UNSCRIPTED TELEVISION

100 TIPS

-for-

BREAKING IN

-and-

CAREER SUCCESS

Everything you need to know to get started. From breaking in the business to pitching shows, finding agents to surviving production. Advice from real TV producers working in the business today.

J O K E A N D B I A G I O
Unscripted Television:
100 Tips for Breaking In
And Career Success

Joke and Biagio
Dedicated to our amazing listeners who’ve followed our podcast over the first 100 episodes.

Thank you!
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Unscripted Televison

What is it?

Unscripted television and film. That’s what we talk and write about at our site Producing Unscripted. In the first 100 episodes of our podcast, we’ve covered many facets of the unscripted TV and film business.

It’s a blanket term that describes any TV show that does not have a fictional, scripted storyline. It’s come to include genres like:

- documentaries
- documentary series
- true crime
- game shows
- variety shows
- reality TV
- paranormal programming

Read on for 100 tips on breaking into and succeeding in unscripted television.
And who are we?

Joke and Biagio

We’re award-winning filmmakers and TV producers, wife and husband team Joke and Biagio. Together, we’ve made over a hundred hours of television series and specials. Plus, one theatrically released documentary. And many TV pilots and presentations for most television networks.

We started this podcast to share tips about:

- breaking into unscripted TV and film
- working your way up in the business
- pitching your own shows
- making TV and film

Joke and Biagio

We’re married to each other. Together, we’re full time TV and film producers and very part-time podcasters and bloggers. Occasionally, we write an ebook.

We also created it as a way to meet other filmmakers who might want to team up with us at some point.
What’s in this free ebook?

100 Tips...

...pulled from our first 100 episodes. Hand selected to give you a broad understanding of the unscripted television industry.

("Note: some episodes have several tips, so not every episode is represented below. You’ll want to be sure to subscribe to the podcast. It’s free, and you’ll have access to every Producing Unscripted podcast episode.)

Below, you'll find these 100 tips broken down by category. Following the tips are relevant links to learn more. There you’ll find Producing Unscripted podcast episodes and posts. Those will give you a “deep dive” into every tip offered here.

We hope these tips serve as a refresher for those of you who've heard all the episodes.

The tips themselves present in no particular order. They are all important.

For new visitors, feel free to jump to topics of interest, or check out all podcast episodes here.

Once you finish this ebook, be sure to also check out our in-depth free guide How to Pitch a Reality Show.

Read on, or click in the table of contents to jump to a specific section.
Chapter 1

The Basics

A wide range of tips designed to give you a broad overview of the business. From realistic expectations, to production no-nos, this section brings you unscripted television and film 101.

1. **Unscripted television & film is not a get rich quick business.**
   You will not become a millionaire overnight. You have to be in this business for the long haul and because you love it, not because of the paycheck. As a TV creator and/or producer you seldom own or control the show. It’s important to know this as you plan your career.

   **Who Owns a TV Show?**

2. **Do your homework. Watch TV!**
   This is the thing we tell people most often. You have to understand what’s currently on the air. What are networks airing RIGHT NOW? Which networks are having success with what kind of shows?

   **What TV Networks Buy and Why**
3. **Make yourself valuable.**

   How? Do as many things on this list as possible:
   - Find a great, real life character.
   - Provide access to a unique world.
   - Attach an exciting property (celebrity, podcast, brand, etc.)
   - Wow people with a specific filmmaking skill.
   - Be someone people want to work with.

   Most new producers don’t do any of the above.

   "Unscripted TV Success - Up Your Odds With This Secret"

4. **Just starting out? Don’t pitch these 4 kinds of shows.**

   It will make you look like a newbie. Because almost every brand new producer pitches one or all of these:
   - Kids’ shows
   - Old School Travel Shows (Best 40 Vacation Spots)
   - Dump & Stir cooking shows
   - Infotainment/current issues

   Keep in mind there are always exceptions to the rules. We want to help you maximize your time and resources. That's one reason we recommend staying away from these kinds of shows when you start out. They're often referred to as MOPs (most often pitched.)

   "Starting Out? Don’t Pitch These Four Kinds of Shows"
5. **Know the 5 Magic words of pitching unscripted television and reality TV.**

- **Self-Contained:** An episode of a show stands on its own.
- **Arced:** Continues story lines from one episode to the next. You can’t watch them out of order, it wouldn’t make sense.
- **Format:** Any show that has structural elements that repeat every episode.
- **Docu:** Has its roots in documentary. More of a “follow real life as it happens” approach, as opposed to repeating beats of a format show.
- **Hybrid:** Also known as “hidden format.” This is the workhorse of reality TV. It’s like a follow-doc in that you’re following peoples lives. Yet, there is a “soft format” element that returns every episode.

What TV shows fall into these categories? Check out the below episode to learn.

**5 Magic Words of Pitching Unscripted Film & Television**

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You will not become a millionaire overnight. You have to be in this business for the long haul and because you love it, not because of the paycheck.
6. **An unscripted TV world must have certain qualities.**
   - Needs to be visual (boring beige accounting office is a no-no.) Think about what the audience is seeing - it must engage them.
   - The world should feel like a discovery. Something the audience hasn’t seen presented this way before.
   - The world itself should cause dramatic situations to occur. For example, Mother Nature, a war zone, or a packed restaurant with rowdy guests.
   - The world must fit somewhere on the TV landscape. Would any TV network do a show set in this world?

