects – observational storytelling or science or history – but are doing it using either new technology or new forms of storytelling.<sup>23</sup>

**Dr Janet Mereweather, Award winning documentary filmmaker and academic:**

It is almost impossible for independent, non-enterprise businesses to trigger a pre-sale from the ABC and SBS, despite these directors/producers having an excellent track record in festivals, awards, critical and audience reception. In the current conservative political climate, the broadcasters are favouring controversial, headline grabbing subjects, nostalgia, or factual entertainment programmes (documentary light). Their pre-sale decisions are mostly about ratings potential, not documentary quality, depth, the reflection of strong Australian characters, or an Australian creative perspective on international subjects.<sup>24</sup>

**Stuart Scowcroft, Managing Director Intomedia and former Head of ABC Science and Features:**

Just as it has always been incumbent upon the producer to consider a life for a production in after-broadcast sales, so it is now a requirement of the sound business case to consider all available platforms and assess their potential, both creatively and financially. The business models need modifying extensively but they are not *broken* which tends to imply they should be dismissed as no longer relevant. Any business model that relies on a single source of revenue for its financing plan is at high risk of failing to find its funding, since all investors, both government and private, now expect a proper analysis of the multi-platform environment in the planning of a production.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Godfrey interview, 2016

<sup>24</sup> Dr Janet Merewether, 2014

<sup>25</sup> Stuart Scowcroft interview, 2012

Unfortunately, not all filmmakers succeed in obtaining a pre-sale and Screen Australia funding. Even if they do, many still fall short of their proposed budget. Before they can begin production, they have to source and lock in additional funding. When award winning independent filmmaker Larry Zetlin produced his million dollar plus documentary *Loggerheads – The Lost Years*, the funding process was as time-consuming as the production itself. To make the documentary, Zetlin had to pitch for pre-sale deals with National Geographic Channels US (AUD\$286,000) and the national broadcaster ABC TV (AUD\$140,000). These two deals made the production eligible for Screen Australia investment (AUD\$267,000). But Zetlin still had a budget shortfall. To fill it, he secured a distribution guarantee from National Geographic International Distribution (AUD\$100,000) and top-up funding from Screen Queensland. The QAPE rebate from the federal government offset scheme guaranteed another AUD\$160,000.

It added up to AUD\$1.12 million dollars, made over 2 years. And it's that kind of high budget, high value, high intention program that the ABC is really interested in. I don't want to give in to tabloid where people survive by doing big turnover with a small margin.<sup>26</sup>

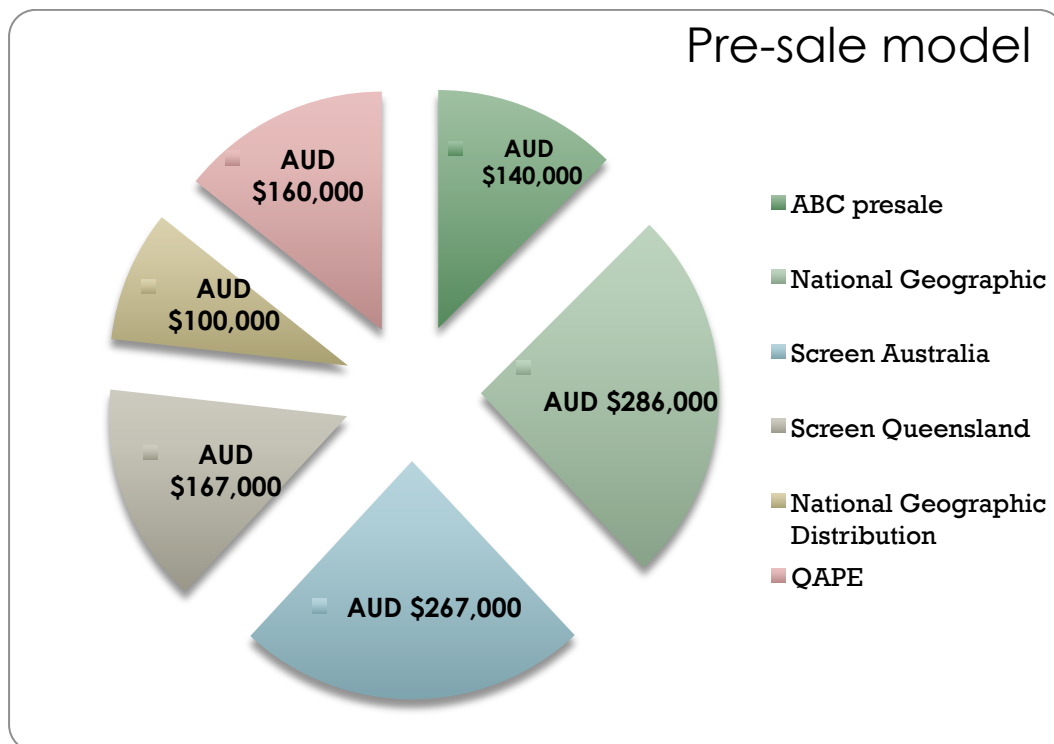


Figure 1. Pre-sale funding model for *Loggerheads – The Lost Years*. Total Budget: AUD\$1.12-million

<sup>26</sup> Larry Zetlin, Gulliver Media, 2016

Although the production budget for Zetlin's turtle documentary was AUD\$1.12-million, the ABC's pre-sale contribution was AUD\$140,000.

For 10% (sic), the ABC had editorial control or say, not complete control. For example, they'll say *we don't like this and you have to change it* in the development stage. So for a million dollars, the ABC gets ten programs it can have quite a say in. We're finding we need to get more pre-sales from more sources to get the budget together. The broadcasters are offering less compared to the good old days. The very first film I produced independently was a koala documentary and the pre-sale with the Seven Network's *World Around Us* was worth three-quarters of the budget. The film was AUD\$120,000 in 1980, which is about a million bucks now.<sup>27</sup>

Screen Australia's ability to fund is reliant on decreasing federal government allocations. What was \$100.8 million in federal government funding destined for Screen Australia in 2013-14 is expected to drop to \$84.1 million in 2017-18.<sup>28</sup> Securing a pre-sale is challenging, but as a sole source of funding, it is no longer viable. Documentary filmmakers, who wish to take this pathway, must secure more pre-sales or find additional investors to get their productions off the ground. Independent filmmakers must take what I call a polygamistic approach and seek relationships with multiple funding partners. They can no longer be too discriminatory. Instead they must make their decisions on who has the money at the time they need it most. Potential partners may include local and/or overseas TV networks, state film agencies, on-line streaming platforms, distributors, sponsors, philanthropists or members of the public through crowdsourcing.

Larry Zetlin has seen a lot of change since he started Gulliver Media in the early 1980s. His documentary films cover a wide range of topics, with a special emphasis on natural history and wildlife. Zetlin is essentially what you would call a legacy or traditional documentary filmmaker, who works with pre-sales. Here's what he had to say about today's funding models.

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<sup>27</sup> *ibid*

<sup>28</sup> (Quinn 2015)

## INTERVIEW

Larry Zetlin is Executive Producer Gulliver Media Australia Pty Ltd and an award winning documentary filmmaker. Zetlin's credits include:

*The Living Landscape - Australian Ecosystems* (10 part series, ABC TV)  
*Living Landscape – Urban Ecosystems* (United Nations Award)

*Crown of Thorns Starfish – Monster From the Shallows* (awarded at festivals around the world)

*Abba, Bang a Boomerang* (ABC TV)

*Loggerheads, The Lost Years* (ABC,TV, National Geographic)

In 2004, Zetlin was named Independent Documentary Producer of the Year at the Annual Conference of the Screen Producer's Association of Australia (SPAA).

### **Larry Zetlin:**

People claim they have business models, but I think we're always just reactive. We try to be proactive but industry changes so quickly. You suddenly find out this is what we should be doing; this is what's selling or in commission - no presenter, must have presenter. That changes regularly.

We're finding we need to get more pre-sales from more sources to get the budget together. The broadcasters are offering less, compared to the good old days. The very first film I produced independently was a koala documentary – that pre-sale with the Seven Network's World Around Us was worth three-quarters of the budget. The film was \$120,000 in 1980. That's a million bucks now. The industry changed slowly leading up to the financial crisis, then really accelerated after that. There was a period when no one was commissioning. The more television channels in the US there were – the less the broadcasters were offering because the market was fragmented. Youtube was going out, recruiting young companies to make low budget productions, for their new channels. They'd approach people who got a million hits and say we'll share the income with you - more eyes on the advertising.

### **How do you see the future of documentary production?**

I think the higher budget docos – the top end is the only area open to Gulliver Media. I don't want to give in to tabloid where people survive by doing a big turnover and have a small margin. I've had knockbacks, which I think were good projects, but the networks are very very selective. And you need an Australian pre-sale to get matching finance from Screen Australia. The rest of the budget for the turtle doco came from Screen Queensland, Screen Australia, QAPE (tax offset), a pre-sale to National Geographic, and a distribution guarantee. It added up to AUD\$1.12 million

dollars, made over 2 years. And it's that kind of high budget, high value, high intention program that the ABC is really interested in.

**Tell me about the knockbacks?**

For instance, we pitched an idea for Underwater World (tourist attraction in Maroochydore, Queensland), which was rebuilding its aquarium. Over two dozen sharks and rays had to find a temporary home. They were going to catch them and move them to Sea World temporarily then bring them back again. I thought that was a good 5 x half-hour series, reasonably cheap to make. The ABC said no we've already got one on Taronga Park Zoo about moving animals around. In the old days, I would've argued that one compliments the other. They're just very selective. But I'm not complaining as Gulliver has got a number of programs up.

**How important is having a multi-media component?**

They like hearing proposals that offer them the ability to have a website. At times, I hear they help pay the cost of the extra elements, but more and more they like to see the new media as part of the overall budget. They have a unit that can develop that, but they expect a lot of it to be handed over to them.

**What other markets have you explored?**

I think China may be to the Australian film industry what it is to the Australian mining industry. It has a lot of capital. It's still not a market worth selling into. It pays very little. The people there are looking for opportunities to invest in western documentaries, and more importantly, feature films. There are now at least three documentary channels in China so the competition is increasing. They want two things. They want to invest in profitable documentaries. They want to link up with experienced western filmmakers so their name can appear on programs and they can learn how to make programs that are suitable. They are interested in blue chip. Once again, if there's a lot of money involved, they want to be confident there'll be a return. CCTV is doing what the ABC in Australia did – all their programs are being hived off to a private company substantially owned by CCTV. It wants to see itself as more of a commissioner and broadcaster.

## **MONEY FROM MULTIPLE PLATFORMS - THE ALL-MEDIA MODEL**

When it comes to engaging in relationships with multiple partners, digital Emmy award-winning Australian producer Marcus Gillezeau is an expert. In 2009, out of sheer frustration with traditional funding, Gillezeau decided to create his own unique model. He said his future as a documentary filmmaker depended on it. Gillezeau's creation combined multiple online platforms with mainstream outlets and commercial sponsorship. To make it work, the filmmaker struck deals with major global sponsors. Their websites showed clips of Gillezeau's film, which showcased leading characters in the sponsor's branding. In return, the sponsors paid Gillezeau and clips of his work were exposed to mega online audience bases.<sup>29</sup>

The model involved a pre-sale of the documentary *Storm Surfers* to Discovery Channel, international distribution and DVD sales contracts. The film concept attracted print, television news and current affairs coverage based on the celebrity of the two retired pro surfers in the film. In all, the production slate included a one hour documentary for Discovery Channel, an interactive website, 20 x 2 minute micro-documentaries for online distribution via RedLever, social networking sites, 180 publishers through Expandable Banner Microsite, iPad and iPhone applications, download sales, a *Storm Surfers* eBook, a *Storm Surfers* photo exhibition of stills in Paris, and merchandising including a licence brand for boards. Gillezeau signed major international sponsors including Red Bull, Sony, Tourism NZ, Quiksilver and Swellnet, which is a website boasting 35,000 surfing subscribers and 200,000 hits a month (Gillezeau interview, November 2016). In addition to online distribution fees, RedLever<sup>30</sup> paid Gillezeau 40% of any advertising revenue gleaned by the 20 x 2 minute micro-documentaries. On top of the sponsorship fees, the sponsors paid Gillezeau for the rights to screen offcuts of *Storm Surfers* on their websites. Gillezeau figured that viewing legendary surfers facing up to giant waves had to be more interesting than looking at a pair of board shorts on the Quiksilver site. Discovery Channel accepted the level of sponsorship, and as Gillezeau expected, received reciprocal internet traffic from cross promotion on the *Storm Surfers* website.

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<sup>29</sup> Marcus Gillezeau interview, 2016

<sup>30</sup> RedLever was established in 2008 as 'a global studio at the nexus of advertising and entertainment, that hyper-syndicates content across contextually relevant publishers in concert with deep video portal integration' (RedLever Studios 2011).



Gillezeau said he sees sponsors as potential broadcasters with mega online audience bases that his model can target and capture.<sup>31</sup>

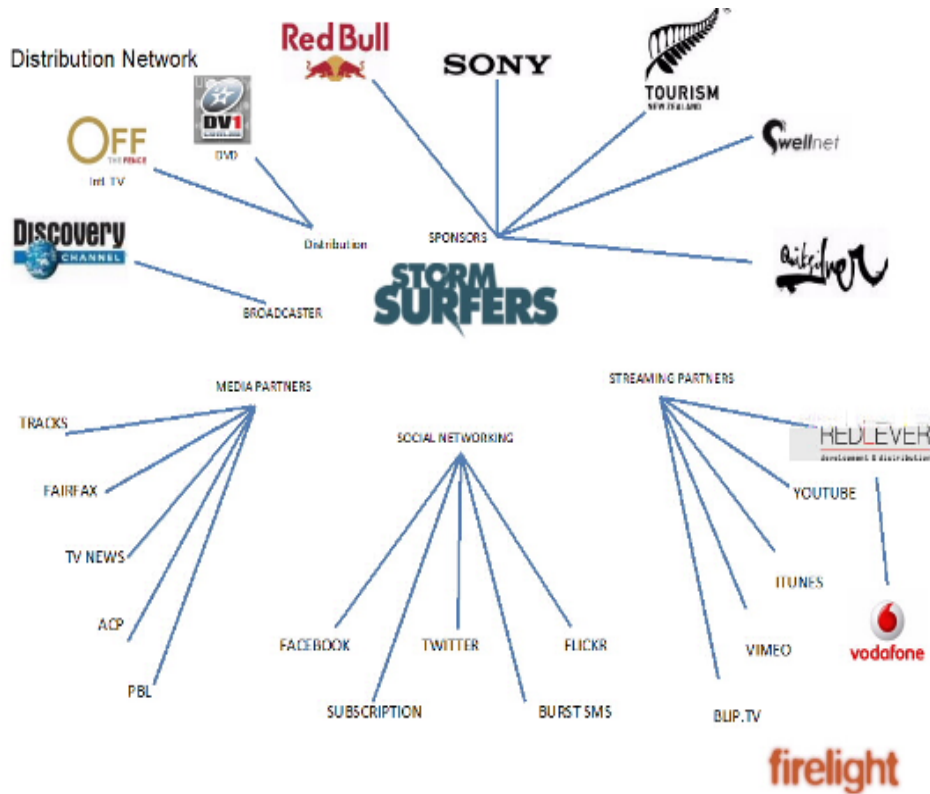


Figure 2. Gillezeau's all-media model for *Storm Surfers* © FIRELIGHT 2010

Pitching a production slate of this magnitude with multi-layered, often overlapping components is a testament of Gillezeau's vision and determination. Commissioning editors and other potential funders understand the concept of a 90-minute feature film, a one-hour drama series or a 3 by 1 hour documentary series. An all-media proposition, however, poses its own problems. In spite of Gillezeau's successes and awards, the degree of commercialism may be too blatant for devotees of traditional documentary films, and would have no place on public broadcast networks such as the ABC, which are commercial free.

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<sup>31</sup> Gillezeau interview, 2016

## INTERVIEW

Marcus Gillezeau, CEO Firelight Productions is a leading all-media Australian producer who has won numerous awards including:

- International Digital Emmy Award Best Fiction 2009 – *Scorched*
- Content and Technology Awards, Best Cross Platform – *Scorched*
- Producer of the Year New Media – Screen Producers Association 2010 & 2012 – *Storm Surfers*
- Best Multi-Platform Director, Australian Directors Guild 2010 – *Storm Surfers*

For more information, log onto: <http://www.firelight.com.au/about/all-media-production/#sthash.ksenxlfE.dpuf>

### **Marcus Gillezeau**

When we did the first film, I said, let us make a doco that's going to cost about AUD\$450,000. We're going to spend AUD\$25,000 on the webisodes; we're going to keep all of those rights; we're going to test them to see how they go; and, we're going to look for distribution channels. Of course, everyone said you couldn't have the rights. So I said, give us AUD\$50,000 and you can have the rights. They wouldn't give me the \$50,000 so I said *Bigger you, I'm keeping the rights and we're making them*. We made them and they went mental.

### ***How difficult is it to pitch an all-media product?***

Ideally, the best scenario would be one party, which is one giant studio that just writes a cheque and says get on with it and do it all. That would be the perfect world. In most instances, we find we're juggling quite a number of the parties for the financing of a project, particularly if the budget gets bigger. Also with the *all media* elements – juggling other parties that may be paying for those additional or ancillary content or if it's a genuine story extension. It can become more complex managing those rights because the line of delineation of who owns the underlying rights becomes more complex. It's quite a juggle and if you're talking about starting to produce games or producing genuine narrative extensions, you're going to have other writers or other production entities becoming involved who also want to share in the upside, because they're going to be contributing to the project a certain amount of risk in many instances.

It's very difficult to pitch an all media product but there are several reasons that in some ways overlap that are also quite separate. When you're pitching an all media product, you have the simple reality that you can't actually frame it into a recognisable format – that is a 90-minute feature film, a one-hour drama series, a 3 by 1 hour documentary series. In television, you can break down the format into specific links in

terms of a television hour and the number of segments, and there's a whole science wrapped around that.

As soon as you walk in the door and say there's going to be a 20 by 2-and-a-half minute web series, they're like: Right, how do I assess that? How do I determine on an investment basis how much I should invest? How do I know the story is going to work within that format? Where are the road rules for a 20 by 2-and-a-half-minute drama series? Well, there are none. I'm trying to create some kind of rules.

***How does the lack of empirical evidence impact on your pitch?***

In terms of pitching, this is an important issue. The infrastructure in the commercial world is not set up to be able to invest in this kind of content easily. They want to invest in it, but where you can sit down and apply a set of rules to a television program that says: if we get 1.5-million viewers, then we can charge a cost per thousand for advertising of AUD\$100. We are going to therefore get AUD\$150-thousand for a prime time ad, bingo! You've got a number straight away. We can play that million-dollar hour of television and we're going to pull AUD\$2-million into the network. Overheads are half a million. We've made half a million dollars profit. Excellent!

***What are the road rules for pitching an all-media slate?***

When it comes to all media, there are no road rules. You can probably apply some road rules with games. The best you can do is take estimated guesses if you're talking about original content. If you're talking about content that is part of a franchise, or part of a story world, it becomes a very different proposition. So if you're pitching in to say hey look, we're pitching in this show, it's a prime time factual entertainment, shiny floor show, based on the team we've got, the talent we've got, historically we've got 1.8 million viewers in the opening week down to 1.5 million, 3 million for the final, there's a pretty good chance you can apply some empirical numbers to it.

With the primary property, you can estimate quite accurately, even though it's still a rubbery figure. With the ancillary or wrap around properties, it's a complete guesstimate when you're talking about a new franchise. And this is why one of the things we've done with Storm Surfers is a case study.

So what we've done is we've road tested our strategy, so next time, I went in and I was able to say this went really well last time. By the way, we'd already developed all of the ideas at the beginning; we were going to make a book, a movie and a series. Every time we went back in, we said we're going to do this – we're going to do a 20 part web series, we're going to develop an app and we're going to do this, this and this. We got the money for it, because of the much easier argument.

Then when we went to the third iteration of Storm Surfers, I went in there and said historically, we've gone gangbusters on these first two. Here are our numbers, here's what we've done, and this time, give us heaps of money and they did, and we ended up with \$6-million to make the whole thing. So that's building a franchise up with realistic KPIs built into it. But if you just go straight in there and straight up say give me a hundred-million dollars, I'm going to build the next franchise, you might end up with a John Carter<sup>32</sup> on your hands and lose \$300 million.

