

SPADA MASTERCLASS SERIES

1. The Three Cs of TV - *Creativity, Clarity & Courtesy*

GETTING STARTED

So you've got a great idea for a screen project, and you want to make it happen. If you're already working at a production company, you can talk to a development executive or producer there and they will help shepherd you through the commissioning and funding process. But if you don't have that framework around you, this masterclass is to help you on your way.

First of all, think really deeply about your idea. Can you easily tell people what it is in a simple sentence? That's a good clue that it's something you'll be able to sell to others. If you can't express it in a simple sentence then think some more about your idea – see if you can focus it a little more clearly. What is the main story, and what are the side stories and issues?

Also think about the various platforms and funding options available at the moment, and where your idea might fit into these. Who is your audience? Who wants or needs to see this programme?

Then write a simple one-pager on your idea – the main idea, and how the story will move out from that main idea. Who are the key characters if it is scripted, and who are the key interviewees if it is unscripted? What form is it going to take – a one-off or a series, and what number and duration of episodes. Writing this will help to focus your mind on your idea and what its real essence is.

Depending on how experienced you are, you may now want to enlist some help – either by taking your idea to a production company, or to an experienced freelance producer or executive producer. Check out the major screen production companies in New Zealand either by heading to SPADA's membership page, or checking out the NZ On Air funding rounds - these companies are also online – so see what you think – and what might be a fit for you. Ask around.

Likewise if you want to work on your own, but with the support of an executive producer, ask around about who might suit you and your project. SPADA can help provide you with some advice, or help point you in the right direction.

If you decide to work with a freelance EP there will be a fee attached – so ask about this and what their rates are early in the piece. A lot of EPs will give you the first bit of advice for free to get you started, and some won't charge till your project gets through the development process and into production, but you can't bank on that. So be clear what their expectation is.

Working with an experienced EP can be a good path for a developing producer – it's like a mentorship role, and you may feel that approach provides you with more autonomy and flexibility. A good EP will support you to do the producer role yourself, but with them there as your security blanket and a constant source of advice and support.

At this stage - where you are seeking help from a producer or production company - you still only need a simple one or two-pager on your idea – don't do screeds of work at this early stage, as it may be wasted.

A production company or executive producer will be able to tell you if they think you've got a chance of getting your idea to happen, and then guide you on your way.

Everyone has the great passion project of their life, and I don't want to tell you that's a bad thing, but generally speaking it pays not to get too wedded to any one idea in the early stages. We work in a very tough industry, and you may well get told early in the piece that your idea has little chance of happening. Don't be put off by that – let it go for now, and try other ideas. A time might still come for the original idea.

And don't be frightened of sharing your idea with a production company or executive producer. In my experience of the NZ production community, people are not sitting around just waiting to steal your ideas. You need a level of trust. There's always a risk that someone might do the wrong thing by you, but it's unlikely, and it's generally better not to be too suspicious and controlling of your idea at the outset, as it may put people off working with you.

Be aware that there's lots of natural synchronicity around. When I was working as a commissioner it always amazed me how often the same idea came in from different producers at the same time. It helps to understand that this can happen – it's frustrating, but sometimes someone just happens to have a similar idea to you at the same time and they get the nod before you do.

If you are working with a production company, and your idea does become a reality, you can work out your rights at that stage. What role are you taking on the production? Are you just expecting to be paid for that role, or do you want a share of any profits? There are screen industry lawyers and others who can help you with this side of things to make sure you get a fair deal.

GETTING A NETWORK / PLATFORM

Okay – so you now know who you're working with, and you've got your two-pager polished and clearly explaining what your project is. It's an important document – make sure it really captures the programme you are wanting to make. You might now be working with a production company, or you might be being guided by a freelance executive producer, or you might be doing it yourself. Now you need a platform.