You'll do yourself a big favor by choosing TV friendly worlds and avoiding the rest.

**Great Reality TV Worlds Have These Four Qualities**

7. **Be polite, but persistent.**

It is okay to reach out by email to follow up on a meeting or a pitch after a few weeks, but don't be rude. Find a reason to get your name back at the top of your contact’s in-box (like sharing a relevant article to your pitch.) Be persistent, but be polite. No one will want to work with you if you act entitled.

Also, be nice to the gate keepers (assistants, receptionists, security guards, etcetera.) Heck, bring them cookies! (We did.) These people are around the executives you’re after all the time. (You’d be surprised how often rude behavior is reported to bosses.) Remember, they are often the ones scheduling the meetings you’re dying for.

**3 Tips to Break Into Hollywood and Stay There**
8. **You have to pay your dues.**
   We all start at the bottom. No matter the gig, do the job well -- regardless of pay or position. Take all jobs as a learning opportunity. Once you commit to a position, give 100% and see it through. You can always switch career lanes on the next gig.

   How Not to Suck: Hollywood Advice We Love

9. **The agent you want is the agent who wants you.**
   Find an agent who believes in you. That’s more important than being with a huge agency. Agents often move around between agencies. You want to stay with someone who will work for you because they believe you have something special.

   How to Get a Hollywood Agent

10. **Showbiz is slowbiz.**
    Be patient. Things take time in this industry, that’s why they call it “slow business.” People are so busy that it could take weeks or months to get back to you. Plus, once legal teams start hashing out the details, things slow to a crawl. Best advice - once you pitch something, immediately move on to your next project. Always have something in the pipeline. Then you’ll be too busy to worry about how long things are taking.

   Realities of the Pitching Timeline
11. **Plan to grow your filmmaking skills...forever.**
   
   We still learn new things every day. Meet people and learn from all areas of the industry. As a producer, you should be familiar with every job on set, and every department you might encounter. The internet is your friend...just know where to look for good advice.

   *5 Traits of Successful TV & Film Producers...and the Letter “L”*

12. **Don’t be THAT person.**

   Are you on a new job or teaming up with a production company? Bet you have a lot of questions, and that’s good. Unfortunately there are such things as dumb questions. Try not to ask questions you can answer yourself with a little online research. A quick Google search becomes your best friend and you’ll save everyone a lot of time.

   *3 Secrets: Asking Questions in Hollywood (Without Sounding Stupid)*

13. **Start every new project fresh and fierce**

   Even after making over 100 hours of TV and Film, every new project is a challenge. We still give ourselves pep talks! We:

   - Go in with an open mind.
   - Rethink everything we know.
   - Allow creativity to happen (or hope it does!)

   In fact, there’s a list we go over before every new TV show or film we start. You should build your own list as well:

   *Art of Starting: Make TV & Film*
14. Yes, this is high-pressure work. Embrace it.
Pressure is a privilege. Take things one step at a time and do the best work you can do. Be very happy that someone is trusting you enough to put up money for your work. That speaks volumes. Don’t let the pressure overwhelm you, revel in it. Pressure can work in magical ways. It’s worth retraining your brain to think this way:

Pressure is a Privilege. Here’s Why.

15. You will get network notes you don’t agree with.
Be flexible with network executives. You have to be willing to take their notes and find a way to make them work. Sometimes you need to figure out the “note behind the note.” Find a compromise you can all agree on. Be very careful which battles you choose to fight. Don’t wreck your project, but don’t turn every disagreement into a war.

Making TV Pilots: 5 Practical Tips You Can Use

16. Find your inspiration.
Beginning a new project? Let other people’s work inspire you. Stuck in the middle of a project and aren’t sure which direction to go? You need some references. Similar shows aren’t the only places to look. Museums, books, posters, news coverage - anything is fair game. The wilder your source of inspiration the more unique your project becomes.

Sizzle Reel Secret: How We Sell TV Shows
17. **Know what you’re getting into when producing a feature documentary.**

Planning a feature documentary? You have to be in it for the long haul. Feature documentaries often take years to complete. It is a lot of work. You have to make sure you can handle it, both mentally and physically.

*Producing Documentaries with Sundance Fellow Amanda Spain*

18. **Time is your most precious resource.**

High-school economics teacher Mr. Butchko once told Biagio an incredible truth. The most important resource we have is TIME. You can't make more time, you can't find more time. All you can do is spend the time you have wisely. That counts twice as much on set.

*Setiquette - Be a Pro on Any Film or TV Set*

19. **Be ready to take advantage when your lucky break presents itself.**

This business requires hard work and perseverance. And then, usually at the least expected times, an opportunity will present itself. It is your job to be ready to make the most of it.

*Catching Your Lucky Break in Hollywood*

20. **Learn how to handle criticism.**

Don't take criticism personally. Yes, easier said than done, but crucial for your survival and mental health. Strive to use criticism as a tool to better yourself. The best way to learn is through experience. More tips here:

*Handling Criticism in Hollywood - Your How-To Guide*
21. **Production can hammer you more than booze.**

If you are giving your all to a project (which you should) you are going to burn out. You need to recharge. It is important to take a rest between productions. Always come back 100% for your next show. You owe it to yourself…and your bosses:

*Production Hangovers: How to Survive, Recharge, and Move On*

22. **There is no such thing as an overnight success.**

Not very many shows become instant hits. It takes time for shows to gain popularity. That makes it easy to second guess your creative decisions. Plus, sometimes TV executives note from a place of fear.