***Given your success in all-media productions, how do you see the future of television?***

The reality is that TV and film is still the primary driver, not the add-ons such as a book even though the book might be successful. Television and film is still the main game if you're talking about transmedia production, even though the movie may not roll out first.

***And ten years from now?***

If we're looking ten years ahead, what I think is going to be interesting and exciting is the explosion of accessibility to content globally. And I think what's going to happen is that audiences end up way ahead of the content creators. They will all have their super-whiz-bang smart phones that by then are going to be able to be sat on the table and project holographic pictures (and I'm not kidding on that front) and they're going to be doing in a way what is happening now. That is they're going to start with consumer level technology exchanging content between each other with advanced technology. And we as the content creators will be playing catch-up. Where you can see that's already occurred of course is in YouTube, where the majority of film makers would crawl over glass to get 75-million downloads of their film. Here are kids making fun little dopey things that are getting 1, 2, 3, 5, 10 million views in a heartbeat. And so, obviously the quality of most of that content is pretty marginal but the reason they're watching it in such numbers is the accessibility to it.<sup>33</sup>

If you extrapolate that same idea, and say okay what's the technology going to be in ten years time, the ultra HD will be standard on all televisions which is 4KHD, auto stereoscopic 3D will be standard on all televisions. You won't even notice or realise that the film you're watching has 3D depth to it. That will become a natural tool in the suite of any filmmaker. Basically the filmmaker will be on set and the DOP will say wow, we can do this with the lighting; and, we can do this tracking shot and we'll put a

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<sup>32</sup> *John Carter* is a Martian adventure movie released in 2012. It grossed \$284 million at the worldwide box office, resulting in a \$200 million write-down for Disney (Chmielewski 2012).

<sup>33</sup> Marcus Gillezeau interview, 2016

bit more depth into the end of this tracking shot and that will look really awesome. That will become a natural thing in 3D because televisions will be auto stereoscopic.

As we learn how to monetise that through subscription and other means such as advertising, what you've actually got is a whole population trained, self trained into how to access vast amounts of content all of the time in many different ways.

If you're going to come to the future of story telling, and this is where it becomes really interesting and exciting is that it will become the norm for a script as we know it now to be pitched as a story-world. This is why books that are best sellers are becoming increasingly valuable in the story telling marketplace. It's because the book has already worked out the entire story-world for the people creating the visual product. Look at the most successful at this point in time, *Harry Potter* and the scale of what that turned over with those seven films. I don't even know how many billion that is. And the scale of what was produced in games and spin-offs and e-books and all of the other stuff - *Harry Potter* pencils to whatever, it's just unreal. Realistically, if I owned a studio, I wouldn't be paying a bunch of scriptwriters, I'd be paying a bunch of authors.

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<sup>34</sup> Marcus Gillezeau interview, 2016

## **MONEY FROM THE PUBLIC – THE CROWDFUNDING MODEL**

Crowdfunding is a do-it-yourself online auction-style pre-sale that is growing in global popularity. It works like this. A filmmaker sets a fund raising target then launches a campaign on a crowdfunding website. The target depends on how much is required for the production. It may be the budget for an entire film or a part of it. The filmmaker is allotted a set time frame to raise the money, usually up to 90 days.<sup>35</sup> During this time, the filmmaker must work hard to spread the word to family, friends and fans via social media.<sup>36</sup> Any one can support the project, and in return they are awarded whatever is on offer from the filmmaker. It could be DVD, a signed t-shirt or they might have their name included in the credits depending on the size of the donation. If the filmmaker fails to deliver these promised perks, the project could easily be harmed. Legally, the money the supporters hand over is a donation not an investment. If the film is a success, the filmmaker is not duty-bound to share the profits with the people who helped to make it happen. The issue of rights and ownership of the film and the fate of donations if the filmmaker fails to complete the project remain unclear. Generally, donations are considered non-refundable.

One of Pozible's early success stories in Australia was the *Gayby Baby* (2015) documentary project. When producer Maya Newell needed top-up funding to shoot some Mardi Gras parade scenes for her film, she posted her plea on Pozible. The budget for the shoot was AUD\$10,500, which was supposed to be raised within 30 days, but Newell had surpassed her target by day 17.<sup>37</sup> Newell also listed the film with the Documentary Australia Foundation, which runs a philanthropic website. The goal was to raise another AUD\$50,000 of the AUD\$350,000 required to complete the film.<sup>38</sup> When the campaign on Pozible ended, Newell had raised AUD\$105,000. Pozible co-founder, Alan Crabbe said:

The film was hugely successful because it took a different slant on a current issue; talking about gay marriage and the effects on children. It provided a different insight so it connected in lots of different ways.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ricky Chen, Pozible.com

<sup>36</sup> *ibid*

<sup>37</sup> (AIDC 2012)

<sup>38</sup> (Newell 2012)

<sup>39</sup> Alan Crabbe interview, 2016

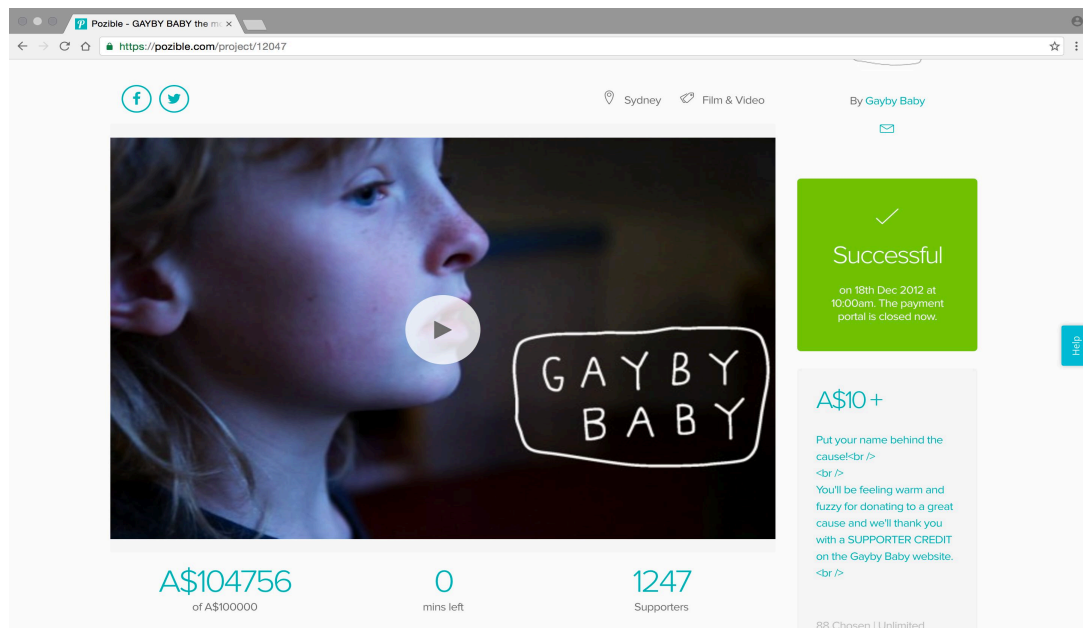


Figure 3. Gayby Baby crowd funding site on pozible.com

The real value in crowdfunding is that it provides the filmmaker with a ready-made audience before the film is released. Smart operators use the platform to develop their fan base and get them talking about the film to create an even wider potential audience. The exposure on the crowdfunding website and social media may attract interest from distributors or other investors.<sup>40</sup>

The downside is that crowdfunding usually attracts funding in small increments. Leading global crowdfunding platform Kickstarter reports that most campaigns raise less than US\$10,000.<sup>41</sup> This is changing with a few film projects breaking the million-dollar barrier, and crowdfunding platforms attracting US\$2.66-billion in a year.<sup>42</sup>

Filmmakers Michael Tey and Tim Maddocks tried crowdfunding when they realised their documentary about spirituality, *Peace Angels – walking light* (2013), may not appeal to the TV networks. But they found the crowdfunding process demanded a new range of skills including constant social media engagement. The campaign website had to be regularly updated with new clips, updates and video journals about the film's progress to keep the supporters interested. Tey and Maddocks had to

<sup>40</sup> ibid

<sup>41</sup> (Kickstarter.com 2016)

<sup>42</sup> (Luka 2014, 159)

develop advanced web skills, write personalised letters and emails, and maintain consistency in branding.<sup>43</sup>

The burden of being relentless in outreach is a bit of a stretch if you are not used to it. Tweetdeck, Facebook, LinkedIn become frequent visits and posts. Blogs are soon to take over my life too. (You need to) have a good range of videos ready to roll out in a serial fashion – your potential audience wants to see what you are up to. And for crowdfunding the personal approach is recommended, ie your passionate statement direct to camera.<sup>44</sup>

One of the issues for Maddocks was the difficulty in accessing funding from the state agencies as well as Screen Australia. Due to fierce competition, Maddocks says only about four to six projects may get development funding, even though the funding agencies might receive hundreds of applications. The independent filmmaker says with these sorts of odds stacked against you: *there is no point being bitter about not being greenlit, or funded*. His advice to filmmakers is to build your audience before you start producing your project. Crowdfunding is an ideal way to test the market and to attract an audience from the get-go. If you struggle to get support early on, then the film may not be worth producing. Maddocks believes the time is right for crowdfunding.

*Embrace* the documentary is Australia's number 1 most successful crowd funding campaign. Taryn Brumfitt, the creator of the *Embrace* body image campaign believes that if you want big results, you have to put in a lot of time and effort. Brumfitt believes that money isn't easy to get. The former body builder and author says she worked very hard early on to build her database, well ahead of her Kickstarter campaign. Brumfitt approached the campaign as a full time job: *I updated several times a day, every day throughout the campaign period. I really cleared my diary for the campaign period, so I could dedicate my time and my life to driving eyeballs onto the campaign*. Brumfitt's key strategy was to get people to look at the *Embrace* trailer or sizzle reel she had posted on the campaign site. She knew that the trailer campaign would take care of itself, and that people would want to contribute because it was so *heartfelt and authentic*. Brumfitt's crowdfunding goal of AUD\$200,000 matched the original budget of the *Embrace* documentary, but the Kickstarter campaign exceeded it resulting in 8909 pledges totally AUD\$331,046 within 53 days.

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<sup>43</sup> (Ney and Maddocks 2012)

<sup>44</sup> *ibid*



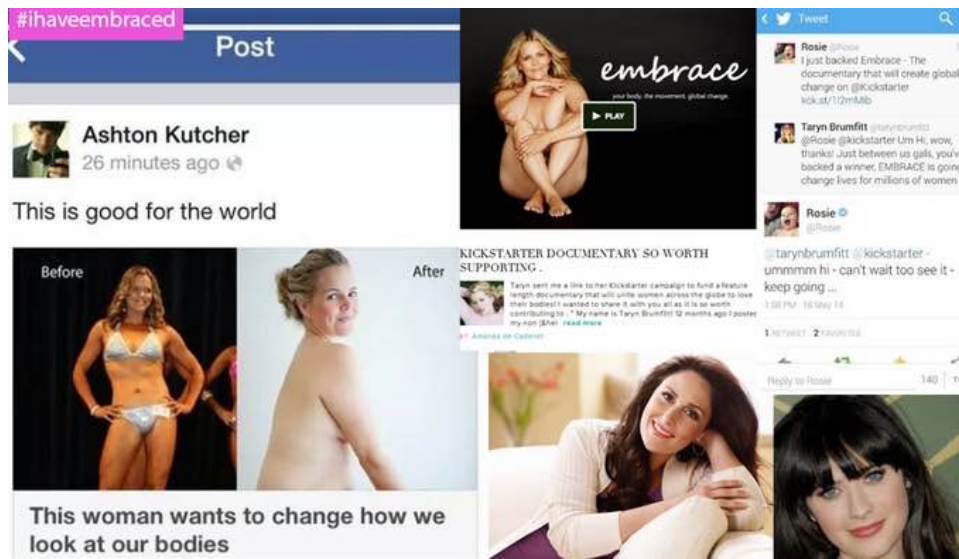


Figure 4. Excerpts from Taryn Brumfitt's *Embrace* crowdfunding and social media campaign, which attracted endorsements from high profile celebrities.

Brumfitt describes how she mounted her campaign and why it was so successful in an in-depth interview. But first Alan Crabbe, the CEO of Pozible will give you an insight into how crowdfunding operates and the potential it has to raise finance.

## INTERVIEW

Alan Crabbe, CEO and Co-founder of Pozible.com. Crabbe is a creative technician, consultant and former financial systems analyst. Pozible.com is an Australian crowdfunding website created by Crabbe and designer Ricky Chen in 2009. Since then, it has launched more than 12,000 projects and raised in excess of AUD\$50-million.

### **Alan Crabbe:**

There wasn't really a place for emerging people who were new and who just wanted to put in a short documentary film. I suppose the most documentaries that come to us are not looking for a large amount of funds; they just need enough to cover some of the basic costs associated with it - maybe the hire of equipment, doing a bit of travel and a lot of the smaller expenses. I think previously (filmmakers) were using it just to get funds. Now, I think the smart people are using it to actually build an audience for the documentary, and as soon as you release this film, people will be talking about it. So they will be sending messages or sharing through their social networks whenever this film gets out there. (It's about) getting the first people who are going to talk about it and encourage other people to get involved. We talk about followers follow followers. People don't follow just one person; they follow, they look, and they follow other people like sheep. So the first followers are the ones other people will replicate. When I talk about it, I talk about a person is only a lone person in this project until someone validates them, and says okay, this is a good idea. And that builds the team. And then the team and their instant network provide the credibility and trust before the next people come in - the next circle. So you have yourself, your team then your network and then you have this outer circle of strangers. These are the people not directly connected with yourself or your team. Well, they can be connected with your team but these are the people who are following these people.

### **How many people potentially could you tap into?**

This all depends on the level of publicity and promotion you can do for your project. When I talk about promoting a project I advise people to look at the 5 Ts of word of mouth (talkers, topics, tools, taking part and tracking)<sup>45</sup>. The two most important Ts are the talkers and then the topics. You need to have the right people talking about your project and you're pitching the idea with a certain topic or angle. Journalism is about picking the story that connects with people, so with word of mouth marketing

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<sup>45</sup> From *Word of Mouth Marketing: How Smart Companies Get People Talking* by Andy Sernovitz, 2009, [www.wordofmouthbook.com](http://www.wordofmouthbook.com)

you're looking at these two T's, the talkers and the topics. Finding out who is actually going to talk about the project and that could be organisations - it could be the press; it could be influential people; it could be your own network or your team's network. But all of these people talk about your project in certain ways and you need to find the way the people will share it. So if you have a team of three people or five people involved in this project, those five people are connected probably to three to five hundred each through their own social networks. So you multiply that up, you get into your circle or your instant network.

**What does Pozible get out of it?**

If a project is successful; if they reach their target, we take 5% as a service fee. So if a project is successful we take a small cut.

**And, if it's not successful?**

Nothing. So it is all or nothing completely. So people can pitch a project, if they are not successful, we don't charge them. We don't take a fee for posting that project.

**What would be the range of budgets that people have been trying to raise in terms of documentary film?**

Putting a dollar figure on it, it can be as low as \$500 just to hire the equipment right up to. We have also seen budgets of \$100,000 to \$150,000. It varies and I think it depends on how long they have been doing this project before they've launched. People coming with an idea two weeks before they launch it may not have been building that network and the audience for that project beforehand. So they probably come in to the project at a very early stage and set a much lower target possibly a couple of thousand just to get things off the ground. But with the likes of the *Gayby Baby* project, they actually ran two campaigns. The first campaign was about getting it started, the second campaign was about *okay, let's get it out there, let's get it distributed, let's get the world seeing this.*

When I am advising people I suggest that in that first day, you need to try and get as many people into the project to get it up to that 20% to 30% mark of the target, because it is at that point the people see that it's a credible project. Before it, that 0% to 10% hasn't built enough trust and credibility to attract people in these networks.

**What timeframe is ideal for building early momentum?**

I would say in the first few days even. If I were doing a project, I would consider it a good indication to get 30% (of the target amount) in the first few hours. So once the campaign launches, the story *is this project has raised this amount of funds in so many hours.* That builds a lot of trust and credibility and that's the x-factor for a project. People in the press and anybody looking to do a story will pick up on it because they see it as very current. They will jump on it because it's moving so fast.

If the press is picking it up because it is moving so fast, you build on the publicity and attract more people. In a lot of ways we are all sheep. We all say *oh wow we need to get onto this, this is huge, this is going to be massive you know.*

**How much do supporters usually donate during a crowdfunding campaign?**

The minimum is one dollar that people pledge but we don't see people pledge between \$1 to \$20 very much. I think the most popular pledge at the moment is \$50. I am not sure if it is still the case, but six months ago \$100 was actually the second most popular pledge amount. And then \$25 is the third. The overall average is around the \$85. I think that with the \$100 pledge, you need to be providing an incentive such as a level of participation or experience for the supporter. Experience is a big thing actually. People value and they remember experiences more than anything else. Build participation, build an experience, as part of the \$100; or provide something that is quite exclusive or limited in availability.

## INTERVIEW

Taryn Brumfitt, crowdfunder and creator of the *Embrace* body image campaign, had never made a documentary or worked in the industry. The former body builder, businesswoman and author decided to make a film about *body loathing, a global epidemic, the sexualisation of women in the media, and how marketers target women's body insecurities*. To fund her documentary, she decided on crowdfunding because her goal was to maintain control. Her Kickstarter campaign went for 53 days.<sup>46</sup>

**Taryn Brumfitt:**

**Did you have to update your pitching material regularly?**

Absolutely. It could be considered a full time job. I updated several times a day, every day throughout the campaign period. I really cleared my diary for the campaign period, so I could dedicate my time and my life to driving eyeballs onto the campaign. But for me, I did it in a way that I could get people to look at the trailer, knowing that the trailer campaign would take care of itself. And people would want to contribute because it is so heartfelt and authentic. The contributions were a by-product for me.

**As an example, what kind of things did you do during the campaign?**

Responding to people's emails and messages, getting back to as many people on an individual basis as I could. I also tapped into contacts I had made over the years such as businesses and corporations to say *Hey I'm doing this*. Anyone and everyone I emailed; I had flyers, I walked the streets. I did everything during that campaign – it was marketing 101.

**On your campaign site, did you post progress reports and photographs?**

Of course! Definitely! I let everyone know how things were going, I put up videos as well of me thanking people for their contributions so far: *this is where we're at, this is how much we've got to go*. There were always photos and updates because this wasn't just about me. This was a large group of people coming together to get this project funded and make this documentary. In the lead-up to the campaign, instead of asking people for money, I asked them for their time. I asked them if they could donate an hour of their time to get eyeballs on the trailer. That was my number one objective. The money wouldn't be so hard if we could get people to watch the trailer. It started out with a call to action on my FB page: *Hey can anyone donate some time?* A hundred people said yes, then 200 people, then 300 people. I was working a hundred hours a week easily and I had three kids. I wasn't sleeping and I was working around the clock before the campaign started. So for me to have hundreds of

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<sup>46</sup> Taryn Brumfitt interview, 2016

hours of people help in time, oh gosh, it still gives me goose bumps to this day. This was really invaluable for me. As it turned out, that number got to 2-and-a-half thousand people. They were doing dinner parties; they were hosting events; they were speaking at their universities and schools; they were sharing it far and wide.

**Some people might say that you're a natural at this. Can you describe your style of pitching and why it worked?**

I think my style was honest and real. I think the approach with people is one of transparency. That's the key for anything. In my past life when working in sales and marketing, I was a photographer. I approached things always looking like I knew what I was doing, with the façade that everything was under control. That really changed for me with everything I've done with Body Image Movement because I needed help. I am just one person. I am really tired and I have three kids. I've got dirty dishes in the sink and there's dog poo on the back lawn. I'm just a very ordinary person but I don't want my children to grow up in this body-loathing, body-hating world. I want to do something about it but I can't do it without you guys, so please can you come with me. Let's do it together. I think that's what worked.

I think it really helped at the start of my campaign. You should get a copy of my book and read it. There's a whole section where I talk about the Kickstarter campaign. The trailer says *come with me, let's create change together*. I think so many people go wrong with pitches and stuff they do when they're not transparent, they're not honest with integrity, yet they expect a positive outcome. You know if someone is chasing a dollar, it just won't come.

