



pitching a

DOCUMENTARY PROJECT

Screen Australia staged a one-day marketing workshop for documentary filmmakers in August 2010. The aim was to help producers get as much exposure as possible for their documentaries by keeping the audience in mind from the outset. Much of the information provided on that day by Anne Vierhout has been fed into this guide to documentary pitching. She is a former coordinator of the IDFA Forum, one of the most important markets for the international co-financing of documentaries in the world.

A film usually has to be pitched to a range of people, sometimes over years, in order to secure financing. Pitching is one of the ways a filmmaker creates interest in a project. The preparation that goes into a pitch can help to clarify story, character and theme.

Financiers, TV buyers, commissioning editors and potential co-production partners are usual targets. Representatives of film funds and film institutes need to be kept on the radar if pitching in Europe, especially as some of these funds and institutes will finance without a broadcaster attached.

Pitching often occurs in a big public arena, in a very competitive context. In this setting there are likely to be strict rules around what is allowed and what is not and the large audience will include many people with the power to greenlight a project. Public forums like this are usually held as part of festivals, conferences and markets.

A more intimate version is the round-table pitch, which is a similar concept but, as the name suggests, is smaller in scale.

Filmmakers must be able to effectively sell projects on a one-on-one basis too. This might be necessary during an organised meeting or due to a chance encounter.

Beware of being under-prepared

Irrespective of the setting and context, it is much better to be over-prepared than under-prepared. Those who are good at pitching will know everything there is to know about their subject matter, will have thought through every aspect of their intended approach, will emphasise the most compelling aspects of a project and will have anticipated a project's perceived weaknesses.

It is not enough to know the project inside out: pitchers must also find out which commissioning editors will be attending and then research what strands they buy for, what projects they have bought in the past and the overall landscape within which they operate. It is a waste of time pitching a wildlife documentary to a history broadcaster.

In a large-scale public setting, meet the moderator in advance. Part of his or her job is to connect projects with appropriate targets and make everyone feel comfortable in what is a very high-pressure environment. You should also research the actual forum where the pitching will occur.

“The trailer is the most important element of the pitch and can make or break its success.”



pitching a

DOCUMENTARY PROJECT

Sell the team, the style and the story

One of the biggest mistakes made by inexperienced filmmakers when they are pitching is to tell too much about the story; it is equally important to sell the creative team and the visual style.

In the public arena, seven minutes is usually allowed for a pitch but three minutes will be used up screening a trailer.

The trailer is the most important element of a pitch and can make or break its success. A good trailer is compelling, has good pace and a distinctive look and feel. It introduces the characters, outlines the themes and captures the atmosphere of the film. A well-edited but flashy trailer is worthless if it doesn't accurately represent the film – and runs the risk of giving the impression the documentary will be all style with no substance.

In a public forum, do not, under any circumstances, read the treatment. Your audience will have already seen and read it during their own preparation using the materials supplied in advance.

It is best for the director and the producer to share the stage in a pitch. Commissioning editors and potential co-production partners want to be able to make an assessment of who they might be working with, their enthusiasm for the material and the amount of intellectual rigour they will bring to the work. Performance is a component of pitching but act naturally and let personality shine through.

Never say things that are untrue. If a contract has not been finalised, say it is under negotiation. Integrity is very important.

Answer any questions as clearly and succinctly as possible in one sentence. If a question can't be answered in 10 seconds say: "Yes, I can answer this, but may we discuss it in a meeting afterwards?"

"One of the biggest mistakes... is to tell too much about the story."

The one-liner has to be inviting

The basis of any pitch is a compelling one-line synopsis or logline. The one-liner and the title, especially in the case of a written pitch, have to be intriguing enough to make the reader want to immediately read the whole document.

Submitting a written synopsis, logline and treatment for serious consideration is a form of pitching. Often a written pitch is in response to a formal call for submissions but the timing could be just because a project is ready to send out into the world.

The synopsis should explain what happens in the story and also make a convincing argument for why the story is worth telling. 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.

Never make a written pitch too long. However, without knowing its purpose, it is not possible to advise a general word count. If there is a prescribed word limit, never exceed it. Less is more.

Following up is part of the process

Keep notes about which commissioners have shown interest so that they can be subsequently approached. If it is possible to immediately set up a one-on-one meeting after a public or round-table pitch, do so. Remember that a public setting can be intimidating for commissioning editors too, who may not want to express strong opinions or their commissioning priorities in front of their peers.

In a busy setting, be alert to body language. Respect the right of commissioning editors to relax and have some time to themselves – especially don't pitch in the toilet or lift. And don't shove DVDs into their hands at any time unless invited.

Don't panic if you don't get to talk to a commissioning editor you are targeting. If they like a pitch, they will track the project down.



pitching a

DOCUMENTARY PROJECT

Many forums are held annually around the world

Some filmmakers find it helpful to pitch at smaller national or regional forums before entering bigger events.

In Europe, the principal forums and markets where pitching occurs are:

- The FORUM at IDFA in Amsterdam, The Netherlands, www.idfa.nl/industry/markets-funding/the_forum.aspx
- DOK Leipzig in Germany, www.dok-leipzig.de
- Doc Outlook Market at Visions du Réel in Switzerland, www.visionsdureel.ch/en.html
- Doclisboa in Portugal, www.doclisboa.org/2011/en/home/2/
- MIPDOC/MIPTV and MIPCOM in France, www.mipworld.com
- Sheffield MeetMarket in the UK, <http://sheffdocfest.com/view/meetmarket>
- Dragon Forum in Poland, <http://dragonforum.pl>
- Eastern European Forum in the Czech Republic, www.dokweb.net/en/east-european-forum
- Sunny Side of the Doc, which now has offshoots in Asia and South America, www.sunnysideofthedoc.com/uk/index.php
- Crossroads Co-production Forum at the Thessaloniki International Film Festival in Greece, www.filmfestival.gr

Those outside Europe include:

- Hot Docs Forum (formerly TDF) in Toronto, Canada, www.hotdocs.ca/conference/hot_docs_forum
- Docaviv in Israel, www.docaviv.co.il/en/about/galilee-festival

The FORUM in Amsterdam and the Hot Docs Forum in Toronto are the biggest and most prestigious documentary pitching forums in the world, and emerging filmmakers may struggle to be selected.

Gathering market intelligence is crucial for filmmakers looking for finance and partners.

Watching other people pitch can be very enlightening and can help a filmmaker to shape his or her own style. It is also useful for spotting trends in different territories and gathering information about who has real commissioning power and finance.