Producers need to stay sane in the face of these notes. Recognize what changes in direction are warranted. Avoid fear-based, knee jerk reactions. Otherwise, your show will suffer.

*The Notes Process in Hollywood with Troy Devolld*

23. **Yes, we’re all scared sometimes. It’s okay.**

Don’t let fear keep you from achieving your goals. Take it from Shay - you never know where life will take you if you roll the dice and go for it. An amazing, wonderful story about chasing dreams:

*Shalandra Champ: Life After Reality TV*
24. **Every day is another step forward.**

Never stop hustling. This industry is built on hustle. Always be creating, meeting new people, and learning new skills. Doing so will also help keep you sane in this very tough business.

**Can you own your own TV show?**

Be nice to the gate keepers (assistants, receptionists, security guards, etcetera.) Heck, bring them cookies! (We did.) These people are around the executives you’re after all the time. (You’d be surprised how often rude behavior is reported to bosses.) Remember, they are often the ones scheduling the meetings you’re dying for.
Chapter 2

Story Tips for Unscripted Television and Film

These tips will help you find and assess story for your potential unscripted projects. Story depth, second hooks, story engines - all the key concepts you need to get your head around the story side of this business.

25. **Make sure you have enough story.**

You must figure out how to make your seed of an idea last 22 or 44 minutes week after week. You might have a great show concept, but you need to make sure every episode is different and exciting. This is why it’s crucial to know the difference between TV series and profile pieces.

TV Series vs Profile Pieces

26. **Must have that second hook.**

Your unscripted television concept needs a second hook. Having a second hook will allow your show to stand out from most other pitches. It makes it easier to present your concept in a promo. Plus, adding a second hook helps engage the audience.

Pitch Success Secret: Sell Film & TV By Crafting Your Second Hook

You might have a great show concept, but you need to make sure every episode is different and exciting.
27. **Start up that story engine.**
   Ask yourself what engine drives your story. What will advance your story from beginning to end? Your story engine is crucial. It will keep your audience interested. It will make a network excited about your pitch. And it will save you in production.

   [What is a Story Engine? Why Do You Need One?](#)

28. **The best new shows might be in your back yard.**
   Pay attention to real life. There could aways be a potential unscripted television show right in front of your face. Maybe you already have access to a unique world or you already know a larger than life group of people. Especially if you’re not in Los Angeles or New York - a hit show could be in your hometown.

   [5 Traits of Successful TV and Film Producers and the letter “L”](#)

29. **No fudging.**
   When pitching reenactment shows, do research and present real examples of actual stories. Do not make up wild tales with no basis in reality in hopes of interesting execs with your concept.

   Reenactment projects lean toward documentary. Facts presented must be real and correct. You will crash and burn if you start making up stories for your pitches.

   [3 Steps: Pitch Cinematic Reenactment TV Shows](#)
30. **Mine those interviews.**

Use interview bites to help shape story and get more mileage out of your footage. Interviews are a great tool to flesh out characters. They also reveal details and truths you could never guess existed.

When you hit story gold in an interview, explore where it can take your project. Even if the direction is unexpected, it’s worth considering. This will enhance your project and paint a vivid picture for viewers.

*Cinematic Storytelling with Reenactments*

31. **Find story sources everywhere.**

You can create a potential hit TV show out of relatively unknown subject matter. Obscure books, under-the-radar journalism...doesn’t matter. The stories don’t have to be particularly popular. You just have to know how to translate them for TV.

*Back to School: TV & Film Style!*

Ask yourself what engine drives your story. What will advance your story from beginning to end? Your story engine is crucial. It will keep your audience interested. It will make a network excited about your pitch. And it will save you in production.
Chapter 3
Casting

Building shows based on real people is a great recipe for success -- especially if you're just starting out. These tips will help you think about casting, whether in documentary or competition reality shows.

32. **Character, character, character.**
Characters must be unique in some way. They must bring an extraordinary perspective to the ordinary. Great characters don’t self-censor, they speak their minds at all times.

[Your Characters: 6 Must-Have Traits of Reality TV and Documentary Subjects](#)

33. **It’s all about chemistry: get the right ingredients.**
Casting is key in competition shows. Find great people who work well together as a group, not just as individual personalities. When mixed together, the personalities should play off of each other. Ideally the mix makes every character seem even bigger.

[Create Competition Reality Shows: 3 Keys to Success](#)

34. **Design challenges to create story between cast members.**
In competition shows, challenges should create a real emotional reaction in your cast. You want this to create the drama in your competition show. Challenges that push your cast mentally and physically will give you the most story.

[Create Competition Reality Shows: 3 Keys to Success](#)
35. **Gotta’ get them on tape.**

Never pitch a character without video of said character. Written descriptions don't cut it. Footage is always best. That doesn't mean you need a fancy camera. Character doesn't pop on a cheap pocket cam or Skype recording? They won't pop when you shove a high-end camera in their face, either.

*Pitching shows we want*

36. **In follow-docs, one is never enough.**

You need more than one great character. Even the biggest star needs more people who are also interesting to carry a doc-style show.