**Was there anything about crowd funding that you hated or that you might do differently next time?**

Not really. No. I think we all take responsibility for how we feel about things and how we play the game in life. Not many things that other people do really affect me because it's my choice how I interpret, perceive, or how I live and feel about the things I do.

**Was there anything that surprised or shocked you about the process?**

I hoped that the trailer would be successful and be shared a lot. In the end, it had close to 9-million hits. During the last week alone, it had 5-million, it went viral. That's over 14-million views that I know of. Those kinds of numbers are surprising.

**Would you do another crowd funding campaign?**

Absolutely!

**Any tips for new players?**

Do your homework, NOT during the campaign or when it starts, do it beforehand. People say to me that I'm lucky my campaign went the way it did. I'm quick to tell them it had nothing to do with luck. I researched and studied it for seven months. People don't get that. The amount of arguments I had with my husband, for example, I'd come home, organize the kids, get them into bed, then disappear while my husband sat on the couch. I was like the missing wife for months on end. It put a lot of pressure on the family for me to do what I've done. I think it's going to be worth it now. People keep asking me to help them with their campaign – They say *it's day 7 and we're not getting anywhere*.

I feel really bad, but it's too late. You can't do anything once you're *in* the campaign, you've got to do all of your homework first. You can't be mid-campaign thinking about a strategy. You need to have all that stuff done beforehand.

## MONEY FOR A CAUSE – THE PHILANTHROPIC MODEL

The philanthropic model mirrors crowdfunding in many ways. Supporters are ideologically or emotionally invested in a cause or a concept. They are prepared to donate money to it with no expectation of making a profit or being paid back. Kickstarter, IndieGoGo and Pozible are among mainstream crowdsourcing platforms that welcome non-profit organisations or individuals to run campaigns for charitable causes. The Documentary Australia Foundation (DAF), which is based in Sydney, hosts a crowdfunding platform exclusively for documentary. This is in addition to its regular role of facilitating a link between filmmakers and philanthropists.<sup>47</sup>

According to its charter, the Foundation does not produce or commission films, it:

aims to inspire and nurture partnerships between philanthropists, charities and documentary filmmakers, and provides expertise, information, guidance and resources to help each sector work together to achieve their mutual goals.<sup>48</sup>

The Foundation accepts and passes on grants from the public to documentary filmmakers. These grants are tax deductible. With no government assistance, the organisation relies solely on the generosity of benefactors. Without this support, it cannot continue to provide tax deductibility for film projects or continue to support and advocate for Australian documentary film. Executive Director Dr. Mitzi Goldman explains:

there are a lot of exclusions that philanthropic groups/foundations have in their guide lines; you have to convince donors of why they should put money into a documentary film when they can put money directly towards the issue itself. You have to convince them that the documentary works. Documentary can reach a broad and diverse audience, it can be used as a tool for social change; to raise awareness long after project is finished; for fund raising and long term outreach...around an issue in a way that just giving directly to an organisation cannot do.<sup>49</sup>

The argument is the philanthropist gets *more bang for buck* by donating money to the filmmaker rather than directly to the cause. Documentary and the publicity it creates can lift the profile of the cause and expose it to a greater, potentially global audience.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> (DAF 2016)

<sup>48</sup> *ibid*

<sup>49</sup> (AIDC 2012)

<sup>50</sup> *ibid*



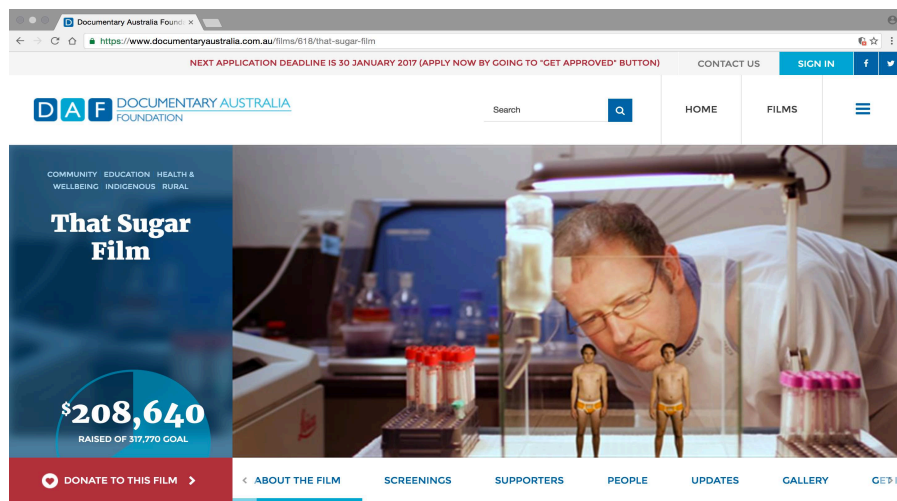


Figure 5. Total amount donated for the production of *That Sugar Film* on the DAF website

*That Sugar Film* (2015) is the highest grossing Australian documentary with box office takings reaching AUD\$1.7-million within four months of its release. Supporters of the campaign against the *harmful effects of excessive sugar consumption* also got behind the film by donating through the Foundation's crowdfunding website.<sup>51</sup> The film itself, which had a budget of AUD\$458,000, had already been produced. The funding target for philanthropic money was set at AUD\$317,770 to cover an outreach educational program as a follow-up to the documentary.

In 2016 at the *Good Pitch2* event organised by the Foundation, six Australian documentaries were awarded AUD\$6.6-million in philanthropic funds.

Susan MacKinnon, Founding Director of the Foundation and a leading filmmaker, explains the pitching process for philanthropic investment. In a candid interview, Susan describes the importance of establishing a relationship with the donor and how to manage it.

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<sup>51</sup> (Screen Australia 2016a)

## INTERVIEW

Susan MacKinnon, Founding Director of the Documentary Australia Foundation and multi-award winning producer. Credits include:

- *Paul Kelly – Stories of Me*, Melbourne International Film Festival;
- *Life In Movement*, best documentary at the Sydney Film Festival;
- *Honeybee Blues*, winner of the Earth Vision Award Tokyo; and,
- *The Oasis, In The Company Of Actors, Global Haywire* (by Academy Award winner Bruce Petty), *4, Over My Dead Body, Men And Their Sheds, Eternity, You Must Remember This*, and *Fetch*, screened at over fifty festivals worldwide including the International Festival du Cannes.<sup>52</sup>

### **Susan MacKinnon:**

Philanthropy suits documentary. It doesn't really suit drama, because documentaries are about issues and about real people and often about social change or education.

### **Does the Foundation deal only with advocacy documentaries?**

No, they don't have to be. It is whatever the issue of the film is and whatever the objective of the film is. So you can make a very beautiful interpretive film about Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* piece of music, which I did. It was so beautiful, such a beautiful film. None of that is advocating anything except the value of the arts – music, poetry, lyrics, interpretation, performance, meditation with music, whatever – all those different things. We could have found philanthropists who support classical music, or loved Vivaldi so much they want to memorialise it in a new way that would bring new audiences to it. The musicians in the film were less than 30; they were all young. And it did really well that film. It went around the world and showed multiple times in Japan. So they don't have to be advocacy films, but you can extrapolate from it as a cultural value. And then your task is to try to connect people who want to support cultural things and want to make a *cultural investment*. That is the language we use in philanthropic spaces, making a *social investment* or a *cultural investment*. It is not a financial investment with the expectation of financial return.

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<sup>52</sup> <https://www.linkedin.com/in/susan-mackinnon-73158523/>

**What is the range of these investments?**

Look it's amazing really. I have processed a AUD\$30,000 donation, which is always exciting, for a film about prisons and the prison system and incarcerated youth. There was a AUD\$5,000 donation; there was a AUD\$1,000 donation to an environmental film about turtles. And you never know, it is really unpredictable. It's always a gift and it's always magic when it happens. We've had \$150,000 and \$100,000 donations.

**So the filmmaker, apart from making the film, doesn't have to do anything in return?**

There is a lot of relationship management. For it to be a tax deductible donation and for it to be considered a donation, it has to be given with no expectation of return, with no expectation of anything. It's a gift. And it's like you are giving to the Red Cross or the Save the Children. And that is the principle of this. Filmmakers don't have to give them back anything, but what they have to do is thank them and try to maintain a relationship. Engaged philanthropy they call it. So you can show them rushes of footage and give them an update; you can give them written reports along the way; or you can invite them into a screening when it is falling into shape. You can think of ways just to include them because they spread the word and they may bring more donors on board who care about the same issue. They might finance your next production if they've enjoyed it and it's done what they want. It's good to understand why they donate to a project. That is always interesting data to have. Why did someone give \$30,000 to a prison film concept when they could give it to cancer research, or a hospital, or anything really?

**Do they see the film as value adding to the cause rather than a direct donation?**

Many times they see that there is a vastly enhanced educative value to the film when it's finished. Especially if it's going to be on television, it's reaching a minimum 400,000 people more that they would just putting a new machine into St Vincent's, if the film is about cancer research. I mean, in terms of the value add for them and what they do, media is the biggest. The internet and having access to that in a meaningful way is what everyone wants - business or philanthropy business.

**Is pitching for philanthropic money difficult?**

What I've learnt changing from the film paddock to the philanthropic paddock is that everything relies on relationships. Everything relies on reputation and track record and everything relies on communicating what you want clearly. It's important to have the vocabulary to communicate. When I first started working in the philanthropic space I had to learn a new vocabulary like *social and cultural investment*, *return on social and cultural investment*, *social return on investment*, *engaged philanthropy*, all

those kinds of words. Donation, grant, gift, all those words are interchangeable. Grant makers and donors are different from commissioning editors or an executive producer and a broadcaster. But the dynamics of assessing are the same. They have to like you; they have to like your idea; and, they have to trust you and trust your judgement and integrity. When those things are established, in either paddock, it is going to work better. If you can communicate what you are doing and why you are passionate about it and why it's important, it's the same as when you are persuading a commissioning editor that your idea is a fabulous one. Donors receive a lot of requests. You know, they don't go looking for films to support. They've got loads of charities at their door begging for money and it's a bun fight towards the end of the financial year about which ones are going to get it. If you are clear in your pitch, it becomes a no-brainer especially if it looks like a great story.

**What makes you climb to the top of the pile?**

You have to do your research. When you are talking to a commissioning editor you do your research about what are they looking for now. What type of programming do they want? You are trying to make the shoe fit the box. And you are doing the same with the donors. What have they financed before? If they have financed the art gallery, they are into the arts so you take them arts programming; or, if they have financed pre-natal care for indigenous mothers, you would take them indigenous programming. You do your research and then you're trying to show them in a powerful way how you would tell a story that is in line with what they support.

**So you need to research how your film project would enhance their cause?**

Yeah and it's a magical a fit when it fits. You see it happen. It is not often when it is a perfect fit but that is when DAF comes along and value adds to help them understand what they can extrapolate from a story that is not directly on message but is a way that will engage more audiences because it is a broader approach to an issue or something like that.

**In relation to the pitching chain does the filmmaker pitch to DAF first?**

In the majority of cases the filmmaker is pitching to a donor. Once the donor says *I really like that idea, I really want to support it, how do I do that?* The donor then says *you go to DAF and you sign up and you make the donation to DAF and DAF will pass the donation onto us.* DAF has the capacity to give you a tax receipt that is deductible off your tax.

## **MONEY IN SHORT SUPPLY – THE LOW BUDGET MODEL**

You don't need a huge budget to make a documentary film. In fact, you don't need a massive injection of funds to create a box office sensation. American filmmaker Morgan Spurlock proved that when he produced *Supersize Me* on a budget of US\$65,000. Self-funded, with himself in the main role, Spurlock used a friend's camera and lighting set during the shoot. *Supersize Me* won the Grand Jury prize at the Sundance Film Festival and earned more than US\$22-million at the box office and was nominated for an Academy Award.<sup>53</sup> The screening and subsequent popularity of the documentary forced McDonalds to remove its super sized portions from the menu and introduce healthier options.<sup>54</sup>

Easy access to portable digital video recording devices and free online broadcast platforms have made it possible to produce films on a low budget. Some low budget filmmakers have made the transition from YouTube to mainstream television. The trailer and some shorts of Dario Russo's student film *Italian Spiderman* scored 10 million views on YouTube, and led to a deal with SBS ONE for his next production *Danger 5* and a *web series to build on his existing fan base*.<sup>55</sup> Google's YouTube, iTunes, Amazon, Netflix, Telstra's BigPond Movies and the free-to-air broadcasters are among the principal content aggregators of online video services for screening and streaming on computers or mobile devices. The major platforms for short user-generated videos include YouTube, Vimeo, Blip.tv and DailyMotion.<sup>56</sup> WeChat in China has 450-million active users. Most content is text and image-based but video posting is growing. GoPro, though not a platform, is the 5<sup>th</sup> largest brand channel on YouTube with 1.8-million subscribers, who log on to watch the extreme situational offerings.<sup>57</sup>

Not all 'no to low' budget filmmakers are new players whose only real chance at broadcasting is via a user-generated platform on the Internet. Brisbane based filmmaker Bruce Redman turned to the *guerrilla doc* low budget model by necessity. A skilled cameraman, Redman decided to go it alone when he failed to get a network pre-sale and had no money to kick start his *Family First – A Federal Crusade*

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<sup>53</sup> (Bailey 2004)

<sup>54</sup> (McCreadie 2010)

<sup>55</sup> (Screen Australia 2011b, 22)

<sup>56</sup> (Screen Australia 2011a, 56)

<sup>57</sup> (Barnett 2014)

documentary. The 52-minute production, which was shot without the two fundamental essentials - a supporting crew and a budget, was eventually broadcast by ABC TV, which also provided post-production services. Redman concedes the production was only made possible because of his access *to broadcast quality and light sensitive, compact digital video cameras that use high-quality front-mounted microphones or radio microphones.*<sup>58</sup>

Low budget filmmakers in Australia are eligible to apply for a grant under Screen Australia's Producer Equity Program (PEP). The grant is calculated at 20% of the film's approved budget, which must be no less than AUD\$125,000 up to a maximum of half a million dollars. According to Senior Manager of Screen Australia's Documentary Unit, Liz Stevens, the agency recoups none of the money:

If you have a budget of AUD\$500,000, AUD\$100,000 of that bottom line can be producer equity. We take no position at all, no copyright, no recoupment equity, it completely belongs to the producer, it's the producer's equity. This only applies to projects with total production budgets of under AUD\$500,000. (If the budget is) over AUD\$500,000 they need to apply for the producer's offset.<sup>59</sup>

Finance can be sourced from other places as long as the budget meets the threshold criteria. The film itself must meet the significant Australian content criteria set down by Screen Australia. As Stevens explains, there are a few pitfalls:

You can't change the approved PEP amount – even if your budget goes up, which is a common scenario with smaller budget projects that may get a financial injection from other places. There is no coming back to Screen Australia asking to increase PEP because your budget has increased. If your budget goes over the AUD\$500,000, you can't go to the Producer Offset (tax rebate model) either. The most common scenario I've seen is people with a budget around AUD\$500,000, who then get a good cinema release, and they could have been eligible for a 40% Offset. Unfortunately you draw a line in the sand once you've accepted PEP, you cannot change it. It is fixed.<sup>60</sup>

The following three models to illustrate how producers of low budget documentaries can utilize PEP. Figure 6 depicts a 52 minute documentary with a budget of

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<sup>58</sup> (Redman 2011-2012, 23)

<sup>59</sup> Liz Stevens interview, 2017

<sup>60</sup> *ibid*

AUD\$400,000, with an ABC pre-sale, and matching funds from Screen Australia under its terms of trade.<sup>61</sup>

Figure 6. Low budget pre-sale model plus PEP - Total budget AUD\$400,000

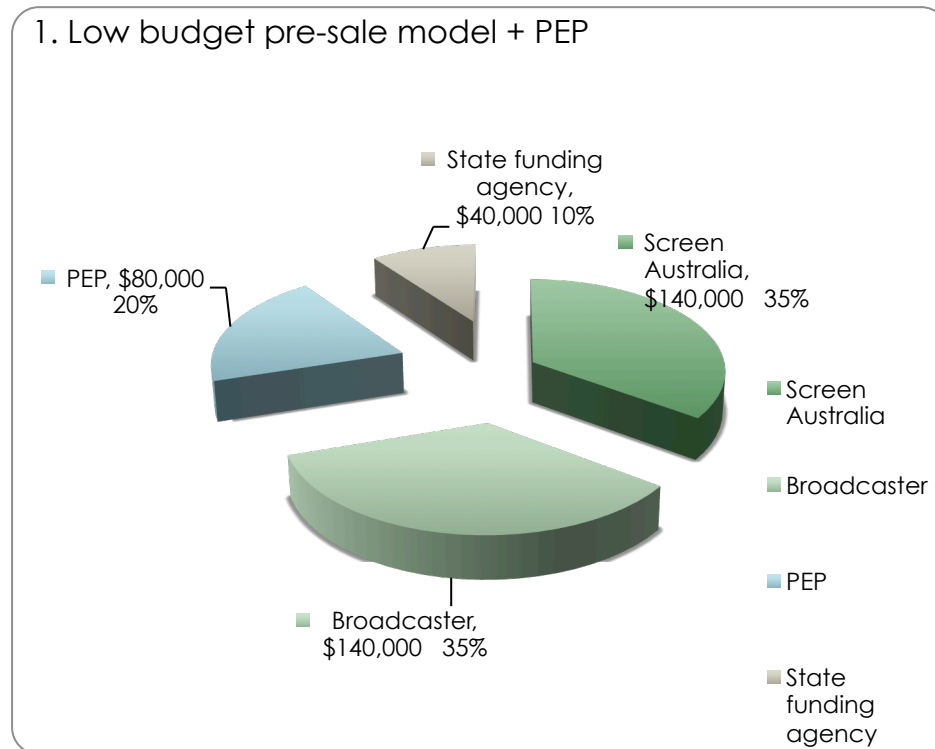
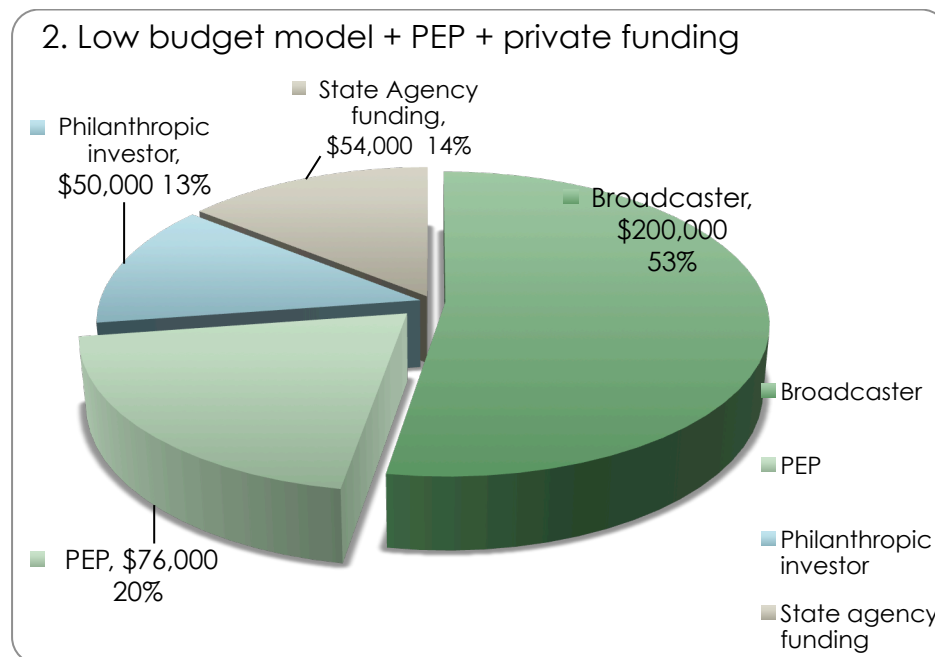


Figure 7. Low budget model for documentary with ancillary funding plus PEP –Total budget AUD\$380,000



<sup>61</sup> Low budget models by independent producer Lucy Maclaren for Screen Australia

Figure 7 shows the funding breakdown for an Arts program with an ABC pre-sale. The total budget is AUD\$380,000.<sup>62</sup>