Have a think about which platform your idea suits best, and try them first. And then work out from there. There used to be an informal industry etiquette that you tried one platform at a time, and waited for a no before you tried the next one. This has changed a little in the more multi-platform online age, so you may want to submit to more than one at once. Or start with the two most likely, and then try a few others. Make sure you personalise your pitch document – don't send something with Three's name on it to TVNZ. You'd be surprised how often that happens.

Get to know the platform and its audience as best you can before you pitch. Look at the TV guides to help with this if it's a TV network and you can't watch everything. If it's an online platform, have a good look at their current content. This will help refine the idea and the treatment. If you can say 'this will

work beautifully for the Fair Go audience once they have finished watching Pippa and Haydn on a Monday evening,' then you are halfway there.

When it's time to send your two-pager off to your desired platform, make sure you find out who the right commissioning executive is first. For the bigger TV networks you should be able to find this online. Otherwise ask around, or come to SPADA and we'll point you in the right direction. If all else fails, phone the company concerned and ask. TVNZ has a team of specialist commissioners; smaller platforms usually have just one or two people in these roles.

TVNZ and Maori Television have a central 'proposals@' email address you can use, but it doesn't hurt to know your specific commissioner and copy them in too. Check out the TVNZ and Maori Television websites for more info on this.

Again, don't invest too much of your time on this initial proposal – as you may get a no at this early stage. Your two-pager just needs to clearly explain what your idea is. And make sure your email cover note is also clear and courteous – there's quite an art to writing a good email, and it is important.

If you get a positive response, you can supply a more detailed proposal and budget as requested. Be guided by what your platform is asking of you. Don't make your proposal any longer than it needs to be. Just the key information about content, style, key personnel and budget. Network executives are very busy people and they won't thank you for hours of extra reading work while you take pages and pages to get to the point. Don't expect to have endless meetings with commissioners, and don't feel you need to pitch in person. That doesn't actually happen all that much these days. If a commissioner wants to meet and talk with you, they'll ask. And the same rules apply – be clear and concise, be courteous, don't waste people's time. But also be excited about your idea – your belief and enthusiasm will shine through.

Once you've submitted your idea, keep track of it and its progress through the system, but don't over-nag. Again, a busy network executive won't thank you for emailing or phoning them every day to check where things are at. But check in from time to time to keep things alive.

Your platform commissioner is your client, your customer, and – as the old saying goes - the customer is always right. Be courteous in all your dealings with them. They don't have to take your project on, and they don't have to help you. Most of our commissioners here in NZ actually are very helpful. But make things as easy for them as you can. Keep all your communication clear and courteous. Make your programme proposals as focused and clear as you possibly can – people need to be able to see what the show is about just by reading the first few sentences.

Do a fair budget for your proposal. Don't ask for more than you need, but don't cut so tight that you won't be able to make the show on budget. You may get pushback from platforms on your budget, and that's fine, there's some give and take. But if you're going dangerously low, have the confidence to say no. Please don't mortgage your house to make a TV show.

GETTING A FUNDER

Platforms sometimes fund commercially appealing TV ideas from their own pockets, or with the support of corporate sponsors – historically TVNZ has done a lot of this, and Three has funded some of its own shows too. This may reduce a little now with the strain Covid-19 has put on network advertising revenue, but it is still a possible avenue for funding of your project, if it is something very broad appeal in nature. But if your project is something with more of a public good focus that meets NZ On Air and Te Mangai Paho's criteria, you will now be at the step of the process where you need to seek their funding. Continue your courtesy and clarity through the funding process.

NZOA and TMP also have online submission processes – get familiar with these in advance of deadline day. Make sure you are registered. Make sure you have everything ready and prepared that you need to submit. NZOA and TMP staff are also generally helpful people, but don't over-burden them with silly questions that you can find out yourself by looking around online, or asking others.

You can find the dates for NZOA and TMP rounds on their websites, but it's important to remember that platforms have their own pitching deadlines. You may think you have plenty of time till the NZOA or TMP deadline, but in fact the network may have decided which proposals it is backing well in advance of that. This information on the network deadlines is either available on their website or you can simply email and ask a commissioner in advance of each funding round.