*3 Steps: Turn a Character into a TV Show*

37. **Flesh out every character so the audience feels they know them.**

Interviews must go beyond the basics. Especially when you're pitching an unscripted television show built on real people. Shoot doc footage of their lives. Interview other people in their lives talking about the character. This will help the audience (and execs) get a real sense of your cast.

*Casting Tapes: Show, Tell, or Both?*

38. **You can’t force a show on anyone, not even great characters.**

You can't push someone into doing an unscripted television show. If your potential cast member doesn't want a TV career, accept it. Move on to your next project.

*How to Cast Reality TV with Dana Golder*
39. **Be trustworthy.**

Earning the trust of your subject is crucial. It helps them open up to tell their story. Without their trust, the story will suffer. You want your cast be open and uncensored. They’ll only come across that way if they believe you will protect them in the edit. It’s your job to make sure they are not misrepresented at any point in the filmmaking process.

5 Tips: True Crime Series - Develop Deep Dives

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You need more than one great character. Even the biggest star needs more people who are also interesting to carry a doc-style show.
Chapter 4
Creating Pitch Tapes

Pitch tapes are videos created to sell unscripted television or film projects. What should they look like? Where should you spend your time? How much money should you invest? These are the answers you’ve been looking for.

40. Producers make stuff.
   Make any kind of tape to get started. Prove your value by making a great piece for no out-of-pocket money. Pitching to us or anyone else for the first time? Showing us footage is a must. Even better is when we learn you’re responsible for all of it.

   Unscripted TV Success: Instantly Up Your Odds With This Secret

41. First impressions matter.
   Pitching a show? Present your best materials: footage, pictures, bios, etcetera. This means great characters, interesting worlds and well thought-out formats. You only get one first impression, so make it count.

   5 Steps to Develop Shows Without Going Broke

Prove your value by making a great piece for no out-of-pocket money.
42. **Think like a promo department.**

A pitch tape is like a mini movie trailer for your TV show idea. It doesn't need to be super fancy. You can even shoot it on your cell phone. Do not spend a ton of money on your pitch tape. Instead, spend a ton of time thinking about how to make it feel like a great promo for your show. Then use every trick in the book to get it there.

What Goes in a Pitch Tape? Should You Make One?

43. **Docu-series pitch tapes need to smack you in the face.**

A Docu-Soap trailer should be around 3-6 minutes. Give a sense of characters, drama, and the world the show takes place in. Hint at possible story lines. Smack us in the face with the tone of your show (is it a comedy or a drama?) Make it clear with the music you choose, graphic style, and the content in the first 15-20 seconds of your tape.

What Goes in a Pitch Tape? Should You Make One?

44. **Format pitch tapes need to be crystal clear.**

A format trailer should be around 1-3 minutes. Explain how exactly the show works. Use photographs, computer graphics, found footage, and title cards. Be creative.

What Goes in a Pitch Tape? Should You Make One?

45. **Characters should never sell themselves.**

Don’t make your cast be their own “sales people” on camera. Use title cards, interviews with other people, and/or voice-over to do the heavy lifting.

Let your stars spend their time showing off their unique personalities. Find other ways to boast about their expertise, awards, and general greatness.

Casting Tapes: Show, Tell, or Both?
46. **Build skills, then use them in your pitch tapes.**

With every new skill, your valueskyrockets. And every pitch tape you make becomes more compelling.

- Learning how to shoot and edit your own footage already puts you ahead of the curve.
- Take an online sound-mixing course and your mix will pop.
- Pick up some graphics skills, and your tapes go to a pro level.

Every new skill you learn makes you a better filmmaker and producer. And it makes you more exciting for professionals to work with.

What Goes in a Pitch Tape? Should You Make One?

47. **Keep your money in the bank and your credit cards in your wallet.**

Do not spend big dollars on your pitch tapes. The money you spend on an unscripted television pitch tape will never be repaid. Your only guaranteed return on your investment is experience earned producing something.

Sizzle Reels: Budgets, Investors, and More

48. **Open big. It’s go big or go home.**

The first 10-15 seconds of your pitch tape are the MOST crucial moments to engaging your buyers. This is when you grab their attention and hold on tight. If you do not intrigue buyers in the first 15 seconds, you’ve usually lost them.

Pro Tip: Awesome Beginnings
49. **Don’t shoot an entire TV pilot. (Unless you really want to.)**

You **USUALLY** do not want to produce your own TV pilot. It is nearly impossible to sell a full pilot to a network for many reasons. Plus, they’ll likely never repay you for the money spent creating the pilot. Stick to short pitch tapes.

Only exception? You want the experience of producing a full pilot. So you take on the challenge as a an incredible learning experience.

Just know the experience is what you’re getting out of it (and that’s worth a lot.) Don’t expect to ever see a dime of your money repaid. Keep things indie and low budget if you go this route.

[Should You Film Your Own TV Pilot?](#)

50. **Best references for pitch tapes are on-air promos.**

Search for “series promos” or “trailers” for similar shows to yours. This will help guide your pitch tape creation. For example, on YouTube, search “Deadliest Catch series trailer.”

This technique reveals how networks sell their shows to an audience. You can use the same techniques to sell networks your concepts.