The final example in Figure 8 represents an alternative low budget documentary distributed on YouTube, which has been made with money raised through crowd funding and the generosity of family members. In this scenario, the producer applies for PEP within 6 months of distribution to repay a loan. Screen Australia stipulates there must be an official loan deed to ensure legitimacy, and the film itself can be a documentary of any duration.<sup>63</sup>

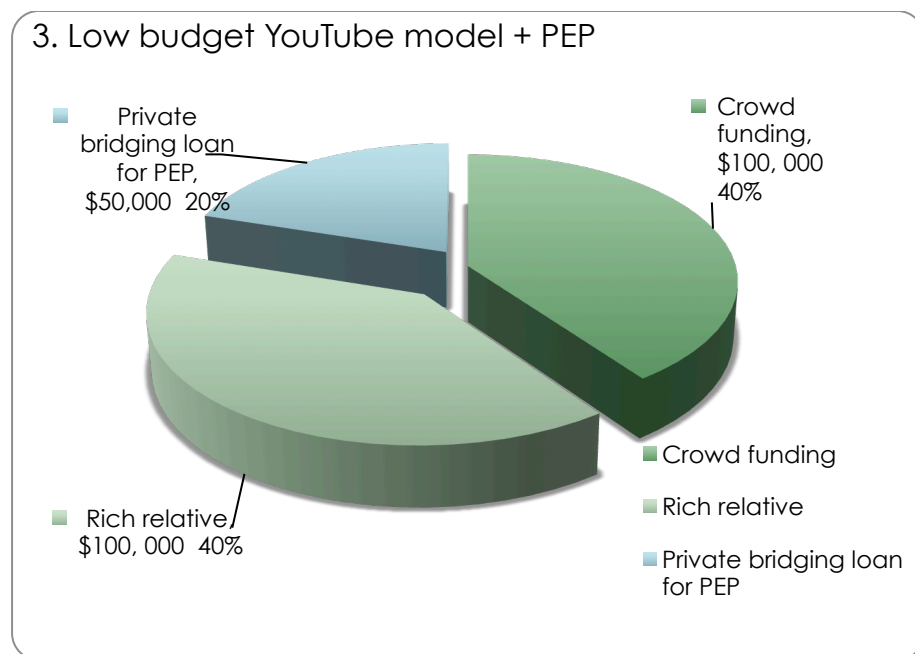


Figure 8. Low budget model with private and crowdfunding plus PEP – Total budget AUD \$250,000

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<sup>62</sup> *ibid*

<sup>63</sup> *ibid*



## DOING IT TOUGH – THE U.S. DEFICIT MODEL

American documentary filmmakers have no access to screen agency incentives or government funding to subsidise their projects. In addition to the absence of any kind of screen agency support, documentary producers in the U.S are also faced with a declining number of co-production<sup>64</sup> opportunities. Unlike their Australian counterparts, they are forced to rely on securing full commissions from broadcasters. Dealing with only one network buyer may be more straightforward, more streamlined in terms of budget, editorial and licensing negotiations. However, it does have a drawback: *many channels, particularly in the USA, insist on taking all the rights in a program so they can transmit and exploit it as they like.*<sup>65</sup> This exploitation can extend to worldwide transmission without having to pay the filmmaker additional licensing fees, if the channel is part of an international network.

the producer is effectively employed on a work-for-hire basis. They are given the budget to make the program, from which they keep a 10-15% production fee.<sup>66</sup>

If the budget blows out, which it inevitably does, their hope of a profit quickly evaporates.<sup>67</sup>

The American documentary filmmaking market has changed dramatically during the past couple of decades. Emmy award winning American producer Michaelo, CEO, Hoff Productions operates production houses in San Francisco, New York, Los Angeles and Washington. He confirms that *the amount of science and true documentaries has declined dramatically – there are very few outlets for documentaries in the traditional sense.*<sup>68</sup> Hoff attributes the trend to an audience migration to docu-reality programming and the networks being more flexible about what their brands mean. Hoff has created dozens of high-profile series including *Hooked: Monster Fish, Ultimate Factories, and Weird, True and Freaky Megastructures* for major international networks National Geographic Channel, Discovery Channel, History Channel and Animal Planet.

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<sup>64</sup> A co-production or co-pro is a financing and rights arrangement between two or more channels (domestic or international); or between two or more production houses, which may pool their areas of expertise and contacts (Nash, Hight and Summerhayes 2014).

<sup>65</sup> (Lees 2012, 60-61)

<sup>66</sup> *ibid*

<sup>67</sup> *ibid*

<sup>68</sup> Michael Hoff interview, 2016

What most networks run on the air now, decades ago, would have been considered impossible; but the market has become more competitive. The only way they can grow is to cannibalize each other, which has forced them to be more flexible about their brands. So now you can almost see anything on any network as long as it works. It is very rare that you get fully funded, so almost always, you are facing a deficit, and there is not much co-production business left because most US domestic networks are trying to hold on to all the rights in perpetuity. These rights are considered an asset.<sup>69</sup>

Each year, filmmakers, broadcasters and distributors travel to international markets, festivals, and industry events such as the World Congress of Science and Factual Producers. Their aim is to do *co-pro* business, that is, to network with and potentially form a financial and/or creative relationship with an international co-production partner. Ironically, when Hoff attends, he often meets up with American *domestic* buyers, who could have commissioned his projects at home.

In terms of co-pro, you're looking for as much as you can get, but the business model right now, from a US production company's perspective is usually if all goes well, you can get maybe 65 or 75% of the budget from the US domestic market. So then you're looking at what you can get internationally. And that varies. It depends on how long you're willing to take and how good the idea is. It's very rare that you get it fully funded. Usually you can expect to get another 15 to 25%, so almost always you're facing a deficit if you do a co-pro, and there's not much co-pro business left because most US domestic networks are trying to hold on to all the rights.<sup>70</sup>

In co-production partnerships, Hoff has worked with international distributors as well as US buyers, who may invest between 65 and 75% of the budget. According to Hoff, the US buyer may offer from the high US\$200,000s to the high US\$300,000s, at times, up to US\$400,000 per one-hour episode. The series may comprise three to a dozen episodes, with an overall budget of two to three million US dollars.

Say you're short 30% on a US\$300-thousand budget - US\$90-thousand per episode. A US buyer is offering US\$210-thousand per episode and you're short US\$90-thousand. Multiply that by the number of episodes you have and you're looking at a lot of money. Most distributors' comfort zone is putting up something like US\$25-thousand, maybe US\$30,000 or US\$35,000. Beyond that, most of them get a little bit nervous. So you could see a deficit of US\$50,000 (illustrated in Figure 9). It's

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<sup>69</sup> Michael Hoff interview, 2016

<sup>70</sup> *ibid*

common to deficit \$50-thousand or so per episode. And you hope that somewhere down the line, you're going to make it back.<sup>71</sup>

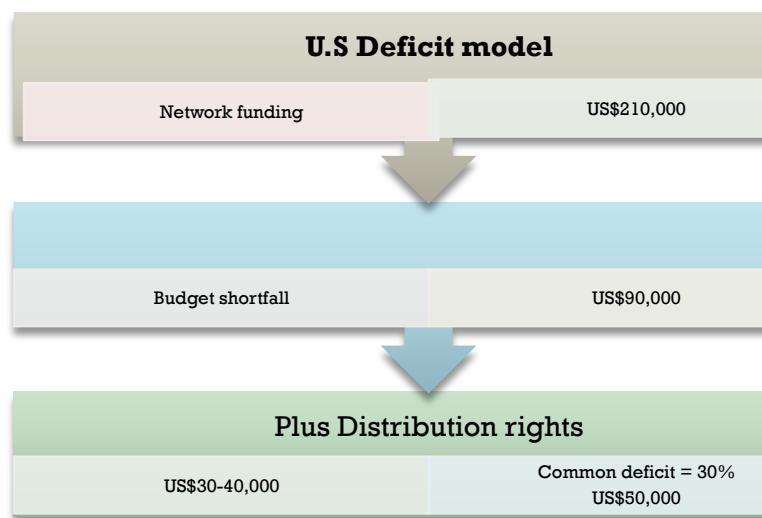


Figure 9. U.S. Deficit model factual episode  
Total budget US\$300,000

Producers try to make up the difference by using their own hardware (production and post-production equipment) and their labour. These are *soft* costs, which don't require an outlay of money. Typically, third party costs can account for about 65% to 75% of your budget.

In general, co-pro business is not a good one. Most of the time I've done it, I've done it as a *loss leader*<sup>72</sup> because I wanted to advance a relationship or because we had nothing else going on and we needed the cash flow.<sup>73</sup>

## BRANDS MODEL

Under the brands funding model, the commercial client covers the production cost. Distribution can vary from buying time on-air to licensing the content to a network. The concept of branding grew out of advertisers paying for product placement in radio programs in the 1920s.<sup>74</sup> Hoff has adopted the brands funding model to produce some of his best-known series such as *Ultimate Factories and MegaStructures* (National Geographic Channel), *Made in America* and *Top Ten/World's Best* (Travel Channel) and *Speedmakers* (Speed Network). Hoff's

<sup>71</sup> Michael Hoff interview, 2016

<sup>72</sup> A strategy to attract clients by offering something at a lower cost (Oxford 2016)

<sup>73</sup> Michael Hoff interview, 2016

<sup>74</sup> (Lees 2012, 108)

website states that many of his successful programs have focused on products made by companies including Coke, Ikea, Lamborghini, Harley Davidson, Porsche, and Breitling Watches.<sup>75</sup> Though the production values are high and the profit margins are good, Hoff says brands funding will not be replacing the US deficit model, as it accounts for less than 10% of his business.<sup>76</sup> In Australia, public broadcaster SBS is considering brands funding as a model for food and similar lifestyle shows. In contrast to Hoff's version of commercial capitulation, *SBS would retain total editorial independence and control.*<sup>77</sup> Apart from branded productions custom-made for airlines or website screening, Hoff argues that online media components have little relevance to funding models for his major programs.

New media is certainly not a vanguard, it's an ancillary product and it's a secondary market for the primary product, which is still television. Television is still the great promoter, advertiser, *brandizer* of ideas and concepts. You'll see a lot of people cannibalizing their television programming and putting it in online media but you see very little. There are online ideas migrating to television and movies, but they're still not that much of a business model. It was kind of a fad a few years ago where you needed a multi-tiered pitch, that (online media) was sort of helpful and they had a little money but that money dried up...they don't care anymore. The issue is: *Is there a way to make money online?* And that's still difficult. I haven't seen it.<sup>78</sup>

With so many programs starting life on television then migrating to online streaming platforms, would it be foolish to rule it out as a key player in documentary film funding?

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<sup>75</sup> (Hoff 2016)

<sup>76</sup> Michael Hoff interview, 2016

<sup>77</sup> SBS Joseph Maxwell interview, 2017

<sup>78</sup> Michael Hoff interview, 2016

## WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY:

### **Emmy award winning all-media filmmaker Marcus Gillezeau:**

The reality is that TV and film is still the primary driver. Television and film is still the main game if you're talking about transmedia production.

### **Dr Jane Roscoe, London Film School CEO and former Network Programmer SBS Television:**

It doesn't always feel like it, but the best of the best gets to television. Online we're being delivered the culling session, the stuff before curation. I'm watching TV, I've got the iPhone, laptop, iPad going, I've got things happening, but television is what has triggered off the activity.<sup>79</sup>

### **Dr Christine Quail, Assistant Professor, Department of Communication Studies and Multimedia, McMaster University, Canada:**

(Television) is a multi-billion industry, a major distribution outlet for film, new TV content, news, sports and educational programs. It would be absurd to suggest that television is not changing, that viewers are not afforded a level of flexibility and control over their viewing experiences with new platforms, or that many people do not enjoy new modes of viewing. Empirical evidence in the North American contexts, suggests that the death of TV is not nigh, nor has television been simply reduced to a *metaphor*.<sup>80</sup>

### **Joseph Maxwell, SBS Head of Documentaries:**

(In terms of multi-media components) some ideas are going to be deeply, deeply integrated. For example, you can use the audience to help go and uncover (facts) to give you a portrait of Australia; if you wanted them to help be your investigators. That would have to come built into the fabric of the show and it would be very much about how you energise that. Other projects might be a straightforward World War II documentary and people are desperately going *oh we must have multimedia* and I think: *not necessarily, if it's a great show, we'll take it as such*. I'm definitely looking a more projects that can crossfertilise that can be both. Where it absolutely has a life on TV and it absolutely has a life online. And when they all come together they make something bigger than the sum of their parts. My opinion, and this is mine rather than SBS, is that if you've got a project that gets a good viewership on TV and then you and drive them online somewhere, that is such a huge bonus.

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<sup>79</sup> Dr Jane Roscoe interview, 2012

<sup>80</sup> (Quail 2012, 1, 6)

**James Murdoch, CEO 21<sup>st</sup> Century Fox and National Geographic Channels:**

It's not really a linear ratings game anymore; it's about creating demand across platforms, and part of the way to do that is to have programming that is big and commands attention. The last thing you can be in this world is disposable.<sup>81</sup> (21<sup>st</sup> Century Fox purchased a 73% share in National Geographic Society's business holdings including its television networks and digital media).<sup>82</sup>

**Dr Aymar Jean Christian, Assistant Professor, Northwestern University, Illinois:**

What the history of web entertainments shows is that it has never deviated from legacy media, including television, even at its most anarchic and open. Instead television has been an object of desire and abjection for those seeking an edge in online markets.<sup>83</sup>

**Stuart Cunningham, Distinguished Professor QUT and Dr Jon Silver, Senior Lecturer QUT:**

What is going on is a battle for eyeballs – and the corporations best placed to win that battle may not necessarily be the media companies that to-date have dominated the movie and television industries but those firms that control the platforms that deliver content to larger and larger audiences across multiple screens.<sup>84</sup>

**Liz Stevens, Senior Manager Screen Australia Documentary Unit:**

We still need aggregators of material. The broadcasters are in the position to do this because they've already got the brand. In America, Netflix has more subscribers than HBO, so they've just gone straight over the top of the traditional model. They're funding their own programs now and they're putting them all out at once. So, you can watch all of the House of Cards in one sitting if you want to. The trick for documentary is going to be to get in there and get a slice of that market and to grow documentary audiences.

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<sup>81</sup> (Barnes 2016)

<sup>82</sup> ibid

<sup>83</sup> (Christian 2012, 352)

<sup>84</sup> (Silver and Cunningham 2013, 4)

## PART 2 - THE FIVE Ps OF PITCHING

### IT ALL DEPENDS ON THE PITCH!

The funding models discussed in Part 1 may be diverse but they share one significant aspect. None of them, not even the once dependable pre-sale, can work with a single investor. Documentary filmmakers, who use these models, are all working with multiple investors by necessity, not by choice. Convincing multiple partners to invest takes time - re-dedicating valuable production days, weeks and sometimes months to fund-raising and pitching.

It doesn't really matter which funding model you employ or whether you are dealing with a television network or streaming platform. Success with any of them can be won or lost depending on the quality and presentation of the pitch. A clear, concise, persuasive pitch is the secret to signing a licensing deal and successfully funding your documentary film project. The pitching process is especially critical when you are faced with the challenge of locking in multiple partners. That means pitching again and again, sometimes every day for months until the funding is secured.

A pitch is 'a form of words used when trying to persuade someone to buy or accept something'. That's how it is defined in the online Oxford dictionary. People do it every day. Even in the Stone Age, some sort of rudimentary pitch would have preceded and certainly secured a successful trade of flint or food. Although cave dwellers and ancient rocks are not the focus of this book, a good pitch remains the key to the *Holy Grail* in any industry that involves selling. It may be to clinch a deal in real estate, used cars, venture capital, even the world's oldest profession – anything that involves persuading another party to buy your idea or wares. Documentary filmmaking and getting a TV network or on-demand Internet content provider to buy and screen your productions are no exception.

Attaining the desired outcome, whatever it may be, always begins with an engaging pitch. Documentary filmmakers like movie and television screenwriters, market their ideas to broadcasters, investors, funding bodies, s or studios through the process of written and oral pitching. For them, the *Holy Grail* is a pre-sale or a licensing agreement to broadcast or publish their work on television, on-line or in the cinema. Filmmaker and author Nicola Lees describes the ideal pitch as *a succinct document that outlines the narrative, format and approach of a compelling and original idea.*

This pitch should also comprise elements such as the budget, talent or characters that will be filmed and the proposed locations of the shoot. Importantly, a good pitch must indicate that *you understand the remit of the person to whom you are pitching*.<sup>85</sup> In other words, you need to do your homework and find out what exactly the buyers are looking for. Hundreds of pitches cross the desks of network commissioners every month without being afforded a second glance. Australia's leading public broadcaster, ABC TV, commissions about 60 hours of documentary content annually - just 7.5% of the 700-800 pitches it receives each year.<sup>86</sup> In my view, subjecting your pitch to this kind of selection process should come with a warning. Only those with thick skin who can handle rejection should apply.

For the pitcher, the selection process can be ruthless and demoralising. The reality is that many worthwhile ideas end up as victims of the delete button, dumped in the trash bin with all of the other junk mail, with no regard for the pitcher.... not even a *don't call us, we'll call you*. These rejected pitches may be clear, concise and persuasive propositions that would translate into gripping documentaries. Producers may have painstakingly invested a high level of creativity, time, money and emotion to get to this stage. But, none of these matter! For a variety of reasons their pitches fail to grab the reader.

Having an unprepared pitch or no pitch at all is the same as no deal and no money to produce your film or eat. My own experience as a documentary filmmaker draws on the wisdom of a vast range of industry experts and seasoned practitioners. As a result, I've been able to create a model for persuasive pitching. The *5Ps of Pitching* model, illustrated in figure 8, is your pathway to developing and improving your pitching skills. It involves five steps: preparation, practice, perseverance, persuasive presentation and pursuance. The model is the result of years of research and hands-on experience, observations, and interviews with practitioners, commissioning editors and representatives of online funding platforms. The *+RP* is a reminder of the importance of *reflective practice*. Genuine and realistic improvement can only be achieved through reflection on your work and experiences – both good and bad. Through reflective practice, you can analyse and evaluate your performance and any feedback you've received, and determine how you might improve it next time.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> (Lees 2012, 25)

<sup>86</sup> Edwina Waddy interview, 2016

<sup>87</sup> (Ryan and Ryan 2013, 13)



Of course, there are no guarantees that you will get your funding every time. But if you follow and practice the *5Ps of Pitching*, at least you will impress and know that you've given it your best shot.

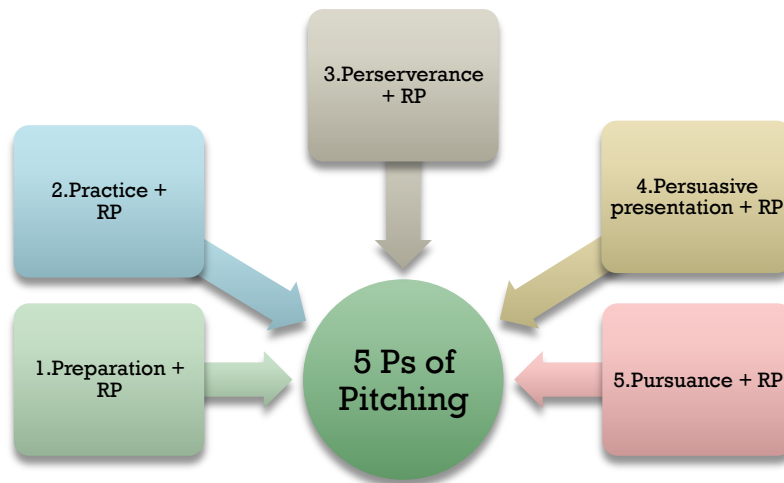


Figure 10. Five phase model of pitching for documentary filmmakers

## 1. PREPARATION

Preparation is the first and most important step in the pitching model. The importance of doing your homework cannot be overstated. You need to be certain your idea hasn't been done before or that no one has beaten you to it. You also need to confirm that your concept for a documentary meets the criteria of the networks or other potential buyers. Researching the ingredients they want in a program is the only way to be certain. The commissioning editors, buyers or other investors need to be sure that you as a practitioner can deliver the film you promise within the allotted timeframe and budget. There is no excuse for failing to do your homework. Screen Australia, the state funding agencies, the ABC, SBS and other networks all have websites with updates on factuals and documentaries in production. These websites provide information on the kind of programs they are looking for, and guidelines on how and to whom you should submit your ideas.

