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The Legal Side of Pitching Your Animation

One of your goals with your animation is to see it come to life for a broader audience. That usually means in movies or television. Not only have you created the characters, but you may also have the entire concept in mind of a series laid out, including the landscape, the theme, even possibly the music. But you may not have the funding or the capacity to bring it to full broadcast. Pitching your animation series idea to secure funding or to have it produced is a process you need to prepare for, including being aware of some of the legalities that are involved.

1. Preparing the Concept: Pitches on Paper (POP).

Copyright law states that ideas are not protectable. That includes program concepts and themes. What is protectable is the tangible expression of the idea. Pitches on paper (POP) allow you to have something in a tangible form regarding your idea. The idea itself is not protected, but the way you envision it and have described it in the POP is. There is a specific format for POP's, which need to include a logline and synopsis. For animation, a character or production bible is sometimes also created to showcase the animated characters in all their glory. POPs can be registered with the US Copyright Office as a literary work. You can also copyright the characters as a visual art. Standard in the industry is to have the POP registered with the Writer's Guild of America (WGA). There is a WGA-East and a WGA-West. You then put the WGA registration number on the POP underneath the title. In addition, having a sizzle reel or short pilot to show how the characters interact can help the person who is to receive the pitch visualize the concept.

2. Submitting the Concept: Concept Call

Sometimes a network will put out a call for requests for program concepts. Nick Jr. (cable) and BatteryPop (online network) both did that earlier this year. In their call they will outline specific instructions as to what exactly you should submit, including a signed submission agreement. Read that agreement carefully as it will lay out what the expectations are for the concept as well as what happens to the concept once you submit it. For example, they may indicate that if your concept is selected they will offer you a certain amount of money to produce it or they may produce it themselves in exchange for ALL the rights to the program (characters and all).

3. Submitting the Concept: Pitch Festivals

Another way to get your concept in front of a producer or network executive is to attend a pitch festival – these are events where a number of networks and production companies make themselves available for a few hours or a couple of days and listen to individuals who have

about 5 minutes to “sell” their idea. For example, there is the Great American Pitchfest in Hollywood in June (<https://pitchfest.com>) and Kidscreen Summit in New York in February (<http://summit.kidscreen.com/2014/>). Keep in mind you will be one of many hundreds or even thousands of others who have the next big thing. There are also fees involved so read the fine print in the registration forms.

4. Submitting the Concept: Industry Calls

Having a friend in the business is always a nice thing to have. But not everyone has that advantage. Many networks and production companies do not take “cold call” inquiries and will not accept “unsolicited materials” in fear of being sued for stealing the show concept. An attorney or agent can be a useful ally to get through the gatekeepers and set up the initial meeting. You need to have an agreement with the attorney or agent as to what they will do for you and how much they expect to be paid for doing so. Sometimes it is a percentage of the overall deal and sometimes it is paid by the hour. Also keep in mind that these production companies and networks may not be open to signing a non-disclosure agreement (NDA) before viewing your pitch. So trust will be an issue here.

5. Pitch Meeting

Be prepared during the pitch meeting (whether at a festival or one-on-one) to answer their questions not just about the concept and the characters, but also about some of the business issues – such as social media outreach and merchandising potential of the animation franchise. Go as if you were going to an interview – clean, well-behaved, etc. Also, bring at least two other concepts in your back pocket. Even if they love your pitch a question always asked is “what else ‘ya got?”

6. After the Pitch

Your job is not done once the pitch is done. Make sure to follow-up with a thank you and ask them if it is ok for you to send them periodic updates about the pitched concept as well as new projects that may come up. The pitch meeting is also a networking opportunity. Take full advantage and remember how to spell their names. And if they hand you a contract – get it reviewed by an attorney BEFORE you sign.

This article was originally written for the Summer 2014 edition of Toon Boom Magazine. You can find more of my articles written specifically for Toon Boom Magazine at: <https://www.toonboom.com/resources/industry-tips>.

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