Just be sure to pick promos and trailers that came out in the last year or so. You don’t want to imitate what a network was doing ten years ago.

[Sizzle Reel Secret: How We Sell TV Shows](#)

You **USUALLY** do not want to produce your own TV pilot. It is nearly impossible to sell a full pilot to a network for many reasons.
51. **Got no graphic skills? Helvetica is your friend.**

If your show is a drama:
- use a black background and white text. Make the font Helvetica Bold or Helvetica Neue Thin.

If your show is a comedy:
- use a white background with black or brightly colored text. Make the font Helvetica Bold or Helvetica Neue Thin.

Don’t ever tell a real designer we told you this. They’ll cringe. However, TV Network execs will think it looks just fine. You’ll be in the clear.

*Sizzle Reel Secret: How We Sell TV Shows*

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* A pitch tape is like a mini movie trailer for your TV show idea. It doesn’t need to be super fancy. You can even shoot it on your cell phone. Do not spend a ton of money on your pitch tape. Instead, spend a ton of time thinking about how to make it feel like a great promo for your show. Then use every trick in the book to get it there.*
Chapter 5
Pitching Projects

You’ve built a pitch tape. Assembled excellent materials. Now, you have the big meeting. You’re sitting down with a production company or a network. First impressions count more than ever. Here are some tips on preparing and executing the pitch phase of your projects.

52. **Ideas are not enough.**

Execution of an idea is protect-able – the idea itself is not. This is why shows like “Wife Swap” and “Trading Spouses” can end up on the air at the same time. The one-line pitch for each is essentially the same. The execution, primarily in tone and format, are different.

Always pitch a package, not an idea. For example, not “I want to do a show about witchcraft!” Rather, “I made this tape featuring three sisters who are witches.”

**Why Ideas Aren’t Enough in Hollywood**

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**Pitch Packages**

What are packages? Concepts + assets. Rather than a simple idea you’ve created out of your head, you have something real attached:

- A real life person who is a great character
- Access to a unique world
- Rights to a book, podcast, or other intellectual property
- Amazing video
- Anything else you attach to your project that makes it special.
53. **Switching it up is not always good.**

Cable networks usually program either a female world, or a male world (A&E being the biggest exception.)

In general, do not pitch a female world that stars men (for instance, funny guys who run a beauty parlor.) Research shows women like to watch other women. If you do have a male character in a female world, make sure great female characters surround him.

Likewise, pitching typically male worlds (i.e. car shows and wilderness shows) with a female cast is often problematic as well. Most networks feel that men prefer their “man-cave” shows led by men.

*Top Secret: What TV Networks Buy (And Why)*

54. **Make the most out of your first meeting.**

Make your meetings count. Show that you’re a professional, that you know what you’re doing, and know what you want. Find a way to show you’ve done your research on the person you’re meeting with.

Do you know who they’ve worked with, who their contacts are, or which networks they’re in business with? Can you explain why you believe they are a good fit for your project?

*3 Tips to Break Into Hollywood and Stay There*

55. **Passion moves people, including network executives.**

Never underestimate passion. People can smell it. If you’re pitching a show simply to make a sale, you’ll likely fail. If you do not have passion for your unscripted television or film project, no one else will either. Better to find a project that inspires you and has a potential market.

*3 Tips to Break Into Hollywood and Stay There*
56. **Avoid the hype!**

If you barge in and say, “I have a ‘can’t miss’ idea” you have just raised the bar impossibly high. Networks spend millions of dollars trying to come up with “can’t miss” ideas and still fail. Claiming that a project is a “sure hit” is the mark of a newbie.

Never predict how a TV show or film will perform. Instead, focus on why you’re excited about a project and how incredibly good it could be.

3 Tips to Break Into Hollywood and Stay There

57. **Project confidence, even if you have to fake it.**

Be confident in yourself and your pitch. You don't have to be the most polished sales person an exec has ever seen. You do need to know what you’re talking about, and look like you belong.

Prepare yourself for questions and curve balls. If the room's not responding to your pitch, be ready to adjust it on-the-fly.

How to Turn a Book- or Any Property - Into a TV Show with Chad Gervich

58. **Produce your pitch down to the minute.**

If you only have a short time to pitch your project, BE PREPARED.

Do not show up to a meeting and waste the first five minutes talking about the traffic. You only get one shot.

Of course, be polite. Don’t charge into your pitch without any niceties. But be aware of the clock. Sense when to shift gears and how to make the most of the time you have.

Pitch Fests: Should You Pay to Pitch? 4 Rock Solid Rules for Pitch Fests
59. **Know the room you’re in.**

It’s very easy to research the executive you’ll be meeting with. So don’t pitch a rough and tumble Deadliest Catch style show to a Bravo exec. Do your homework and listen to the execs. They may have just read some audience research that you can use to adjust your pitch to their needs.

**Pitch Fests: Should You Pay to Pitch? 4 Rock Solid Rules for Pitch Fests**

60. **Passion projects pay you by feeding your passion.**

It’s great to have a passion project, but most of the time it won’t pay the bills. A passion project is something you’re compelled to make, even if nobody else wants it. It’s something that no network will touch, and no production company wants to invest in.

Our theatrically-released documentary, *Dying to do Letterman*, was our passion project. No one wanted it, so we funded it ourselves.