Out of the hundreds and thousands of pitches submitted for consideration, very few make the cut. Most written pitches are emailed and likely to be deleted - banished to the trash bin shortly after being opened.<sup>88</sup> The pitch is either too boring or about a topic that is of no interest to the commissioning editor or investor. It may not fit the planned broadcast schedule; or may focus on a genre the network would never put to air. Alternatively, the pitch may attract attention, but fail to convince the recipient that the filmmaker could deliver what is promised or that the story could sustain an hour in prime viewing time. The list of reasons a pitch may be rejected is endless. The rejection is swift and ruthless with no second chances.

Preparation is to pitching what insurance is to risk. With sound preparation, practitioners can pitch in the knowledge that they have covered all bases. It is the period, when strengths and possible weaknesses of your concept and how they may be overcome are considered. It is the time to canvass and deal with any negatives or possible objections that might be raised - well in advance of the pitch reaching the desk of a potential broadcaster or investor. At best, your pitch will captivate the commissioning editor or investor. At worst, you know you gave it a fighting chance. At this stage, you must decide if the concept is worth reworking and submitting to another broadcaster or buyer. Or should you cut your losses and move on to the next project?

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<sup>88</sup> (Rosenthal 2011, 140)

## 2. PRACTICE

From a practical perspective, it makes sense that dealing with more than one investor or multiple supporters puts a greater burden on the pitching process. In crowdfunding, for example, you may be required to write and present dozens of pitches via video journal to hundreds, perhaps thousands of online investors. In the words of the ancient Corinthian ruler and philosopher Periander *practice does everything*.<sup>89</sup> In the context of written and oral pitching, practice is everything to succeeding in a dynamic industry marketplace.

Not all of us are born communication experts, creative writers or skilled orators. Yet, as documentary filmmakers, we are required to write and present engaging pitches that capture the essence of the story and captivate our audience. For some, the prospect of pitching face to face or presenting to a panel in an industry forum is terrifying. It takes skill to be clear, concise and persuasive especially when you are required to do it within a set and very tight timeframe. Mastering the pitch is a lifelong or at the very least a career-long learning process. It involves developing a collection of skills, self-monitoring, analysis and evaluation as you practise.

Professionals are called upon to perform tasks for which they have not been educated. Professional knowledge is mismatched to the changing character of the situations of practice – the complexity, uncertainty, instability, uniqueness and value conflicts which are increasingly perceived as central to the world of professional practice.<sup>90</sup>

Practice creates new knowledge.<sup>91</sup> Practitioners can use this new knowledge to improve their pitching albeit written or oral. Each practice session followed by reflection will generate new knowledge and enhanced performance. Describing verbal pitching as a critical skill, leading Australian filmmaker Damian Parer recommends rehearsing aloud at least three times.<sup>92</sup> As a pitching practitioner I would argue that numbers should not define practice sessions. Instead practice combined with reflection should be ongoing. Each pitch must first be structured in a written outline or dot points that *maximise its appeals*.<sup>93</sup> These appeals should be

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<sup>89</sup> (Laertius and Hicks 1925)

<sup>90</sup> (Schön 1983, 14)

<sup>91</sup> (McNiff 2013, 38)

<sup>92</sup> (Parer in Jeffrey 2006, 218)

<sup>93</sup> (McCarthy and Hatcher 2002, 69)

based on the research into the network or investor's brief, as well as the filmmaker's interpretation and concept. Rehearsing aloud takes the maximisation of appeals to another level - involving how one looks and sounds:

Your physical presence can help you: if you are physically approachable and comfortable, your listeners can be comfortable and focus on your message. If you use facial expression and gesture, you can add greater meaning and feeling to your presentation.<sup>94</sup>

Practise aloud in front of a mirror and, if possible, in front of a colleague or friend. Practice will help to build confidence and put you at ease.

### 3. PERSEVERANCE

If you are not willing to persevere, you may need to reconsider whether or not you're on the right career path. Perseverance is essential to all phases of the pitching process. But in terms of the *5 Ps of pitching* model, perseverance refers to building on your preparation, and enhancing the written and oral pitching skills accomplished during the practice phase. Perseverance drives the pitching promotion, whether it is aimed at a network, streaming platform, crowdsourcing campaign, philanthropic organisation, social media or a bid for other investment. With the networks commissioning so few documentaries from the thousands of pitches they receive, you must be persuasive and determined. Rejection is not an impasse; it is a signal to reflect and try again. Filmmakers Michael Ney and Tim Maddocks described their crowdfunding campaign as *a burden of being relentless* and *a stretch if you are not used to it*.<sup>95</sup> Raising money online and dealing with thousands of supporters, if done well, may involve a 100-hour working week, that is *intensive and intense*.<sup>96</sup> Taryn Brumfitt's successful *Embrace* project is a tribute to hard work and perseverance, resulting in almost 9000 online pledges raising more than AUD\$330,000. After the crowdfunding campaign ended, Brumfitt's perseverance continued to pay dividends with a Screen Australia grant, a cinema release and online sales. *If you want big*

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<sup>94</sup> *ibid*, 65

<sup>95</sup> (Ney and Maddocks 2012)

<sup>96</sup> (McIntosh 2016, 70)

*results, you have to put in a lot of time and effort.*<sup>97</sup> Brumfitt said she put her life on hold.

#### 4. PERSUASIVE PRESENTATION

In the world of pitching documentary films, the pitch has to connect in the first couple of paragraphs or the first thirty seconds, if it's verbal. The pitch not only has to be engaging, the topic has to be on point, and your treatment of it just what the reader or audience is looking for. Otherwise, forget it. The written version will be binned and the verbal presentation will be cut short abruptly. The solution is to be persuasive. It's a public speaking formula that dates back to 300 BC. Greek philosopher Aristotle espoused *logos, ethos and pathos* as the three critical elements that transform rhetoric into the *art of persuasive or honest communication*.<sup>98</sup> By *ethos*, Aristotle is referring to the credibility of the presenter; *pathos* is the emotional appeal that engages audiences; and *logos* is the logic of the argument being presented.<sup>99</sup>

Television writer Ginny Lowndes, whose credits include *Neighbours* and *Sons and Daughters*<sup>100</sup> advises that *a brilliant presentation of a great idea will help you through the minefield as you seek investors for your project.*<sup>101</sup> Persuasive presentation *stirs the listener to action while making them feel it is reasonable to do so.*<sup>102</sup> It may sound like rhetoric but the concept has a solid theoretical foundation.

(Persuasive presentation) relies on combining the features of two expository text-types: hortatory and analytical exposition. Hortatory texts deploy emotive (affective) writing or speech that appeals to the *heart and soul* of the listener. Analytical texts speak to the mind; they are logical, factual, and rely more on evidence than emotions. The key to persuasive speaking lies in balancing hortatorical and analytical language devices with a logical structure.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Taryn Brumfitt interview, 2016

<sup>98</sup> (Wróbel 2015, 401)

<sup>99</sup> (McCarthy and Hatcher 2002, 28)

<sup>100</sup> (IMDb.com 2016)

<sup>101</sup> (Jeffrey 2006, 159)

<sup>102</sup> (Jetnikoff 2015, 15)

<sup>103</sup> *ibid*

Your pitch has to be passionate and connect emotionally. *Passion equals commitment, so play the emotions card!*<sup>104</sup> These are the words of leading global communication consultant Neil Flett, the creator of the AUD\$8-billion pitch that won Sydney the 2000 Olympics. In an interview with The Age newspaper, Flett says the key is *knowing the audience* and to *never ignore the emotional side of anything you are selling*.<sup>105</sup>

Persuasive speaking is very connected to the audience, as the speaker must, in a sense, meet the audience halfway.<sup>106</sup>

Knowing the audience (commissioning editor/buyer) or specifically knowing what that audience is looking for means the filmmaker is pitching to receptive ears. This should be researched and addressed in the preparation phase and structured into the pitch. When you understand the brief, you fulfil the logos requirement of Aristotle's three elements of persuasive presentation. All that remains is to convince the commissioning editor or buyer that the other two elements are covered: that you have the ethos or industry credibility and the pathos or passion to deliver an engaging documentary.<sup>107</sup> Without a credible track record in the industry, these elements must be demonstrated in another way.

Appearance, facial expression, mannerisms, posture, movement, gestures and eye contact send non-verbal messages. Anxiety may be transferred and cause the audience to lose faith in your credibility.

Breathing is a code that reveals a lot about you and your audience. If your chest is tight and your breathing shallow, listeners read anxiety.<sup>108</sup>

Poor eye contact or a furrowed brow may indicate a lack of assurance. Conversely, good eye contact and a warm expression convey confidence.

Pitching is one of the most challenging and potentially creative communication situations you may ever be in.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> (O'Neill 2005).

<sup>105</sup> *ibid*

<sup>106</sup> (Pitt 2007)

<sup>107</sup> (McCarthy and Hatcher 2002)

<sup>108</sup> *ibid*

<sup>109</sup> *ibid*

Olympic bid pitcher Neil Flett says you must grab people's attention and *be compelling* and *everything you do in a pitch has to demonstrate your ability to deliver*.<sup>110</sup> Time is limited. Filmmakers are often allotted only seven minutes to deliver their pitch, show a sizzle reel or trailer and persuade the recipient to trust them and invest tens, perhaps hundreds, of thousands of dollars in their idea. Talking too much for too long is the antithesis of persuasive presentation and a sure way to turn people off. Too much *extraneous detail* will cloud the rationale and disengage the audience.<sup>111</sup> The most common and by far, the biggest mistake pitchers make is trying to relate their entire story, rather than focusing on the most appealing aspects of it.<sup>112</sup>

## 5. PURSUANCE

Pursuance is the final P of pitching and represents the follow-up phase of the process. It might be last but it's essential. When pitching to a commissioning editor or other buyer, you must be an active listener. That involves listening carefully to feedback, taking it on board, and following up with a brief question or two if there are any grey areas.

If you consistently hear the same concerns or suggestions, go back to the drawing board and address these weaknesses before you continue pitching.<sup>113</sup>

If the feedback is positive, or indicating mild interest, it is important to take the initiative and follow up with a question. You could ask the commissioning editor or other buyer if they have any questions. Or, you could ask them if they'd like a copy of your treatment, or further information? As a practitioner, building contacts is a vital part of the preparation phase and industry practice.

Like the pitching process itself, networking and keeping up with industry developments should be an ongoing exercise.<sup>114</sup> Nurturing these contacts and developing a rapport with them at industry events enhance the filmmakers' credibility and raise their profile in the eyes of the networks and other buyers. Filmmakers are

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<sup>110</sup> (O'Neill 2005)

<sup>111</sup> (McCarthy and Hatcher 2002, 186)

<sup>112</sup> (Hauge 2006)

<sup>113</sup> (Hauge 2006, 103)

<sup>114</sup> (Rosenthal 2011, 172)

advised to carry a business card at all times. It should show their contact details and an indication of the type of programs they produce as a reminder of who they are and what they can do. You should always carry plenty of business cards and *20 per cent more copies of printed material than is estimated.*<sup>115</sup> It's a good idea to send a follow-up email, especially to new contacts, to say that it was great to meet them. You could also send them a request to connect on LinkedIn. This helps to keep track of contacts for future follow-up should they change networks or organisations.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> (Parer in Jeffrey 2006, 220)

<sup>116</sup> (Lees 2012, 43)



## **WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY:**

### **ABC TV:**

We encourage bold storytellers using the filters of relevant, contemporary, challenging, compelling, distinctive and thought provoking. Our programs must inspire and have a reason to exist right now.

[http://www.abc.net.au/tv/independent/factualdocumentary\\_about.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/tv/independent/factualdocumentary_about.htm)

### **SBS:**

Our Charter makes us distinctive and gives us a clear vision, this vision is enhanced by 4 key values: To provoke debate, push boundaries, surprise audiences, and inspire change. This ensures bold and distinctive documentaries that would only play on SBS. We only commission hour long documentaries, either as singles or series.

<http://www.sbs.com.au/shows/commissionedcontent/about/page/i/2/h/Documentaries/>

### **Screen Australia:**

Screen Australia funds the production of everything from features to documentaries, television drama, children's programs and online web series. Sometimes this funding can be the difference between a project getting the green light to go into production or not. Other times, it's a starting point – giving producers the initial support they need to go into the marketplace for more.

<http://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/upcoming-productions#documentary>

### **AIDC, Australian International Documentary Conference:**

Held in March annually, it is a premier event that attracts producers, buyers and screen funding organisations from Australia and overseas. It is a fertile ground for networking, pitching and gleaning industry knowledge, and its website provides a vast range of information and other resources.

AIDC is a not for profit organisation committed to the sustainability of documentary, factual and unscripted storytelling. Its goal is to connect creators, purveyors and viewers of non-fiction screen content in ways that promote business, inspire creativity and ignite social change.

<https://www.aidc.com.au>

## PART 3 – *LET'S DO IT!*

It's clear from what the experts say that there is more to a pitch than a brief summary or verbal presentation. The story concept being pitched must meet the network or investor's brief. There is no point trying to pitch a non-story or a story that is too weak. Your concept must be emotionally engaging and strong enough to hold audiences for the nominated duration. It may be a new story such as a discovery or scientific breakthrough, an innovative twist on a known subject, unique access into an unknown world or topic; or it might have a *special* quality or narrative that the commissioning editors can't resist.

Once you feel confident that you've ticked the right boxes, it's time to turn your attention to other necessary components: content, talent, locations, logistics, crew and equipment, pre and postproduction costs, additional effects, background music and budget. It may seem premature and a waste of time having to source all of this detailed information pre-pitch. However, preparation, planning and knowledge of all facets of the proposed documentary will increase your confidence and credibility when it comes to writing and presenting your pitch. For example, it would be pitch-suicide to promise a buyer characters and locations you have no permission to film or that you cannot deliver.

### GET YOUR TIMING RIGHT

Effective pitching has a lot in common with planned baby making. If you want it to happen, you need impeccable timing as well as the means and mode, a few good lines and an injection of passion. Understanding and recognising the fertile phases are fundamental to success. Documentary filmmakers face similar challenges. Lees puts it very succinctly. They must 'target the right person at the right organisation at the right moment in their funding cycle'. Being aware of, and, making a note of key deadlines in network commissioning and funding agency cycles are as critical as researching the type of programs with which the networks hope to fill their planned schedules. Information on the genre and style of programs they want and when they are procuring can usually be found on the websites of networks and screen funding bodies, or by attending industry information sessions and conferences. If all else fails, you can always call or email the commissioning editors or their assistants. Identifying and getting to know these industry insiders and what they do, will help budding filmmakers compile a network of contacts.

Figure 11. **PITCHING – THE BASIC INGREDIENTS**

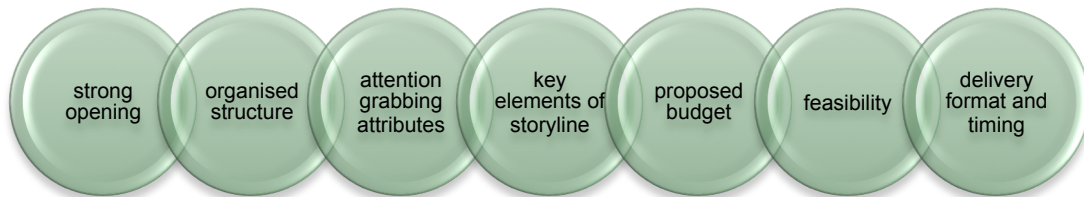
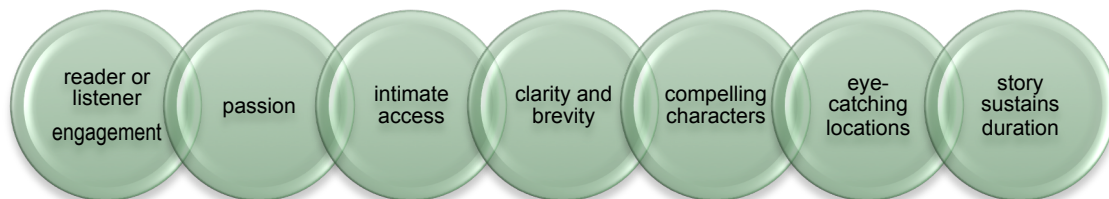


Figure 12. **PITCHING – THE SPECIAL INGREDIENTS**



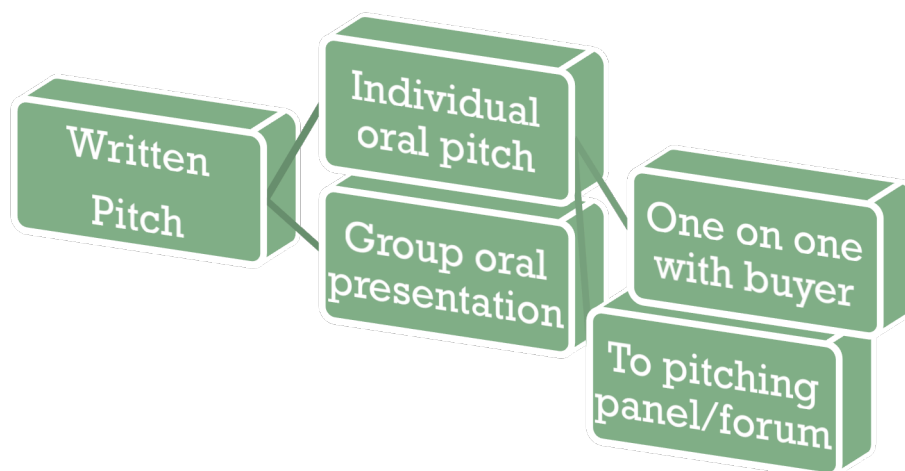
## THE GOOD PITCH

The aim of your pitch is to grab the attention of a potential investor, network representative or buyer. Two things are certain: first, they are busy people; and, second, they receive hundreds perhaps thousands of pitches a year.

Assuming you have done your homework, you should know the program slots and the types of documentaries or shows they seek to fill their schedule. Experience and research confirm they want concepts and stories that stand out from the rest, such as an insight into a new discovery, an innovative twist on an existing theme, or intimate access into a world that hasn't yet been explored. Alternatively, the narrative may be told using new or different filmmaking techniques.

Most importantly, your pitch must demonstrate why your concept should be considered above all others. What sets it apart? Try to look at the story objectively. If you feel you are too emotionally invested, run it by some other people especially those who fit the demographic of the proposed target audience. Ask them questions. What interests them most about the story? What are the aspects of it they find engaging? Are they excited about the subject, the mystery, the discovery, the impact it will make, or the characters, locations or special effects? Make a note of your findings. Based on your findings, choose the most powerful characteristics to write in your pitch.

Figure 13. Pitching Styles



## PITCHING STYLES

Traditionally, a pitch can be written or oral, although the starting point for both is a composition of words on a keyboard, note pad or a coaster. If you happen to run into a commissioning editor or buyer who is receptive to a chat and expresses interest in your project, don't let the opportunity pass. If you are caught without a copy of your pitch, explain your concept informally, making sure you highlight what sets it apart. Jot down a line or two about it as a reminder. Don't forget to include your contact details, and arrange to follow up with the written version of the pitch and your treatment of the concept as soon as possible.

NOTE: Whatever you do, respect the commissioning editor or buyer's right to privacy and to enjoy their downtime. Don't barge in with your pitch, especially if they are in conversation with others or clearly do not wish to be interrupted.

Pitching a documentary concept is a lot like pitching a drama. You are expected to provide a range of summaries about your project. Though some may find this a tedious chore, the process can help identify and articulate the 'fundamental essence of a project's story'.<sup>117</sup> In the context of the documentary marketplace, the pitch is likely to be a brief, but engaging spiel about the storyline, characters and merit of the project. In the written form, it is expected to be a one to two page synopsis, which includes the budget and delivery format. In the oral form, it can be presented to potential buyers during a formal pitching forum, an impromptu buttonholing of the right person, often referred to as the *elevator pitch*, or a speed-dating style event. Ideally, documentary filmmakers prefer to pitch their projects to the most likely buyers in a private one on one meeting.

A written pitch can be emailed or handed to a potential buyer - the designated person from the intended broadcasting or online pay-on-demand streaming network, who is in charge of commissioning. From the pitcher's perspective, it is the frontline, the first hurdle to be conquered. From the network's perspective, it is one of thousands of pitches that will either live or die in the first cull. In pitching, nothing can be assumed. Your pitch must be thoroughly prepped, creative, clear, concise and intrepid. In the words of the *Star Trek* opening sequence, the aim is *to boldly go where no man (or woman) has gone before*.

