

## LECTURE 1: HOW COMMISSIONING EDITORS TICK

If you want to make films, you have to know how to sell your projects. And one crucial part of selling is to know the person you are selling to. I believe that one of the most frequent mistakes of documentary makers is to confuse broadcasters and commissioning editors with “enemies”. Yet thinking in categories of “us” and “them” helps no one and only makes everything more difficult. Of course it is only natural to resent those who appear to frustrate our efforts, the gatekeepers who refuse to let us pass through the gate. If we want to make real progress, though, frustration is not a reliable guide. Filmmakers must start to see broadcasters as customers – and as their partners. The first step towards this is to understand the truth about the power balance. Many filmmakers have a skewed view of their own position in relation to that of the broadcaster. They think that a potential buyer is next to almighty, someone who can choose between a wealth of projects and companies and who is under no pressure at all. Unfairly, the commissioners reject whatever they please, even if it’s your most cherished idea. Somehow the bags of money always seem to be going to someone else... This perspective, realistic as it may seem to some, is utterly distorted.

I know this from first-hand experience since I had a brief stint as a commissioning editor for a well-known broadcaster. We had to buy docs in order to fill a 24-hour schedule, 7 days a week. Of course a significant part of this schedule consisted of repeats, but you can still imagine how many hundreds of hours of programming were needed to fill a week, a month, let alone an entire year. The amount is absolutely colossal! At the same time, there were other players out there who were in exactly the same position, all in need of quality films for their documentary strands. In most cases, they had far more money at their disposal than we had which of course meant a competitive edge. Everyone was keen for films that worked for one’s home audience. Not just any old films, but programs that will surprise people, have a feel of novelty and that will deliver good ratings. And that’s not even all of the criteria the “merchandise” would have to meet. Not only will the films truly have to intrigue, they will also have to fit the brand, the “image” the broadcaster is trying to nurture. You must imagine that there are so many channels out there that it becomes absolutely crucial to be instantly recognizable by the viewers.

So like in the world of film production, the world of broadcasting is a shark pond full of competitors. I can tell you right now that the amount of quality content out there is very limited indeed. And if you have to filter the available films even more because your network is specialized in a certain subject matter, caters to a specific audience or wants to stand out in a particular manner, the chance to find gold is even less. When I was working as a buyer, I spent days in Cannes sifting through dozens of films

which were available on a database at the MIPDOC trade fair. Remember Cannes, the palm trees, the film festival, the glamour, the glitz? Well, I'm afraid there's none of that for documentary film buyers. It means sitting in a windowless cellar watching dozens of rather uninspiring material. 80% of what I saw was not suitable at all and a frightening amount was poorly made. Of the remaining 20%, 15% was not suitable for the network I was representing, often because of cultural references a German audience wouldn't understand or appreciate. 5% seemed interesting, but in most cases the rights had already been snatched up by competitors.

The point I'm trying to make is that if you're able to provide good quality and intriguing subjects that will captivate an audience, you're in a more powerful position than you may think. As a buyer, I was very eager to meet up with producers and to listen out for their new ideas. In fact, I listened to everyone, regardless if I had heard from them before or not. I wasn't desperate, I didn't feel that I had to accomplish an impossible task, but I woke up to the fact that good projects don't grow on trees. So if you've got a good project, be self-confident about it and please, please don't think of the people you are selling to as your personal enemies or, worse even, as some kind of evil judges who can rule as they please. Understand that commissioning editors are under various pressures and that by nature they have to be selective. Try to make their lives easier for them, try to understand where they're coming from and treat them as your partners. If, ultimately, one of your films gets commissioned, then you will have to start listening to their requests, no matter what you think of them. So please consider this and don't fall victim to misconceptions.

Since we're tackling this subject, let me tell you a little bit more about my experience as a commissioning editor. Like for many professionals, my time was somewhat limited. There was a lot to accomplish in little time. There's really nothing special about this, the same is true for me now, as a filmmaker. Yet some of the people who were pitching me projects came to me and had not studied out what kind of programs my broadcaster stood for.

As I mentioned in the beginning, we're not talking of a tiny operation, but an international brand, a well-known channel. So I found myself sitting in meetings, where arthouse films on little-known intellectuals were being pitched to me. In principle, there is nothing wrong with these kinds of films, please don't misunderstand me. There's a market for these films. But why go to a commissioner who represents a very commercial private channel? Why waste my time with something that, even if I had liked the subject matter personally, would have had to reject? All these people would have needed to do before they scheduled this meeting is to watch television. Not even that, they would have just needed to have looked at a program schedule, their local TV guide. One look would have told them that a mini-DV film on a 1960's philosopher wouldn't fit easily into our schedule.

What I'm trying to say is that no-one likes their precious time to be wasted. And with that I mean no-one, not a commissioning editor and not even you. A simple way to avoid mutual irritation and frustration when you're selling to broadcasters is to watch their programs before you approach them. Yes, just watch TV! That's the best form of intelligence you could possibly get. They put stuff on air that they like, that they think will deliver an audience and that they believe "suits" their channel. As a filmmaker, I have managed to sell a project just by watching TV and finding a suitable target for my pitch. Someone who I knew would like the kind of film that we had in mind. So don't underestimate this, even if it seems like the most primitive trick in the world. It also helps you to know what's already out there and what kind of subjects that have already been covered. And it will cost you nothing, except a couple of hours of your time in front of the box.

#### SUMMARY:

- In relating to commissioners, don't see them as your enemies but as partners
- Understand the truth about the power balance and that suitable films are rare
- Understand the pressures that broadcasters face.
- Leave a good impression by not wasting a commissioner's time.
- Study the TV guide and watch television to get a feel for what they like.
- Double-check if your subject has already been covered BEFORE you pitch.

COMING UP NEXT: How to choose a subject that will sell. Sometimes it's just a little twist that is needed to make an idea commercial. Learn how to make your film concept attractive for the market.