It won awards. The International Documentary Association invited it to qualify for Academy Award® consideration. The film played in theaters and received a distribution deal. It was not a money maker. It was a prestige builder. Most important, making it fed our souls.

**Avoid This Pitch Mistake**

*It’s great to have a passion project, but most of the time it won’t pay the bills.*
61. **Not every buyer is your buyer.**

Don’t pitch your project to everyone just because you can. So, you’re lucky enough to get a meeting, but you’ve done your homework and you know your show isn’t right for them? Be honest up front, ask them what they are looking for and be ready to pitch on the fly. If you make a good impression, you’ll be able to come back with a project that is right for them.

*Step by Step: TV Idea to TV Show*

62. **You can’t pitch what you don’t have.**

If you are going to pitch a show featuring a celebrity, you must already have access to that celebrity. Film your own footage to prove it. Videos you only pulled from YouTube won’t do, but can be included in addition to your original footage.

Ditto for a family, organization, or any other subject matter you are pitching. NEVER pitch what you do not have.

*Hollywood Insider Tip: Can You Pitch What You Don’t Have?*

63. **Reimagine your show for multiple networks when possible, but don’t force it.**

Can you adapt your concept to fit the brand of multiple networks? A slightly different pitch for each? A show that’s right for *Discovery* may also work for *History* or *NatGeo*. If a project can be pitched to more than one network, even if you have to adapt it a bit, you up your chances for a sale.

*Hollywood Pitch Meetings: Pro Tip for Success*
64. **Rinse and repeat.**
Once you pitch a project, move on to your next project. Don’t put all your eggs in one basket. Don’t drive yourself crazy “waiting to hear.”

The best cure for the “waiting game” that is Hollywood is to keep moving forward on other projects. You’ll be too busy to worry while execs consider your pitches.

*3 Steps to Win the Hollywood Numbers Game*

65. **Mood boards get executives in the mood.**
Pinterest is a great tool (and secret weapon) to create mood boards or draw inspiration. You can find photos to illustrate the tone of your show, camera angles, color schemes, and more.

*Back to School: TV and Film Style*

66. **Listen to what they’re telling you.**
It would be great if we could tell networks what they want, but they spend millions on research every year. They know what they want, at least right now. And while that may change, if you want to sell, just listen.

A great place to visit is their websites. Research the websites of the networks you want to pitch to. Know everything there is to know about that network.

*Back to School: TV and Film Style*
67. **“Soft Pitch” doesn’t mean empty pitch.**

Even a soft pitch needs more than an idea. A soft pitch is not a simple logline. You should only soft pitch a concept based on a real person, place, or thing you have access to film. Remember, the purpose of a soft pitch is to say, “I have access to X. Should I spend resources filming it?”

[10 Mistakes That Wreck Your Pitches](#)

68. **Soft pitching is for execs or production companies you already know.**

Only soft pitch to people you already have a relationship with. You don’t want to soft pitch a network exec or production company who doesn’t know you. This goes back to first impressions. Once people know your skills, they won’t judge you on ideas that aren’t fleshed out.

[Soft Pitch Blueprint - Beyond Ideas for Pitch Success](#)

69. **Even a soft pitch needs materials.**

It’s not just a conversation. A treatment and pictures should be part of your soft pitch. Videos pulled from online are also okay in a soft pitch - IF - you already have the talent on board.

This is only for soft pitches -- never do a “proper” pitch to a network without footage that proves you have something.

[Soft Pitch Blueprint - Beyond Ideas for Pitch Success](#)
70. **Spend time thinking of a good title.**

Run from vague titles. The title of your show should hint at its subject matter without feeling generic. A good title can make the difference in a sale.

**Paper Pitches: 5 Steps to Awesome**

*Always pitch a package, not an idea. For example, not “I want to do a show about witchcraft!” Rather, “I made this tape featuring three sisters who are witches.”*
Chapter 6
Filming and Editing

Making a pitch tape? Producing your first big project? Entire books have been written on the filming and editing process. We won’t try to compete with those. Rather, here are a few tips specific to unscripted television and film.

71. **Pretty pictures make for happy executives.**

Shallow depth of field makes interviews look like bigger productions. Techniques, like properly “using a long lens,” up production value. Little dollies and sliders go a long way. Drone footage is easy to get. It all helps.

*5 Tips to Make Small Productions Feel Big*

72. **Always cover your you-know-what.**

Shoot as many different angles as you can without harming your production. You never know which angle will tell the story better, especially on important scenes. You can’t plan how reality will unfold. You can plan how to capture it if things go haywire.

*5 Tips to Make Small Productions Feel Big*

*Little dollies and sliders go a long way. Drone footage is easy to get. It all helps.*
73. **Don’t be afraid of visual effects.**

VFX up your production value. Desktop computers and laptops today are capable of pulling off realistic “movie magic.”

Placing a computer generated gun in a scene, for instance, can be safer and cheaper than filming a real one. Adding the Eiffel Tower with VFX to a reenactment is another great example. Far less expensive than traveling to Paris.

5 Tips to Make Small Productions Feel Big

74. **Unscripted projects should feature some great, unique framing.**

Make your shots interesting. Creative angles driven by your narrative will keep people engaged in your show. Wild angles and stunt cameras are great options when appropriate.

Experiment if you can. You can always cut it in post if the angle calls too much attention to itself.