If you've ever submitted a pitch to either the ABC or SBS, chances are it may have been considered or rejected by commissioning decision makers Edwina Waddy

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<sup>117</sup> (Brindley 2009)

(ABC) or Joseph Maxwell (SBS). Both are experienced commissioning editors and former filmmakers. Now, they will reveal what they look for and why so many pitches fail to impress.

## **INTERVIEW**

Edwina Waddy is Channel Manager ABC2, former Commissioning Editor, TV Factual and an Executive Producer in ABC Development. Waddy has considered thousands of pitches in her career. Only a small percentage makes the cut.

### **What do you look for in a good pitch?**

There're a couple of fundamental things and there are a couple of things, which are dependent on who you're looking for. I'm at the ABC so I'm looking for ABC type shows. For documentary, the two key things are story and character. A lot of the pressure for a broadcaster is finding – you're looking for half hour stories or hour-long stories or series. So you're looking for stories that will cover a number of hours. Very often, you'll get pictures and they'll say they've found a great character; they've got this amazing backstory but they're not necessarily that strong on what's going to happen – moving forward. So it's always about what's the story that you want to tell and has it got enough in it to get you through the amount of screen time we're looking to commission for?

### **With the pitches, it's about the story, the characters and whether the story has legs and can move forward?**

It's also about what the story is telling us. What's the idea that the story wants to explore? Is it an idea that people would be curious about and want to know more? Then it's about how the filmmaker wants to tell that story and unpack that idea. It's also about the film maker's approach to the subject area. You're looking at a whole range of things at the same time:

- Who are the people who are going to take us through this story?
- What is the story?
- How does the filmmaker want to tell it?
- What's the kind of territory?
- What's that territory telling us?
- Is it telling us something that we haven't heard before?
- Is it an idea that is really familiar to us or is it a new take on a familiar idea?
- Is there something that gives it currency?

### **Apart from the story and the characters, what is it about a written pitch that makes it good for you?**

Well written. It's seems obvious. It should be clear, concise, with an understanding of what the idea is. *What do you want to do? What is the story you want to tell?* Writing

a two-page or even a paragraph synopsis about a film is one of the hardest things to do in terms of: *What is this film really about? What do I want to say? How do I get people interested in it?* It is not an easy thing to sit down and do, to write a synopsis or a 2, 3-4 page outline of your film. It requires a good deal of thought; but I do think being able to nail what the film is about and what it wants to be, is important.

**When you get these written pitches, am I right in saying you don't want the filmmaker to give you every detail of the story?**

You wouldn't be able to tell the whole thing. But sometimes you get people who want to cover a process that's going on or that people are going to undergo - some form of program that's happening. So you'll very often say: *What's going to happen in that program? What are we going to see? What are the milestones in that program that you want to capture? How will we know how the people are going.* So it's about trying to get to the nuts and bolts of where the story might turn.

**What other essentials should be in the pitch – practical things that you might like to know, for example?**

We ask for the creatives, the CVs of the key creative. We ask for the synopsis. We ask whether they're asking for development or commission, and the timeline. We actually don't ask for a budget as a prerequisite to pitch. They don't need to have that straight up, but they do need to know what the budget parameters might be. The pitch needs to fit a broad spectrum of what the budget might be.

**What turns you off?**

Turnoffs – when people submit a book. They say they've just read this book and it would make a great documentary, and they submit the book. That is quite a challenge because, no, we don't read books. I mean it might be a great book, but you tell us how you would turn it into telly. I do get a lot of family histories from people. Of course, we accept ideas from everyone, not just experienced producers or people who want to be producers. A lot of the time, the ideas are quite small.

**When you're reading these pitches, are you putting yourself in the shoes of the target audience - thinking how would they react to this story?**

I think so. What you're trying to do is assess what an audience would find interesting or entertaining or educational in inverted commas. You're trying to put yourself in their shoes to some extent. I think that one of the tensions of the job is *to what extent?*

Taste is always one thing that comes up in these decisions, in terms of personal taste. Everything is subjective to some extent but you can't be bound by personal preferences.



**Do you sometimes go for something that doesn't appeal to your personal taste, but you think it will translate well to your audience?**

YES you would. It's hard to articulate the dance you have to do.

**Is pitching a documentary like any other sales pitch?**

Yes, it is selling. The other thing is a person pitches to me, and the pitching process never stops. The idea starts and it moves on. You have to sell it to investors or commissioners. We have to get it signed off here so we have to get other people to buy into the idea; and then we all have to get the audience to buy into the idea. It's about ideas and trying to get people to buy into your story.

**How far ahead do you plan to fit within your schedule?**

Being a broadcaster, we've got a schedule and the head of department works with the controller of each of the channels and they're thinking very much about what's going in to the schedule. At the moment, we still work in a world where we have prime time and there are half hour slots and hour-long slots and that's what we commission. Every so often, we'll commission shorter form things. We've got something going out now which is 10 minutes long, but that's quite unusual.

In terms of time frames, our time frames are more dictated by how long it takes to get a documentary financed, commissioned and made, and ready to go to air. We're often thinking 12 months, 18 months, and two years out in terms of when things will become ready. Sometimes, they are finished sooner than that, but often it can take a long time. The timeslots for documentary generally sit at 8.30 or 9.30 pm in the schedule. We also have an 8 o'clock slot. The timeslots for documentaries are usually determined by controllers or programmers. It's also a question of resources. When you look at your commissioning budget, where do you put those resources, and we put them into prime time. And, we put them into half hour or hour long shows or series.

**When a written pitch is submitted, who looks at it?**

It's me and it's the commissioning editor. Every idea is read by two people. The process is the pitch comes into the building, it is logged onto a data base, a copy goes to me and a copy goes to the relevant commissioning editor. We both read them, then we meet and discuss what we're going to do. Once we've made a decision, we get back to the producer with a yes or a no.

I do always say to filmmakers that the best thing they can do is their homework on the broadcaster. When I worked in my previous job at Channel 4, knowing what broadcasters are looking for and knowing what they put out, what they have already

covered is important. That's a big job for a producer especially when you're working on your own material, but even if you just read the guide every week.

## **INTERVIEW**

Joseph Maxwell is Head of Documentaries SBS, a former Commissioning Editor SBS and independent filmmaker in Britain. He reveals what he looks for in a pitch and how SBS differs from the ABC.

### **What advice do you have for documentary filmmakers who wish to pitch to SBS?**

What I've really found at SBS, is tailoring your idea to the channel. Far too often you get the kind of generic idea that is to a generic channel. Well, you're not a generic, you have a very specific purpose and position within the market. You must make sure the idea works to that.

### **Is pushing the boundaries a criterion?**

Absolutely, yes. It's fundamental for us. The fact is we are a very small broadcaster in a very busy multi channel world. I think, for us, the future lies in finding ways to make big issues of multicultural Australia come to life and captivate an audience above and beyond our normal staple audience. And pushing boundaries is a great way to do that. *Yes, please do push boundaries; please do take risks; please do spark debate; please do surprise your audiences as well.* And that's a tricky thing to do, as well as not to go: *Oh yes SBS is doing that predictable rant on x, y or z,* and for us to give it a freshness. So I think SBS is slightly different in that way, and I think we are an interesting hybrid broadcaster. I feel, that we do programs that absolutely speak to our charter but also hit a broad audience, as they can punch out and engage people on multi cultural issues.

### **What do you think are the elements of a good pitch?**

Well, first of all, you absolutely come in knowing your broadcaster. That is my first rule. I am amazed how many pitches I get that actually do physically say ABC on the top of them. You know, it is just like the cardinal sin. You must at least have the decency to make a quick check and make sure that's not in there. But really when it's there, yes it pisses me off because I see it there, but more, it's telling me this hasn't been tailored to us. We have a purpose and the ABC has a purpose and National Geographic has a purpose we are very different. We all have clear identities and being clear on what each broadcaster is trying to do is fundamental to that.

Secondly, I think, you can get a divergence really. You could just come in with that kernel of a really interesting idea. I remember someone was talking to Channel 4 about how they were going to crash a plane into the desert. That was their pitch. It

was an extraordinary idea, which looks at the science of what happens when a plane crashes. But instead of doing it all as history doc, the story was actually taking it and crashing it - a huge, big, loud stunt. So you can either come in with an interesting one liner that can grab things and have potency and a power for me.

The other way is to come in with a brilliant trailer, especially if it's built around talent, built around access. And that is certainly something we have been pitched - an idea called *The Network*, which is from Oscar Winning Producer Eva Orner. She was pitching an idea about Afghanistan and what swayed us was when we looked at her reel of what the story was in Afghanistan, it gave the whole idea of the tone.

**What is the worst thing you can do in a pitch?**

I think the worst thing is to come in with a ten-page document. I think the final point then would be to have a dialogue and I think the good production companies maintain a dialogue with broadcasters. They know what's happening; they understand the changing needs; they are looking at how badly certain nights are failing or doing well or what's going well; and they maintain that dialogue. So it is not necessarily one pitch out of the blue every year, it is more of a regular conversation.

**What are some of the other important factors to consider when preparing your pitch?**

I think, very often, people concentrate on a subject area without thinking how to tackle that. And for me, that's what has been fascinating moving from being an independent producer to working for a broadcaster. What you are really looking at is something that can break out. A great example of that is here at SBS where we are incredibly focused on one thing, which is our multicultural charter. That's what all of our factual commissioning is about. And they give us a real vision and a real strategy. It's also a real difficulty as well in how you keep that being invigorated and fresh and new. And *Going back to where you came from* is a really good example of that. When that came in, it's the same subject matter, immigration, asylum seekers, the same hysterical fear you get in the mainstream tabloid media about it, but tackled it in such a different way that it reaches a bigger, broader audience. Having those really clever moments where you can really turn things on its head in a new way and explore the film in different ways, is what the key ingredient is in either getting that commission or not.

**Would you rule out a fantastic idea if you don't have a slot?**

Well firstly SBS is a bit different. We have so few hours we don't really commission to slots as much. It is not as if we are trying to fill every single Monday night with factual because we haven't got enough commissioning hours to do so. So we're slightly different. I think if you come along with a good enough, big enough, exciting enough idea, we will find a way to make it work. Having said that, I think many broadcasters

are very risk averse, it's one thing we really try and embrace actually - saying *God! Can we do that? It's a really interesting idea!*

**At what point do you know a pitch (either written or verbal) has won you over?**

I get so excited when a good pitch comes in, there is an immediate tingle and normally I have to suppress enthusiasm just to kind of think, am I getting over excited by something here? But normally there's an immediate impact; there's an immediate buzz when something does get you - especially when I question if we can actually do that and that goes back to us wanting to take risks and that's what's great in this job. I recently had a couple of pitches that came in, and it was great to have two in quick succession, where I did think *Can we really do that?* When you start to ask that question, it's because you think *Excellent, let's try and tackle it.* So it is normally a pretty instantaneous thing.

## WHEN YOU WRITE YOUR PITCH

Pitch writing has to be succinct, positive and dynamic. Overall, the language of the pitch should be plain English. The tone should be conversational. It must have a *hook* to catch and keep your readers. The hook should be in the first sentence. What is a hook, you may ask? It is the *special something* that makes the reader or the listener want to read or hear the whole story. It may be an extraordinary fact, the promise of a mysterious quest, or an intimate look inside a strange world. The fact that the outcome of the quest is unknown is not a disadvantage. Rather, it may be used to tantalize and intensify interest. In creating a hook, you must understand the network or investor's brief and the target audience.

Remember, to use active voice as opposed to passive. Active voice is stronger, more direct, and usually more concise than passive. The inclusion of the word *by* can often be used to identify a passive sentence.

*Example:*

*I love you!* (active voice)

*You are loved by me.* (passive voice)

Active voice is positive. Strunk and White in *The Elements of Style* say that:

The habitual use of the active voice makes for forcible writing. The is true not only in narrative concerned principally with action but in writing of any kind. Make definite assertions. Avoid tame, colourless, hesitating, noncommittal language. Use the word *not* as a means of denial or in antithesis, never as a means of evasion.

*Example:*

*He usually came late.*

*He was not very often on time.*<sup>118</sup>

The first sentence in the example is better than the second. The first is clear, to the point, and more assertive, as opposed to the second one, which sounds negative and diluted.

Most networks require documentary producers to include the following in their pitch submission, including the working title of the project:

1. A one liner or logline – a captivating, concise *bottom line* summary of the story and issue, which makes the reader want more;
2. one paragraph synopsis – an engaging summary that connects on an

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<sup>118</sup> (Strunk Jr and White 1979, 18-19)

emotional level. It reveals the leading character/s, issue or conflict, the impact of it and briefly, how the filmmaker will deal with it;

3. one page proposal or pitch – as above, plus the broader implications of the story (it may be a local story that relates to a global audience). This page should include why the story is so important to the filmmaker and the audience. It should end with a brief paragraph of the format, crew, location and budget.

These summaries should not give away the conclusion. The proposed journey, the conflict faced by the character/s and the anticipation of not knowing how it will end translate to audience engagement.

If you have some compelling vision of a character or the location, you should send a video clip with your pitch submission. At this stage of the pitching process, there is no need to submit a full treatment of the documentary. The network will request one if your pitch is successful.

Ideally, a pitch should be no more than one or two pages. Submitting too many pages is risky. The pitch may be overlooked because it is too time-consuming to read. Alternatively, it may take too long to get to the point and fail to engage the reader. The commissioning editor or buyer may skim the first page and dismiss it without reaching the best part.

## THE LOGLINE

If someone asked you what your documentary concept is about, your logline should contain the answer in one sentence. In addition to summing up the narrative, it should include the main character, the challenge or conflict, and why your story is unique. This is not an easy task. In many ways keeping your summary concise is more difficult than writing a long description. It is a skill that takes practice. You have to fight any desire to tell the whole story. Instead, you have to focus on reducing it to a sentence. Not a long convoluted sentence or a wishy-washy truncated one. Your logline must tantalise the readers and hook them into wanting more.

Which of the following loglines do you think is better and why?

*A. An Australian farmer discovers a dinosaur bone while herding sheep.*

*B. An Australian sheep farmer stumbles on a rare dinosaur bone that convinces scientists he is living on a prehistoric graveyard.*

The first example A. sums up the story concisely. The second B. is better because it

takes the story further – enticing us with the notion of giant creatures thundering across the land where sheep now graze calmly. The words in B. paint a more vivid picture.

## ONE PARAGRAPH SYNOPSIS

The one paragraph synopsis expands on the logline. Instead of one sentence, you are expected to write a summary of three or four. These sentences include the *hook* or most compelling part of the film and provide a brief description of the narrative.

*Example:*

*Monsters of the Outback is the story of a laidback Aussie farmer who stumbles on a large mysterious bone while rounding up sheep. The bone is identified as part of the leg of a giant sauropod, which once thundered across the plains where sheep now graze. The discovery leads palaeontologists on an extraordinary quest to find what they believe is a dinosaur graveyard under the farm.*

## ONE TO TWO PAGE PITCH

A pitch proposal or outline for a documentary is different from a drama. The latter is a storyboard of sequences or blocks of action, each one building on the one before and leading (in a chain of cause and effect) to the next', presented in three to eight pages.<sup>119</sup> A documentary proposal includes the essential questions (who, what, when, where, and how), and is written as a one to two page pitch.

The following template in Figure. 14 is an example designed to help you identify the essential components and highlights of the story, then distil them into a clean, clear and emotionally engaging pitch. At the same time, you must build the character/s and location scenes by painting pictures with your words. First, give your project a working title. This may change as you progress further into the production. You may come up with a catchier title or the commissioning editor or buyer might have a worthwhile suggestion. Then consider the following questions. By this stage of the preparation phase, you should have enough information to answer them.

1. What is the issue? Who does it involve?

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<sup>119</sup> (Brindley 2009)

2. What is the impact of the discovery, the conflict or dilemma?
3. What are the wider implications?
4. Why must this story be told?
5. What are the logistics of production: format, CGI, locations and budget?



A FORMULA FOR SUCCESS

Figure 14. Template for preparation of a one page written pitch

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Working Title: <i>Monsters of the Outback</i></b></p> <p><b>1. WHAT IS THE ISSUE? WHO DOES IT INVOLVE?</b></p> <p><i>A farmer, alone in the outback of Australia, herding his sheep on his motorbike, stumbles into a massive bone.</i></p> <p><i>He is a typical laid-back Aussie with a dry sense of humor who is quietly staggered by the find. It doesn't resemble any animal he's ever seen. The sheep are oblivious but he knows it's big.</i></p> <p><b>2. WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF THE DISCOVERY, CONFLICT OR DILEMMA?</b></p> <p><i>Paleontologists at the museum say it belongs to a giant sauropod – which would've stood a couple of storeys high. They want to bring in heavy earthmoving equipment and dig up the farm.</i></p> <p><b>3. WHAT ARE THE WIDER IMPLICATIONS?</b></p> <p><i>Scientists believe that dozens of these prehistoric creatures are buried deep beneath these paddocks where sheep now graze.</i></p> <p><b>4. WHY MUST THIS STORY BE TOLD?</b></p> <p><i>It's the biggest dinosaur ever discovered in Australia. The challenge of unearthing the rest of the skeleton is unprecedented - requiring heavy earth-moving machinery in a remote, striking outback location.</i></p> <p><b>5. WHAT ARE THE LOGISTICS - FORMAT, CGI, LOCATIONS AND BUDGET?</b></p> <p><i>52 minute documentary, to be filmed in HD, using cranes and helicopter in remote sheep grazing plains. Extensive CGI (computer graphic imagery) to bring the dinosaurs to life in the Cretaceous Period. Budget AUD\$600,000.</i></p>
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## TREATMENT

The treatment is how you plan to tell your story, so that the commissioning editor or buyer can imagine how it might unfold. This is not always easy with documentaries, because we may not know how they will end – what the film will discover or fail to find. The treatment will describe the characters, their connection to the issue, any conflict or dilemmas, and the locations. It should evoke passion and be told in a personal way. Like the synopsis and the pitch, the treatment should be written in a conversational tone with an active voice.

The document itself is expected to be longer than a one to two page pitch, up to ten pages. It should address the following:

- expected development of the story - how it might unfold;
- brief description of the lead characters and their perspective;
- presenter-led or narration;
- locations;
- creative team;
- format;
- timeframe;
- archival vision;
- production music or original score;
- special effects – CGI;
- evidence that you have addressed any logistical issues – foreign languages, locations or potential ethical problems.

A drama treatment is similar, though longer. It should show that the filmmaker has a strong concept worthy of being produced and screened and that the writer is capable of delivering a winning script. In a drama treatment:

It is quite legitimate to state motive and describe thoughts and emotions. In the screenplay and the movie, of course, these things must be inferred from what is seen and heard.<sup>120</sup>

There are differing views on whether or not to include the technical aspects. Some suggest they may kill the feel of the treatment. Certainly, if the documentary is to feature special effects such as CGI, or rare archival vision, then that would be a highlight worth mentioning. I would suggest keeping all of the other technical

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<sup>120</sup> (Brindley 2009)

information very brief and at the end of the treatment.

Screen Australia describes the treatment as a *statement of intent*. The agency recommends that the documentary treatment should *specify interviews, reconstructions, archival footage, photographs, maps, diagrams and graphics*.

Generally, a treatment is submitted on request, once a commissioning editor or other buyer has expressed interest in your pitch.

*(EXAMPLES TO BE ADDED)*

## WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY

### **Alan Rosenthal, filmmaker and author of *Succeeding as a Documentary Filmmaker*:**

A proposal is, first and foremost, a device to sell your film. Somehow you have to grab the attention of a jaded commissioning editor. You use your strongest hook or bait. In the opening lines of the proposal, I deliberately wanted to tantalize the readers. You are not writing a term paper. Nor are you writing for a learned magazine. Instead, keep your language punchy and short, and use strong colorful adjectives to add flavor.<sup>121</sup>

### **Screen Australia:**

The treatment, or project description, is more about how the story will be presented. It may include background information, details about the key protagonists, information about access to subjects and locations, the visual approach and a director's statement.<sup>122</sup>

### **Wilma De Jong, Eric Knudsen and Jerry Rothwell, scholars and authors of *Creative Documentary*:**

(The approach is) a description of how you are going to realise the film. Be specific about the film's tone, its focus and its technical requirements. If the film offers something unusual – for example, a particular approach to CGI or a narration told in song or verse, support this by describing who will be involved and their proven expertise in these areas.<sup>123</sup>

### **Lightsfilmschool.com**

A treatment could be written as if you have already finished your documentary and now you're looking back and giving a description of what happened. If you do this, your expectations and story ideas will be written and therefore visualized. This is a great place from which to launch your documentary project, and it will help you better understand the three dimensional shape of your intended film.