If a project doesn't get funding, you can ask why – but do this in a polite and constructive way and you'll likely get a polite and constructive reply. Get abusive, and you won't. It's old-fashioned advice, but it's amazing where please and thankyou will get you.

If you end up getting a “no” for your project, be gracious, and understand how tough it is to actually get an idea to happen in New Zealand. We have a small population, tight budgets and a high demand on funding, so many great ideas never see the light of day. Don't assume your idea is no good because it didn't get through, or that the broadcasters/funders are mad. It might just not be your idea's time. Put it away for a while, and see how you feel about it six months later. Is it worth trying again?

GETTING THROUGH PRODUCTION AND POST PRODUCTION

Obviously if you do win the lottery and get a commission and then your funding, you then have to make the production. That's great, but there's still a long road ahead. Again, you are working to your platform as a client. If a builder was building you a house that you were paying for you'd expect them to build you the house you wanted – and it's no different with a screen production.

Your story-telling strength and creativity can shine through, but you still have to make the show that your platform and funder is expecting. Make sure you are really clear at the outset what is expected of you.

You will also have to do legal contracts at the start of the process – with both your platform and your funder. Your production company or EP should be able to guide you through this, as the contracts are reasonably standard. But you can also enlist the aid of a screen industry lawyer if you feel you need to. SPADA board member Mick Sinclair works in this area, as does Karen Soich, and others. SPADA can help point you in the right direction.

As you move past contracting and into production, make sure you keep your platform and funder informed as you progress – there are specific formal producer reports required at certain stages along the way, but keep key people informally abreast of what you are doing as well. Check in now and then and at key stages, let people know of any issues and changes. Again, clear communication and courtesy will stand you in good stead. If there are differences of opinion talk them through calmly. Your commissioner might change their mind. They might not. Be prepared to compromise. Find a solution that works for both of you. Listen to what your commissioner is saying and what their need is – you might be able to give them that but in a different way from how they are asking for it.

The same thing happens at editing approval time. It can be very frustrating when you are happy with your edit and the network wants changes, but that's their right. Keep a cool head. Getting angry with them won't help you. If they're asking for something you don't think will work, explain why. Again, find a middle ground that works for both of you. Let some things go. Diplomacy and pragmatism will help you. Make sure you have left enough editing time and money for network changes so there are no last minute budget blow-outs.

Commissioners should know their audiences best. So, in most cases, when they are assessing your idea or looking at the fine cut in the edit suite they are asking for changes not just for the sake of it, but to make the idea and the programme best fit the platform and the time-slot.

I touched on budget management a moment ago in the context of making sure you have the money there for possible network changes, but obviously managing the budget and talking to your platform and funders about any possible issues is essential at all times. As a producer, you'll likely have a production manager running your budget for you. Get someone good who you know you can trust, and listen to them at all times. I won't go any further than that at this stage, as we could do a whole separate masterclass on budgeting, but ask me at the end if you have any specific questions.

Eventually you will be finished your show and delivering it to your platform, and – if it's been a good process for all concerned and you've made a great production - chances are you'll get to make another one.

I've talked a lot here about the importance of courtesy in your dealings with networks and funders. But of course this does go both ways. If you feel you have been badly or unfairly treated but don't feel you are in a strong enough position to raise it, and you're not working with anyone with the mana to do that for you, then come to us at SPADA. We have a whole board full of experienced producers, myself included, who will happily give you some advice and support.

USEFUL LINKS

SPADA website [here](#) or email info@spada.co.nz

NZ Writers Guild website [here](#) or email guildhq@nzwg.org.nz

NZ On Air Funding Guidelines [here](#) or email info@nzonair.govt.nz

Te Māngai Pāho Funding Guidelines [here](#) or email lynne@tmp.govt.nz