Cinematic Storytelling with Reenactments

75. **Adobe Premiere is reality-ready.**

Adobe Premiere is great for building multi-cams. The flexibility to change them at anytime, updating on the fly, is impressive.

We find that Adobe Premiere is the most flexible and user friendly editing software. See this case study. As of this writing, we use it on every production.

Making TV With Adobe Premiere
76. **Stay up to date with those new filmmaking and editing tools.**

Lynda.com is a great tool to learn new software and pick up filming techniques. We use the site regularly. The industry changes fast. Having some way to stay informed and keep growing is crucial. Software and hardware evolve at an astounding rate. Keep up:

[Television Post-Production - Tips You Can Steal!](#)

Make your shots interesting. **Creative angles driven by your narrative will keep people engaged in your show. Wild angles and stunt cameras are great options when appropriate. Experiment if you can. You can always cut it in post if the angle calls too much attention to itself.**
Chapter 7

Genre Concerns

Just like the movie business, unscripted television and film has its own genres and sub-genres. It’s important to understand where your potential project fits in. Different genres have specific tentpoles audiences have come to expect. And some networks only work in certain genres. Presenting your show as part of an existing genre helps you in the pitch process.

77. **Competition shows need a worthy prize.**

On our TV show *Scream Queens*, the winner received a starring role in *SAW*. She would appear on movie screens world-wide. That was a worthy prize.

The prize is part of your package when pitching a competition show. That’s why you probably don’t want to create these kinds of shows when you’re just starting out. It’s not easy to get someone to put up a huge prize if you’re unknown in the unscripted television industry.

*[Create Competition Reality Shows: 3 Keys to Success]*

78. **Hosted shows can feel old school.**

You don’t want to pitch a show where “a cool host shows us some unique world” UNLESS...

- You already have the host
- That host has a real connection to the world you’re pitching
- They don’t feel like a traditional “host” but more like an interesting character

Focus on your talent’s expertise and build the show around that. It will feel less “hosted” and more organic.

*[One Huge Reason Your Concept is Not a TV Show]*
79. **You need a larger audience than yourself.**

If a topic speaks to you in a profoundly personal way, consider if it will also appeal to a bigger audience. If it speaks to you, and it’s not too niche, it may speak to others as well. Learning what moves you personally is important. Sensing if a larger audience will feel the same is a skill you must develop.

*How to Turn a Book, Or Any TV Property, Into a TV Show with Chad Gervich*

80. **Stake those tentpoles.**

Your format show should have “tentpole” moments with colorful names. We all know “the tribe has spoken” and the “immunity challenge” from Survivor.

These tentpoles help the audience understand the format of your show. They also clue people in about where they’re at in your show.

*Shows We’re Looking For - Plus, Pitching Formats*

81. **Nothing gets a production company and network on the same page faster than a style guide.**

Create a style guide to give the network or production company an idea of how your show will look.

Pull pictures from the internet, magazines, or personal photos to sell the tone of the show.

*Style Guides for Unscripted Television - A How-To*

82. **Make sure your style guide fits the network you pitch.**

Your style guide has to sync with the network you are pitching to. Don’t pitch a tonally dark style to a “bright” network and vice versa. Your style guide should feel like it could fit in with any show on their air.

*Style Guides for Unscripted Television - A How-To*
83. **Find what’s real.**

Unscripted television, reality shows, and documentary series are about something real. Do not pitch a concept without actually knowing if that person, place, or thing exists. (And you should ALREADY have access to that person, place, or thing.)

*Top 3 Pitch Mistakes You’re Making Today*

84. **If it’s too niche for TV, try digital.**

Niche ideas can be more successful on YouTube. A show about basket weaving could flop on television, but could be a hit on YouTube or the web.

*TV versus YouTube - Where Does Your Show Belong?*

Your format show should have “tentpole” moments with colorful names. We all know “the tribe has spoken” and the “immunity challenge” from Survivor. These tentpoles help the audience understand the format of your show. They also clue people in about where they’re at in your show.
Chapter 8
Legal Concerns

It’s impossible to put an unscripted television show on the air, or film in theaters, without legal considerations. Here are a few things you’ll run into on the legal side of the unscripted business.

85. You can protect your package.

It’s not possible to protect a simple, one-line idea. If you package up your show with a real person, place, or thing, you are far more protected. You’re no longer pitching a concept anyone could already have in development. You’re now pitching a specific package you’ve worked to put together. If you’ve protected your package, no one can come in and steal your talent/access.

Choosing an Entertainment Attorney

86. Get it signed.

If you have a real person, place, or entity willing to give you access, get something in writing. Even a simple letter of agreement can be helpful. This helps “prove” your package.

Casting Agreements for Unscripted Television

87. Read the fine print when using archival footage.

Always check with your lawyer before using archival materials. Don’t get hit with a lawsuit because you improperly used a small newspaper headline from 1967. Better safe than sorry.

Casting True Crime Projects with Alexis Linkletter
Chapter 9

TV and Film Production Tips

From “setiquette” to surviving, these tips will prepare you for unscripted television and film production..