<https://www.lightsfilmschool.com/blog/how-to-write-a-documentary-treatment/335>

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<sup>121</sup> (Rosenthal 2011, 43-45)

<sup>122</sup> <https://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/getmedia/3c3cf703-5b9f-488f-96d2-d2959d874fa9/Pitching-a-documentary-project.pdf?ext=.pdf>

<sup>123</sup> (De Jong, Knudsen and Rothwell 2014, 68)

**Edwina Waddy, Channel Manager ABC2, former Commissioning Editor, TV Factual and Executive Producer, ABC Development:**

The synopsis is very useful because it's like a discipline and it does make you drill down into what the film is about. A lot of the time people give you background or context, and that can be important when you're looking at a film and trying to work out the currency of the idea. But often you can find that too much time is spent on the background and not enough on what is actually going to happen in the film.

For contemporary stories, people say *oh we don't know what the ending is; we don't know what's going to happen; how do we know?* And that's fair enough. We don't always know and that's the wonderful thing about life. If you're the filmmaker, you must have an idea as to why this film is interesting and what you think might happen. You can give us a range of different outcomes as to where this story will finish and that's great. But we need to know why you think something is going to happen here and if you're going to have enough to be able to cover and to bring this story to fruition. You smell that there's a story, so what do you think is going to happen?

**Joseph Maxwell, Head of Documentaries SBS, former Commissioning Editor SBS and independent filmmaker in Britain:**

For me I would like to see something condensed onto one page or even one paragraph for that first pitch. I think they need to sell you on the idea on one page. Later, (on request) absolutely send me ten pages or more. I think it makes most people's heart sink (to receive multiple pages) because we do get a lot of submissions and you really want to get to the core of it. You need them to be selling it to you well and if they can't do that in one page then you do become concerned. I would say be concise. I would normally prefer verbal pitches, meeting someone and seeing their passion, excitement and interest is normally stronger than email. Having said that, projects have come through to me in email and I've absolutely fell in love with them.

**Andrea Phillips, Author *A Creator's Guide to Transmedia Storytelling: How to Captivate and Engage Audiences across Multiple Platforms*:**

The one big question you need to answer in your pitch is this: *What's in it for me?* If you're pitching to a TV channel or movie studio, for example, the people you're talking to will be looking for a strong story concept, and evidence that it can find an audience. You'll need to make sure that you're communicating your storytelling chops effectively.

## WHEN YOU PRESENT YOUR PITCH

An oral pitch should first be put in writing. Follow the recommendations for writing a pitch on pages 70-71, using the template on page 74. That way, you can decide what to include or delete. You can reflect on what you have written and amend it. Or, you can think on it for a few hours, even overnight, and revisit it with fresh eyes. In my experience, that separation from the document allows you to be more objective the next time you read it. To look at it objectively, put yourself in the shoes of a commissioning editor or buyer. This will help you decide what works and what doesn't. *If you were the commission editor, would the story excite you? Does this pitch compel you to want more?*

You should write and present your pitch as if you are talking to one person. This is a device to help you connect with each and every person in the audience. Importantly, your pitch must be written in conversational language - for the ear, rather than the eye. The written pitch has to work when spoken. If it sounds like you are reading a financial story in a newspaper aloud, you need to rework it.

The way to find out is to try reading your pitch aloud. Then read it again, as if you are in conversation with someone who has asked you what your film is about. Think about emphasising important points and pausing as if to gauge the listener's reaction. Practise your pitch aloud in front of the mirror. When you feel comfortable, try pitching to a friend, colleague or family member. Ideally you should video record yourself so that you can reflect on your performance and improve on it for next time. You will gain confidence as you become familiar with the content, and more relaxed in your delivery.

Persuasive and successful verbal pitching takes skill. The only way to develop these skills is to learn from those involved in the pitching process. Commissioning editors and investors can tell you what they look for in a pitch; and, practitioners can share their experiences, good and bad. It is vital that you take note of this advice. But the real growth occurs through practice, then reflecting on your performance. *How did you come across? Were you engaging enough? What worked well? And, are there any aspects of your pitch that could be better?* The knowledge you gain through your reflection on practice will help you improve the next time you practice your pitch. Whenever you get the opportunity to attend a pitching forum and observe practitioners in action, take it. If you're feeling confident enough, you should participate to gain some hands-on experience. Otherwise, go along to take notes and

reflect, not only on the pitching performances and content of the pitches, but also on the responses from the audience.

### YOUR BODY TALKS TOO

Your mouth may be doing the pitch, but your body is sending its own messages to the audience. Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, very wisely said: *Though we may lie with our lips, betrayal oozes out of us at every pore*. In other words, our body language can reveal what we truly think, in spite of what we say. These non-verbal signals can send quite powerful messages. We might swear we aren't nervous, but our sweaty brow and shaky hands tell a different story. In fact, our body language can tell an audience if we are anxious, overly confident, unprepared, untrustworthy, out of our depth, or lack credibility. Likewise, the way we speak – the tone of voice, the pace, pitch or the volume can add to, or take away from, the content of our pitch.

In fact, presenting a *persuasive* oral pitch depends on both your body language and your speech working in harmony. It's important that they're on the same page. That page must also include Aristotle's three elements of persuasive presentation - *pathos, ethos and logos*. Your audience can determine whether or not you have the passion, the integrity and the ability to deliver the project, through your non-verbal signals as well as your words.

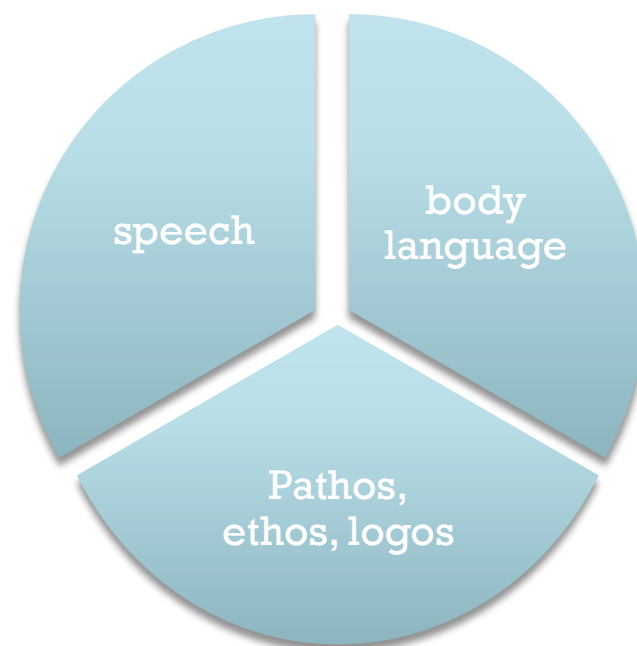


Figure 15. Anatomy of a Persuasive Oral Pitch Presentation

Figure 15 illustrates the relationship between body language, speech and Aristotle's three elements of persuasive presentation - *pathos*, *ethos*, and *logos*. The question is how to get the non-verbals and verbals to work together and deliver the goods, with Aristotle's extras. In the next section, the characteristics and devices of body language and speech are broken down. I have drafted a list of the devices with a description of what they do; and, how you can use them to enhance your presentation.

### SPEECH

Modulation	Modulation gives your voice light and shade, and reflects the meaning of what you are saying. By altering the level of volume and power in your voice from high or low or vice versa, you can change the meaning of your presentation. When people speak loud and fast, it can give the impression of anger or brashness.
Projection	Consider the location of your presentation. If you are pitching in a forum or before a panel, you need to project your voice so it can be heard. (It does not mean you should shout at the audience.) In a face-to-face meeting, there is no need to throw your voice. You should speak clearly using a relaxed jaw and mouth. If they are tight, you will mumble and your words will be difficult to understand. Remember, to breathe deeply from the diaphragm and fill your lungs with air. Shallow breathing will leave you out of breath and straining your voice to reach the end of your presentation.
Emphasis	Emphasising the highlights or key points of your presentation can be done using the pitch or volume of your voice. My preference is to pause before and after the part that needs to be stressed.
Tone	Our voice tone is created when our vocal chords vibrate, and the vibration passes through the body's resonating chambers such as the chest, head and mouth. In a pitching presentation, your tone should be warm and friendly, underpinned with passion and energy.
Pitch	The pitch of your voice is determined by how low or high it is. It too can impact on how you are perceived. A high squeaky voice could indicate a lack of credibility or nervousness, whereas a low-pitched delivery may sound serious or dull. If the voice is constantly low and slow or monotone, it will turn people off. Ideally, you should vary the pitch of your voice, and drop it at the end of a sentence.



Pause	Pause can be used to emphasise and to give your audience time to take in what you've said. In conversation with a friend, you don't just talk at them <i>ad infinitum</i> , you pause to gauge their reaction. It is the same when presenting either face-to-face or in front of an audience. The pause is also a device to reflect momentarily and change your delivery, if you sense your message is not hitting the mark.
Pace	Your pace should be comfortable so that your audience easily understands your presentation. Neither too fast nor too slow, it should fall somewhere in the middle. If your pitching presentation is governed by a time limit, do not rush or slow right down. Edit your pitch accordingly.

### BODY LANGUAGE

Appearance	You should look the part. Consider the environment and the person/s you will be pitching to. What sort of image do you wish to portray – the savvy businessperson, the arty filmmaker, or the professional who can deliver? The main consideration is to have credibility. That doesn't mean you have to wear a power suit. It means you should look clean, tidy, and professional, (though not necessarily as a white-collar worker). Wearing sunglasses in a meeting isn't cool. It makes you look like you have something to hide. Eye contact is vital to good communication. If your hair is long, keep it out of your eyes.
Stance	Be mindful of your posture, especially if you are standing while presenting your pitch. Round stooped shoulders can look like you lack confidence, whereas a rigid military stance could appear arrogant or uptight. Keep your feet firmly on the ground; stand up straight with your arms by your side and relax.
Breathing	Rapid shallow breathing comes across as being nervous. If people think you are nervous, they will have less confidence in your ability to deliver. Deep diaphragmatic breathing takes practice, but it can make a significant difference to your physical appearance as well as your oral presentation.
Mannerisms	Fidgeting, tapping your pen on the desk, touching your face, flicking your hair and any other repetitive behavior are distracting and irritating to watch. It's important to check for these mannerisms by presenting in front of the mirror or recording yourself on video. Then work on eliminating them.

Eye contact	Blinking, eye rolling or worse, avoiding eye contact, are annoying mannerisms that need to be controlled because they send the wrong message. Good steady eye contact instills credibility and trust.
Facial expression	Be relaxed and smile when you meet and greet people or present in an industry context. Make a habit of exercising your jaw and face muscles to keep them from tensing or locking up. Opening your mouth wide in a yawning action is one way to do. A fixed or tight jaw will impact on your facial expression and your speaking ability. You will look tense and if the lips are clenched, the words may be mumbled.
Movement & gesture	Keep your arms relaxed and by your side when presenting in front of an audience. If you tend to express yourself with your hands, try not to overdo it as it may distract from your message. Likewise, don't contrive hand gestures or movements. Be natural. Record yourself and reflect and adjust your movements and gestures accordingly. Remember less is more.

## INTERVIEW

Dr Jillian Clare is an Adjunct Assistant Professor and former senior lecturer at QUT. She is an expert consultant in speech, presentation, body language and media. In this interview, Dr Clare explains the difference between oral language and written language and provides some tips to improve your pitch presentation.

### **Describe an ideal oral presentation or pitch?**

Too often people write an essay and try to memorise it. This is the worst strategy for an oral presentation. There are many problems with this approach, but basically written language and oral language are stylistically diverse and discrete to each other. Written language can never sound like extemporaneous oral language because we write differently to how we speak. Written language regularly uses longer more complex and intricate sentences that just don't work orally as they are too difficult to follow. Scriptwriters and playwrights understand how to deploy oral language. They do not ask actors to try to bring written language to life orally; it just never works. Playwrights and speechwriters use oral language that works the first time it is heard; *re-reading*, or repeating, is never an option in an oral presentation. However, in oral presentations there is a whole repertoire of additional meaning-making facilities open to the speaker that is unavailable to a writer. So any oral presentation, or pitch, should be prepared using oral language not written.

### **How is oral language different from written language?**

One characteristic of oral language is the use of simpler, shorter sentences; the use of single words, phrases, or sentence fragments. Writers are told to avoid starting a sentence with *And* or *But*, but in an oral presentation this may be an effective device. Vivid, visual, clear language that brings ideas to life is the aim, rather than stuffing the presentation with too much detail that an audience may struggle to remember. It is much better to add the detail in written documentation rather than trying to include it orally. A successful pitch makes the outcomes, desired actions, the benefits, and the reasons for them, very very plain.

### **What strategies can oral presenters use to help their message connect with the audience?**

Rhetorical strategies will do this. For example:

- The use of the list of three – this, that and the other; Tom, Dick and Harry; for God, Country and Communities...
- Similes and metaphors: She is lithe as a willow, thin as a reed.
- Repetition of words or phrases: *If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us,*

*do we not laugh?* (Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*). So it has been. So it must be. *And so it will be for this generation.*

- Repetition for emphasis: *I have looked at this a thousand, thousand times. Quality, real quality, for quality outcomes, requires the right planning, the right knowledge and the best team imaginable.*
- Rhetorical questioning to address difficult issues such as price/cost/money.
- Repetition of the same word at beginning of multiple phrases: *Our nation ... Our economy ... Our education system ... Our children ...*
- Parallelism using words or phrases with a similar structure:  
*I went to the city, I bought some food, I sat in the park, and ...*  
*For us, they packed up their few possessions .... For us, they toiled in sweat shops ... For us they fought and died ... (Obama)*
- Saying something by stating that you will not mention it (politicians use this to denigrate a policy or a person): *Don't mention the war ... I won't discuss the problems with alcohol our learned friend has experienced ...*
- Contrast of ideas: *This is not about ...., but about ....*  
*We gather here today because we have chosen hope over fear, unity of purpose over conflict ... (Obama).*

These essential devices are what make oral language strong, memorable, and effectively persuasive in getting messages across to listeners. That is, to achieve the speaker's desired outcome. They are devices for all presentations. One rule is that all words must earn their place. In a short pitch there is no time to waste or lose in rubbishy filler words. Avoid vacuous *weasel words* (Don Watson) and jargon. Politicians are famous for this. They speak but say nothing specific.

### **What is diaphragmatic breathing? And why is it important?**

Nervousness can be difficult to manage, and may convey a negative impression if not controlled, but there are techniques that can help. Breathing, that is, deep and controlled breathing will assist in reducing stress and anxiety by helping the speaker to relax tense muscles. The term 'diaphragmatic breathing' is a technical description for deep controlled breathing that deploys the base of the lungs for both control of the breath and increased capacity of the breath required in a pitch. This is in contrast to upper chest, shallow breathing that may also exacerbate tension in the neck and shoulders, and lead to further stress and reduced vocal efficacy. A strong clear voice that conveys an image of confidence requires support from deep controlled breathing, because it is the breath that creates vocal sound. Breath also underpins the volume of the voice so it is vital that is successfully deployed. It is difficult to sustain a

successful dynamic presentation style without good breathing techniques. Controlled, deep breathing also helps in relaxing the body and reducing nervous gestures and movements, which, at worst, can irritate the audience; at best, gestures and movements can assist in creating a positive impression by extending meaning. Breathing exercises that support the demands on the voice in a public presentation, such as a pitch, are essential to all speakers. Breathing is automatic, but public presentations put a greater demand on the voice and so require better techniques. There are many books and strategies to help in this and I recommend these to any prospective speaker.

### **How important is body language?**

Non-verbal communication includes everything beyond the words. Every culture has a range of individual norms for communication and these affect how the audience receives and understands the communication. This is another key to successful presentations: analyse the audience to understand to whom you are presenting this particular pitch. It is not sufficient to just assume, *It's the ABC Board*, as if they were one homogenous mass. The business world is littered with stories of unsuccessful attempts to succeed in a new business culture because the customs and norms of that culture were ignored or misunderstood. The sound of the voice, vocal range and colour, emphasis on particular words and phrases, the pace of the presentation, volume, pauses, facial expression, eye contact, stance, posture, physicality, gestures, dress, behaviours, and the use of visuals, including visual symbols, all affect the meaning-making and the overall persuasiveness of a presentation. Examine them all analytically, frame by frame, as a documentary filmmaker does.

### **How can presenters sound persuasive?**

The voice, and the use of a range of vocal techniques, is of paramount importance to an oral presentation because if used well the voice adds to, and enhances, meaning. You first of all create an image of you with your face, smile, and non-verbals, and then you build on this with the voice and use of language. Successful speakers train and develop their vocal style and techniques, because you are your voice. One of the most useful tools to improve the voice is to record yourself and listen analytically to how you sound to an audience. Ask yourself the questions, *Would you like to listen to this voice, and would you be persuaded by it?*

Analyse components of the voice, because the elements making up your vocal style are read in specific ways. For example:

- Depth and strength of tone suggests strength and commitment.
- High-pitched voices may suggest youth and immaturity.
- A breathy tone may suggest nervousness or insecurity.

- An excessively nasal tone may irritate and distract from the messages.
- A strident tone may create a negative impression.
- A flat monotonous voice may fail to engage the audience.
- A lack of contrast in use of volume or light and shade (that is, emphasis), may result in meaning and emotions that are not evoked.
- Volume that is too low may risk going unheard or creating a lack of confidence in the listeners. Or a too-loud volume may overwhelm.
- Pace that is too fast may be difficult to follow, but a ponderous pace might allow the audience's attention to wander.
- Overuse of an upward inflection in pitch at the ends of phrases may sound unconvincing.
- Fading volume, coupled with a drop in pitch at the ends of phrases, may result in words/punch-lines that are missed or that the presenter sounds unconvincing.
- Lack of clarity in the articulation of words may cause confusion or irritation or, at worst, disengagement.

All of these challenges can be improved with listening to the voice, analyzing strengths and weaknesses, acquiring knowledge about the voice, and practicing, practicing, practicing. There are many many books on both persuasive presentations and for developing and extending the voice and vocal techniques. Identifying people that you consider are great presenters, or who have great voices/vocal styles, can also help in the development of the voice. Think about voices that do not persuade and try to identify the issues at play. The essential part for improving the voice is analysis plus knowledge plus practice. The aim is a clear voice with vocal colour, interest, and variety - one that matches the content and desired outcomes. Ask friends and family to listen to your presentation and to give you honest feedback about how you sound to them.

### **How important is appearance?**

Appearance is vital. Look the part. There is no one way to dress to present, but you are what you wear and how you present will be assessed along with every other message you communicate. That is, the body is *read* in the same way as all other messages. The success of each presentation is influenced by the context, the purpose, the place, the people attending, the setting, the desired goal, the timing, pressures, and the stylistic components. If you are aiming to persuade a group of banking people in their boardroom, then board-shorts and thongs may not be appropriate. However, if it was the board of Mambo, then to dress in a Mambo T-shirt may be strategic. The choices need to be consciously selected to enhance the persuasiveness of the presentation and to create an appropriate, positive impression.

The body and the face are the very first persuasive elements in any presentation.

They are what the listeners first see and react to. From the very nano second when you first appear, you are in persuasive mode. Make every second count. Look great, appear vital, alert, and energised. Straight upright posture communicates strength, so use it to advantage. The face and eyes should engage, and both the body and face together should communicate energy, interest in the listeners, warmth, openness, and involvement in the entire context and *moment*. Be engaged in the present and focus on the audience/listeners and the ultimate goal. Listen to them. React to them. Engage with them. Build something together.

## PITCHING CONVENTIONS

The style of your pitch and the duration of it depend on where you have to present it. In my experience, the ideal setting for a pitch is a one-on-one meeting, when you have the commissioning editor or buyer's sole attention. In the domestic and international documentary filmmaking marketplace, pitching sessions are often staged as competitions. These sessions may be held in front of a panel of commissioning editors from different networks; in a forum with an audience; or, in a speed-dating style setting. Organised pitching events usually run by the clock and are strictly timed. When you apply to take part in a pitching competition, you will be advised of the duration. Just as written pitches are to be kept at one to two pages, you must also keep your oral presentations tight. Hollywood screenwriter and pitching consultant Michael Hauge says that relating how the entire story unfolds when you pitch is the worst mistake you can make. He's right. The key is to get to the point. When someone asks you about the highlight of your day, you don't start from when you woke up then run through all of the mundane things you did first. You go straight to the highlight. It's the same when you're pitching.

## ELEVATOR OR *SHIRT-FRONT*

Elevator Pitching conjures up the image of a commissioning editor trapped in a lift with a zealous documentary filmmaker doing a rapid-fire hard sell on his story. The buyer can do little but gaze longingly as the storeys of the building whiz by. The spiel generally lasts as long as the elevator ride.

In truth, an elevator pitch is a synonym for a concise, compelling oral delivery during a chance one-on-one meeting. In spite of the name, the location is immaterial. The pitch may be 30 seconds or 60 seconds though usually it is no longer than 2 minutes. I have witnessed documentary filmmakers pitching over coffee, at festival *meet and greets*, propped up at bars, and on decks and patios where buyers and network commissioners congregate to chat or smoke. From inside a cubicle in the women's toilets at a major event, I overheard a lively pitch from a producer to a network executive as they reapplied their make-up. Pitching can happen anywhere a buyer can be cornered and ear-bashed. Although I am not one to miss an opportunity, cornering someone with a view to hammering them with your pitch is not the key to success, especially in the loo. They may run in the opposite direction next time they see you.



At an international documentary conference in Europe, I ran into SBS Network Head of Unscripted John Godfrey, who agreed to a brief interview. I asked him what he expected from a pitch. He replied that *a pitch has to be a big, bold idea that not only addresses the channel's multi-cultural charter but has the potential to reach a broader audience.*<sup>124</sup> I suspect Godfrey was referring to the story rather than the pitch itself. Given the haste and indiscriminate times at which pitches are delivered at these conferences, it was clear a successful pitch had to create impact and encapsulate the storyline in the opening sentence. I decided to seize the opportunity presented by my one-on-one encounter with Godfrey, and try to pitch an idea I'd been working on. Unfortunately, my attempt to take advantage of the interview situation to pitch to Godfrey was neither big enough nor bold enough to capture his imagination. I had wrongly supposed the network commissioner, tasked with meeting a multi-cultural charter, might be interested in my story. I thought that a band of courageous indigenous men who risked their lives in sub-standard conditions to defend white Australians from the Japanese during World War 2, might hit the mark. But I was wrong. The story, according to Godfrey, was too confined and needed to be part of a bigger picture. Good feedback. And another lesson learned. If I'd been better prepared, I would've known this. I could have expanded on the story to embrace the bigger picture and adjusted my pitch. Or, if that wasn't possible, I could have moved on to another concept that would've had more chance of success.

## ONE ON ONE

A pitch meeting is a pre-arranged face-to-face encounter with the most promising buyers sourced by the filmmaker. Usually booked in for about 15 minutes (though they can run longer), a pitch meeting involves the potential buyer or buyers, and a documentary filmmaker either alone or supported by a co-producer or other team member. It is not surprising that most producers prefer to pitch this way. Pitch meetings provide exclusive, personal time with buyers who are virtually a captive audience. They are an ideal way to gauge reaction to your concept. Both sides have the opportunity to ask questions, and if necessary, discuss ways to improve the concept or move forward on other projects. Importantly, pitch meetings build relationships with decision makers. Pitching fulfils three purposes: it proves the concept can be expressed easily; commissioners can ask questions immediately;

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<sup>124</sup> John Godfrey interview, 2011

and, they can size up you as well as your material. *They like to work with people who are bright, pleasant, and flexible*.<sup>125</sup>

But beware! These encounters can lead to sudden death during the first attempt. The type of film, storyline, funding model, content, characters, and broadcast or distribution platform may be highly relevant and have taken considerable time to research and compile, but a potential deal can be made or killed off within the first 30 seconds. During industry conferences or trade events, network buyers run on tight schedules. They have numerous filmmakers to meet and don't allow poorly thought-out ideas and weak pitches to waste their time. The pitching experience described at the start of this book is indicative of many first-time one on one pitches. Preparation, practice, being an adept listener and a focused communicator who is open to suggestions will ultimately lead to success.

## PITCHING IN A FORUM

Documentary festivals, conferences and markets typically dedicate part of their agenda to pitching sessions in which filmmakers can pitch their projects to a panel of commissioning editors, ask questions and swap business cards. The Hot Docs Forum is a two-day pitching fest held annually in Canada to promote international co-productions and funding partnerships. To secure a seat behind the microphone at the pitching bench, documentary filmmakers must submit a written pitch in advance of the forum. Twenty successful candidates are given the chance to pitch orally to a collective of network buyers who have the authority to green light their projects. Rules apply. Candidates must have a *trigger financier* or initial funding partner already on board. They must deliver their pitch within a 15-minute timeframe. This allows them seven minutes to pitch and a further eight minutes for questions and discussions. Pitchers are also encouraged to feature a brief video clip to bolster their presentation. In the lead-up to the forum, contestants are trained in pitching by industry experts. The pitching tournament itself takes place in front of an audience of industry delegates, many of whom are there to glean market intelligence or pick up tips on how it is done. Hot Docs also hosts a short pitch session for short film projects with six contenders vying for a prize of CAD\$75,000.<sup>126</sup> Hot Docs is one of many international pitching forums open to documentary filmmakers. The websites of

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<sup>125</sup> (Wolff 1984, 23-24)

<sup>126</sup> (Hot Docs Festival 2015)

funding organisations such as Screen Australia feature lists of these documentary festivals and publish updates on relevant events. You can also subscribe directly to the festival's website and receive newsletters and updates via email.

## SPEED DATING IN 7 MINUTES

As the title suggests, speed dating is about connecting with as many buyers as possible in the shortest time. Romance has nothing to do with it. Commissioners or co-producers are positioned at tables around the room and documentary filmmakers spend a few minutes pitching their project before swapping places with other filmmakers. In some documentary pitching forums, *a polite bell signals the end of the pitch*.<sup>127</sup> Documentary producer Brett Gaylor, who won a pitching competition at the Banff World Television Festival in Canada described the experience as like being in a *Filmmaker Idol* TV show.<sup>128</sup>

As a filmmaker and academic researcher, the most gruelling pitching session for me, by far, was a speed-dating style competition at the 2011 WCSFP. I had to pitch a documentary concept repeatedly to a room full of French producers, one at a time. My attendance at WCSFP was motivated by data collection rather than locking in a film deal. But, in my capacity as a researcher, I was refused permission to sit in and observe the speed dating pitching event. My only hope of gaining access was to win a place in the finals by competing with producers from all over the world. I decided to enter the competition and submit a written pitch on Mexican tarantulas, a topic I had researched extensively a couple of years earlier. By coincidence, these tarantulas were in the news in Europe as a shipment destined for the black market had been confiscated by authorities in Zurich. The entire speed dating pitching session was to last two hours during which every one of the twelve finalists were allotted seven minutes to pitch to each of the French producers. The pitching venue was laid out like a restaurant - twelve tables with chairs positioned opposite each other. One, sometimes two were occupied by French producers, and the remaining one ready to be filled by one of the hopeful participants. A warning bell tolled after five minutes, at which point, the international pitchers had to change tables and start all over again with a different French producer. The aim was to connect with and ultimately lock in a co-production partner.

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<sup>127</sup> (Reed 2006, 39)

<sup>128</sup> (Stewart 2006)

It's a nerve-wracking process because you simply don't know what type of reaction you're going to get until you've laid your idea (as well as your heart and soul) on the table for all to see. That said coming up with an idea that will make an executive jump out of their chairs is hard enough. The last thing you want to do is kill a great idea because you blew the pitching process.<sup>129</sup>

Apart from exhaustion, and a concerted effort on my part to wake up one very jet-lagged French producer, the main difficulty I encountered in the speed-dating event was the realization that not all the French producers were looking for the same genre. Some were looking for a unique wildlife project; others wanted pure science.

This required a shift in my pitch delivery. For some, I had to highlight the wildlife and environmental merits of the concept. For others, I had to focus on the potential scientific breakthroughs that the concept might uncover.

A momentary impasse provided an opportunity for me to *reflect in action*, and quickly adapt my spiel to match the producer's brief. The dilemma with the French producers could have been avoided with more forethought on my part. If only I'd paid more attention during the preparation phase to the networks and the style of programs they broadcast. I should have researched the French producers' preferences in genre, and developed two pitches – one for science, another for wildlife. This time I was lucky. My pitch, and quick changes from science to wildlife and back again, proved to be a triumph. Two of the French producers expressed interest in forming a co-production partnership and invest €150,000 (AUD\$185,000 in round figures). Travail bien fait! If only I were pitching for real and not for data collection!

## VISUAL AIDS

Pitching, regardless of the mode of delivery, is pivotal to securing any kind of deal with a network, funding agency or distributor, and the concept of an accompanying visual teaser is becoming normal practice.

A good pitch tape – sample, trailer, demo, work-in-progress, sizzler, call it what you will – introduces your key characters, proves you have access, showcases your filmmaking skills and sets up a conflict or question that you will resolve in the finished film.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> (Breman 2012)

<sup>130</sup> (Lees 2012, 27)

A visual sample of your project - often called a sizzle reel, video clip or trailer - can be a powerful demonstration of key elements of your story and your skills as a producer and filmmaker. These include the issue, characters, locations, style, tone, and quest at the core of the documentary.

We (SBS) received an extraordinary project and I must say, I got the email and I saw a huge document attachment. I think it was about 30 pages, and my heart sank. I thought *Oh god!* But then I saw there was a reel and luckily I went straight to the reel and started watching it, and within a minute I was just captivated. It was just a brilliant, brilliant trailer. I then read through the whole treatment and loved it, but I was first absolutely captured by the reel.<sup>131</sup>

Pitch or sizzle tapes are generally brief, usually about three minutes, and may be filmed inexpensively with a domestic or non-broadcast standard video camera or an iPhone particularly if the documentary is still in development and filming has not yet commenced. During my speed dating, interested buyers asked for a sample video. I didn't have one. All I had with me were a couple of photographs of the key characters – scientist and tarantula, and surprisingly they seemed to suffice. But a sizzle reel would've been much better. The spiders in question were the size of bread and butter plates, hairy, scary and colourful. The moving pictures of them would've had a major impact on the commissioning editors. That vision combined with clips of the scientist talking about their gruesome mating habits, and fanciers who kept them as pets, would have captivated them and sealed the deal.

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<sup>131</sup> Joseph Maxwell, SBS, interview, 2016

## WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY ABOUT ORAL PITCHING

**Edwina Waddy, Channel Manager ABC2, former Commissioning Editor, TV Factual and Executive Producer, ABC Development.**

### **Can a good oral pitch really sell you on a story?**

Definitely. A good oral pitch is really helpful to sell a project, but I don't think you need an oral pitch to sell a project. Otherwise, we would be meeting all day. We'd never be able to get anything else done. A written pitch is equally valid and important, but a good oral pitch can go a long way to getting you enthused. A good oral pitch will do what a written pitch will do, basically hook you into a sense of character, be able to tell you a story as to what the film is going to explore. They can kind of do the same things.

### **What about the opportunity provided by an oral pitch to ask questions?**

Certainly if you're having a conversation about something and you have the opportunity to ask about certain angles of the story that can unfold or open a box to other territory, then yes, an oral pitch does give you that chance.

### **Some broadcasters/buyers say they know within a minute whether they're going to go for the pitch or not? Do you think that's true?**

The thing about oral pitching is that it can depend on the presenter skills of the person who's doing it and their ability to sell - sell the idea. At the same time, if you have a person who is doing a pitch and they can be the best performer in the world and they're selling an idea that you don't want, then you do know that you don't want it. If it's outside your commissioning agenda - what you're looking for - then you do know in a minute that it's not for you, not for your network.

**Joseph Maxwell, SBS Head of Documentaries SBS, former Commissioning Editor SBS and independent filmmaker in Britain.**

### **Do you know within the first 30 seconds of hearing a pitch if it's a goer?**

Normally I think it comes from a conversation with the filmmaker. I immediately get excited and it's because someone has had a really clever thought as to how they can tackle an area in a very fresh way. And that does normally happen within the first 30 seconds. And then it is trying to use the rest of that meeting to drill down. *Does this really work? Is there a real purpose to this? Will it fit for us?* You start that questioning process. And that process can then go on for months. So I have had some very promising ideas, which on the surface look great, but when you drill down, you start to think: *Is this built on solid enough foundations? Will this work for us?* So it's not that their commissioned instantaneously but that they absolutely engage me instantaneously.

**As a former independent filmmaker, at which point did you know your pitch had won over the commissioner? How did you detect that tingle?**

(Before a pitch), I'd think *God! We're definitely going to come out of this with something*. I would get that tingle thinking of ideas and then go in and get knocked back flat and be devastated. So I know that deep, deep disappointment when you come out empty handed. I've then also had time when I've gone in to a commissioning editor and they've got really excited (at first) and then it's all gone flat. They've gone up to their boss and they've said: *oh no, we can't do it* or something else has happened. (As a filmmaker) you have to manage those expectations. But then again I think this is also part of that regular dialogue. When you start to know the commissioning editors, you also know whose tastes are what; what would appeal to them more; and you start to be able to read them more. As a commissioning editor, if I start to immediately go: *Could you do this? Or could you do that?* If I try to start to improve it, then you know you are onto something. I always found that as an independent filmmaker, if the commissioning editors started to try and take it on as their project, you knew you were onto something.

**How important is verbal presentation?**

I think there are some brilliant, smooth, suave, creative pitches but they don't get anywhere. Admittedly, some ideas can be very badly sold and that's a real shame. People really need to think about how they do present their projects. But I think at the heart of it, what we are all looking for are the *great ideas*. I think if someone starts to concentrate too much on performance it actually detracts from the fact that they haven't actually got any gold in their pocket to bring out, to show you. I think people can definitely work on their pitches. Bad pitches are awful. I've given bad pitches as a practitioner. You can see that it's not working; it's dreadful; and you dig yourself such a deep hole. And, I've sat back and had people pitch projects that have been dreadful. The key thing (as a filmmaker) would be making sure you listen. I mean, people don't listen enough. So often there's a pitch where the commissioner hasn't had a chance to talk 15 minutes in, to provide feedback so that's why I come back to that dialogue.

**What are some of the typical things that people do wrong when pitching?**

Not listening. Targeting to a different broadcaster. Then you get to the very hard part, and I never know what the answer is in this. Do you come in with one idea they could say no to and that's the end of the meeting? But you go: *look, I am really championing this one thing*; or do you come in with a long list. And I've got to say, I think after five ideas, when they come out with ideas six and seven, you are thinking *Oh God! They really have just gone up to the attic, grabbed whatever they can and*

*throwing it out.* So I think it's better to find a hybrid of a couple of ideas that are interesting. I don't think there's a golden rule about one or five, but certainly if there are too many, (the pitch meeting) certainly starts to lose its value.

#### **What are the positives about a verbal pitch?**

For me, passion is important with these projects. The great thing about smaller companies is that they are really driven by their idea and they want to get it made. When you see that and you can look into their eyes and can feel that they've got that excitement about it, that's a powerful tool. (The project) is not going to drive past the finish line on its own, but it really helps to give it a good launch pad. When you can see their hunger; see their passion; see their desire; *that's great!* I would rather tap into that than someone going *oh, here's another piece of business to put through.* And that fuels an important part.

**Susan MacKinnon, Founding Director, Documentary Australia Foundation and award-winning filmmaker:**

#### **Is there any way to escape pitching?**

No! (*laughter*) It is about pitching, pitching, pitching! Pitching is really just a label stuck on a process where you're doing a succinct presentation, I think, with a desired outcome. You know what you want and the more clear you are about that the better the pitch. It is just communicating really clearly and trying to be as engaging as you can to get the person on board. To get them to consider it and to feel positive towards whatever it is, I guess. I mean real estate agents do it all the time. Not always convincingly. I think everybody has to do it. And if you can do succinctly, that is the hard part, people just go on, and on, and on, and on, and then I just vague out, it's too long. Or I can't concentrate the pitch is too long, or it's boring.

#### **Especially when you hear lots of them?**

Yeah. But if someone talks at me too long about something I feel like I am being lectured and that's not pitching. Or it's talking in a dull way. You know, it can't be dull or people just turn off. There are a few tricks along the way, a few things that help – this is good and bad – likening it to something before that the person would know and I used it the other day and the lights went on for the Donor. There was a project about an outback children's choir and I said to the Donor, 'This is like Mrs Carey's Concert in the outback' and she knew that film. She understood. It just tuned her in really quickly. So sometimes that works and sometimes, you might suggest a film that the person hates and they go *ewww I hated that film* so it doesn't work. So you have to be careful when you use something like that but it's a way of fast tracking the engagement.



And it's practice. Good pitching is practice. You practise and practise and practise and eventually you will read the audience and do it accordingly.

I've had people text and read their emails on their blackberries whilst I'm talking and you think, are you listening to me?

### **MY PITCHING TIPS**

Do your homework

Know your concept thoroughly

Think of what the buyer might ask you about it

Practise, practise, practise

Be warm, friendly and professional when you arrive

Establish a rapport – connect with the audience

Keep your pitch clear, concise and strong

Show warmth and enthusiasm about your concept

Be professional and credible

Present confidently and spontaneously

Maintain eye contact

Listen carefully to any feedback or comments

Be prepared to answer any questions

### **PITCHING PITFALLS**

Being unprepared

Describing your documentary concept or storyline in too much detail

Confusing or boring the buyer with needless information

Exceeding the time limit

Using industry jargon instead of plain English

Overselling or promising to deliver things you cannot

Reading directly from your pitch

Failing to listen to feedback

## A FINAL WORD

As filmmaker Susan MacKinnon pointed out, if you want to produce documentaries, you can't escape the pitching process. You may have an impressive CV with a long list of top rating documentary films. But, you still need to finance it. That involves convincing a commissioning editor or online distributor that your story is just what they want. Your pitch should do that in a page or two, or in a tight verbal presentation. According to Edwina Waddy (ABC), *oral pitching depends on the presenter skills of the person who's doing it and their ability to sell the idea*. Joseph Maxwell (SBS) says he knows within 30 seconds if he likes what someone is pitching. He gets a tingle, a feeling of excitement that the project is right for his network.

If you are crowdfunding, you have to stage a campaign, expand your social media skills and contacts, and pitch relentlessly to get supporters on board. Crowdfunder Taryn Brumfitt says she put her life on hold to run her *Embrace* body movement documentary campaign. That's what you have to if you want to reach or exceed your funding goal. Pozible's Alan Crabbe says the crowdfunding campaign is an all or nothing affair. If you fail to reach your target within the campaign timeframe, your pitching efforts are futile. After all of your hard work, you walk away empty-handed. That's the last thing you want to happen.

The reality is that most of us are documentary filmmakers. We are not necessarily social media savvy, web experts, skilled writers and orators with a gift for deal making and fund raising. And the truth is we have to be. Digital disruption, the explosion of multiple online platforms, decreased television program budgets and government grants have put additional pressure on practitioners. In particular, it places a huge burden on our ability to write and present compelling pitches. In the current documentary filmmaking marketplace, we have to lock in multiple investors to raise the finance for our films. That requirement runs across most of the funding models being deployed by practitioners today. When we pitch, we have to pitch to multiple investors, often with different criteria. As Marcus Gillezeau laments, it'd be great if one big studio just handed you a huge pile of money. Unfortunately that's not the case. We have to work for every dollar. We have to be *polygamists* in our pitching endeavours. We have to be *hungry* in the way we prepare and passionate in our approach.

The pathway to successful documentary financing is to pitch persuasively. The most efficacious way to develop and enhance your written and oral pitches is to follow my *5 Ps of Pitching* model. Preparation, practice, perseverance, persuasive presentation and pursuance are the 5 *Ps* to remember. After each phase, it's important to reflect on how you approached it and your performance of the task. It is through reflection that you will learn and improve. Of course, there is no guarantee that your documentary will be funded if you abide by the model. But, you will at least know that you have given it your best shot. And there's always next time!

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