88. **Always be prepared.**

Going into a Hollywood production is like jumping head first into a black hole. You will disappear from the world for weeks or even months. A few tips:

- You will have very little time for your friends and family, so let them know ahead of time that you will be MIA. You don’t want Mom and Dad freaking out that they haven’t heard from you.
- Pay your bills before you’re deep in production. You don’t want your power shut off because you forgot to pay the electric company. Or even worse, have your cable shut off!
- Think about your health. (Book doctor appointments. Fill prescriptions. Etcetera.) Schedule these ahead of time and put a reminder in your calendar. You can’t afford to neglect your health.
- Schedule car maintenance (oil change, anyone?)
- Clean your home now so when the production is over, you have a clean place to crash.

Things get bonkers during production. Here’s how to make it through:

*Survive Production - Seven Weird Tips Guaranteed to Save You Sanity and Help Avoid Burnout*
89. **Cover the basics.**

Don’t walk onto a set unless you understand the basics of cameras, lenses, lighting, and audio. Professionals need to have a basic understanding about all of it. With so many free resources, there’s no excuse for you not to learn. If you never went to film school, that’s okay, just hit the web. You’ll avoid embarrassing moments on set.

How Not To Suck: Hollywood Advice We Love

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90. **Inspire respect by honing your craft.**

When you know your stuff, you can be a better leader. As the producer or director you are leading the way. Working in a way that respects the hard work people put in makes your crew very happy. You’re the captain of a ship of pirates, so run your ship smoothly and command it. The best way to do that is by staying informed and having answers for the many questions coming your way.

How Not To Suck: Hollywood Advice We Love

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91. **Act responsibly on set and know who’s in charge.**

Treat everyone with respect. Doesn’t matter if they are above or below you in the production hierarchy. Doesn’t matter how many beers you had with them the night before. Know when it’s an appropriate time to joke around and when to get to work.

How Not To Suck: Hollywood Advice We Love
92. **Know when to ask a question, and when to wait.**

Is your question time-sensitive and related to the work at hand? If not, wait to ask.

People are crazy busy on set. Don't ask general questions when there's other work to do. Especially if you just want to “pick someone's brain.”

*[Asking Questions in Hollywood Without Sounding Stupid]*

93. **Always bring extra audio gear.**

It's worth it to pay for an extra audio transmitter or receiver. Do not get caught on set without a spare mic. If you only bring one and it breaks, good luck.

*[Get Great Audio For Your Unscripted Project on Any Budget]*

94. **Always have more than one source of audio.**

It is never a good idea to only have one source of audio. Run sound to multiple cameras or other recorders. Use several mics, ranging from booms to lavs. At some point, one audio source will go bad. Having others saves the day.

*[Get Great Audio For Your Unscripted Project on Any Budget]*
95. **Know thyself and which path you want to take to the top.**

- Option 1: Take a job in the industry. Start at the bottom and work your way up. Build contacts and credits. It is hard work, but it can pay off with a long, fulfilling career.

- Option 2: Start producing stuff and showing moxie. Convince people you’re a talented filmmaker or producer by making great stuff on your own. Riskier, but potential faster rise. That’s how we broke in, but it was easier back in the day.

Which should you choose?

[2 Paths to Hollywood Success](#)

96. **Value trustworthiness.**

You need to be able to trust the people you work with. If you can’t trust them, move on. Too many things can go wrong on a production. That last thing you need to worry about is whether you can trust your team members to get things done.

[Shopping Agreements for Reality TV Concepts](#)

97. **Airplane mode is your friend.**

Silence your phone on set. Do not be that person who ruins the perfect take or misses the perfect bite during an interview. Pulling out a phone at the wrong time is also rude. And it happens more often than you might think.

[Setiquette - Be a Pro on Any Film or TV Set](#)
98. **The best camera is the one you have.**

The best camera you can use for a pitch tape or any project is...the one you already have. This means any camera from your phone camera to a RED. On the pilot for our [MTV show CAGED](http://www.producingunscripted.com/mtv-show-caged), Biagio caught some scenes on his iPhone that aired on television. It was the camera he had at that moment. It did the job.

*Tools We Use to Make TV Shows*

99. **Your crew is made of human beings.**

When scheduling your productions, try to finish before the holidays. This one is tricky, we know. It’s not always possible to work around the holidays. When it is, do it. Your crew will thank you. And really, who is working at the top of their game on Christmas Day?

*Production Hangovers - How to Survive, Recharge, and Move On*

100. **Love it or leave it.**

This business is full of ups and downs. You’ll have far more rejections than sales. Naysayers, critics, and the general public will line up to take shots at you. Your next paycheck will always be a question mark. If you can get past all that, working in Unscripted Television and film is one of the most rewarding careers you can have. And if the roller coaster is too much for you? Do something else. The business is just too challenging if you can’t love every minute of it.

*100 Tips, 1 Million Thanks*
100 Unscripted Television and Film Tips - How Will You Use Them?

We hope you’ve found this free guide helpful. Congrats on making it to the end. Brand new to the business? These tips will put you miles ahead of your competition. Long time listener? Use this list as a reminder of key points from the past half-decade of podcast episodes.

Be sure to check out our in-depth free guide How to Pitch a Reality Show for a deep dive on the creation and pitch process. And of course, make sure you subscribe to our podcast.

See this page if you’d like to learn how to possibly team up with us.

Whether or not we ever get to work together, we wish you success in your unscripted television and film journeys. Let’s all strive to keep the industry a creative place where talented, driven people have the opportunity to succeed.

All the best,

Joke and Biagio