

THE ART OF THE PITCH

By Diane Wild

The Art of the Pitch is about six writers — seven, really, but we'll get to that later — who reveal to an unseen interviewer their experiences pitching TV shows. Think *Episodes* meets *The Office* meets *Canadian Screenwriter* magazine. It's about tips, cautionary tales, and the bond that develops — or really, really doesn't — between pitcher and pitchee.

Our characters come from the drama, comedy, and animation worlds:

- **Tassie Cameron:** With *Rookie Blue* and *Flashpoint* making her one of today's most sought-after writer/showrunners, she's got *10 Days in the Valley* coming up on ABC plus *Mary Kills People* for Global.
- **Adam Barken:** This man is everywhere. He's written for *Killjoys*, the *Bruno and Boots* movies, *X Company*, and recently sold his sci-fi pitch *Memoria* to BBC America.
- **Michael McGowan:** Largely known as a filmmaker, with *Saint Ralph* and *One Week* among his notable successes as a writer/director, McGowan created *Between* for City and Netflix.
- **Michael Amo:** Can you say persistent? He's in production on his CBC series *Pure* about Mennonite drug smugglers after eight years of crafting, pitching, and optioning and re-optioning a magazine article with money earned from his time on *The Listener*.
- **Mark Farrell:** With classic Canadian comedy cred from *The Red Green Show*, *The Newsroom*, *Made in Canada*, and *Corner Gas*, he's more recently made his mark on *This Hour Has 22 Minutes*, *Dan for Mayor* and *Seed*.
- **Lienne Sawatsky and Dan Williams:** This real-life couple are our two-in-one writing team who now have a Teletoon series called *Wishfart* in production about a leprechaun who grants wishes that go very, very wrong.

Let me show you the article so you can see where I'm going with this:

It all starts with ...

Preparing for a pitch. Knowing your material inside and out, and being able to present it in front of others without curling into a fetal position, is crucial.

Cameron walked into ABC with the script for *10 Days in the Valley* already written, which isn't always the case. But she learned the importance of preparation after a disastrous first pitch in the U.S., where she was expecting a casual chat and ended up locked in a hotel room for two days to learn how to do it right. Now, exhaustive preparation is “the cost of doing business. I've worked very hard on pitches for shows that have never gone anywhere.”

She thinks she still might have 37 sweaty index cards with her *Rookie Blue* pitch notes on them, and she had answers to whatever questions might be thrown at her. “Most important is to really know why this matters to you, why you're the only person who can tell the story how it should be told,” she says. “My take on *Rookie Blue* was it's a show about imposter syndrome, and I know that very well.”

For Barken, the core of any pitch is that the idea must be “cool or immediately gettable, with an emotional hook that gets the person leaning forward. From there, it's a rough idea of what the story is, and ideally that's when the person starts asking questions.” That's when he fleshes out the idea of the pilot, the world, and how it can run for five seasons.

Barken doesn't usually bring pages to leave behind, but instead offers to send material in the next couple of days to allow for rewrites based on the reaction in the room. "You don't want to show up with something and have them say they love everything but the robot dog. If your script is called *Robot Dog*, you're in trouble."

Besides sending a teaser of the pitch in advance so the producer is already prepped, for animation pitches Sawatsky and Williams have also brought artwork with them, which she calls a risky tactic but one that's paid off. "You can bring along a look book — something that portrays the general style and tone of the show, a scrapbook of the dream cast, images that fit the look you're going for."

She says the main thing they've learned is that producers can be receptive to giving feedback on a concept early on, allowing them to "bulletproof the idea," in the words of her partner Williams. They've gained valuable advice, such as aging their concept down, and some producers invited them to reach out for a formal pitch when they were ready.

Writers are split on the wisdom of writing a spec script first. For some, like Barken, that's what the development money is for, plus there isn't always time. For others, like Williams, writing the script is how they solidify their idea and know it will work as a series. And sometimes a writer just wants to write.

After years of rejection, Amo wrote the *Pure* pilot script as consolation after another of his piloted shows failed to get picked up. Did it make his pitches more successful? "Again, crickets."

"We used to go to pitches with nothing in our hands and almost no idea what we're going to say. We thought, we know this, we'll just talk about the idea."

"I've pitched the script, but you have to know you might have to throw it out depending how they react," says Farrell. "Sometimes I wasn't sure and I wanted to make sure I could write it."

Though he's gone into development based on a paragraph, McGowan tends to do what he does with film: write the script first. With *Between*, he had a mini-bible and wrote the pilot "out of curiosity to see if I could sustain it. Some stuff I've pitched and then realized in developing the concept that I don't really like it on further examination."

Another advantage is shortcutting a step in development. "The marketplace can shift and they're no longer looking for the show you've spent a year and a half working with them on, because someone else has done it or the time has passed for that kind of show."

The performance

Farrell compares the performance of a pitch to an audition for an actor. "The skill you're demonstrating is different from the skill you're trying to get hired for." As a stand-up, he says "I think I'm pretty good at it but it's one of those other unfair things about show biz: people who can pitch well can't necessarily write well and vice versa."

"Everyone tells you that you have to be super animated," says McGowan. "The best pitch is to believe in the show and be able to talk about it. I don't think there's a right way to do it."

"You have to be authentic to who you are," says Cameron. "People read false notes very quickly. Some of the best pitchers are actors, because they can command a room. I wish I was that person but I'm not. I've had to embrace who I am, and I am someone who would rather not be doing this. I need my written documents in front of me. I'm going to be present and engaged in the room, but there's not a lot of pyrotechnics."

"We used to go to pitches with nothing in our hands and almost no idea what we're going to say. We thought, we know this, we'll just talk about the idea," says Sawatsky. After their agent called to tell them a producer said "you were really charming and she really liked you and you were horrible pitchers," they realized a change in style might be in order.

They had a pitch meeting for a show they hadn't created, where they were up against a few other writers, and "we really prepared this time," says Sawatsky. "We wrote down the pitch, who would say what, practiced a couple times, had a cheat sheet of points in our notebook. We absolutely nailed that pitch, and we knew we were nailing it. We thought, how is it that we've been pitching for 10 years and have never done it that way before?"

Practicing out loud to other people is a universal recommendation. Barken recalls one of his first pitches as one of the best experiences, when he went to the Banff festival with a writing partner who was also an actor. “I was doing the typical writer thing and pitching like an essay. He said that’s incredibly boring, I don’t want to do that.” They worked out a script and practiced enough to make it sound conversational. “You can go in and wing it if you feel confident about that, but I just don’t. It takes work to sound off the cuff.”

He recommends pitching as though you’ve just seen a show no one else knows about and are trying to convince your friends to watch it. “The best way to learn to pitch is to hear people pitch. You realize how quickly you can get bored.”

Both Barken and Cameron have moved away from cue cards, but prefer having an outline to refer to. As Barken says, no one blinks at a writer carrying a notebook. “The key is comfort. It’s a nerve wracking experience and whatever you need to make yourself comfortable is what will make the person listening to you feel comfortable. As long as you’re wearing pants.”

The tells

How do you know the pitch is landing? It can be as easy as “they pretty much bought it in the room.” That was Barken’s experience with *Memoria*, a high-concept sci-fi series that required a lot of world-building and working on the vision before he was ready to pitch it.

Or it can be as hard as Cameron’s “I can never really tell if it’s working because I’m always so plagued with neuroses and doubts.” That said, she can read body language. “There have been moments where I feel it’s going sideways or they’re not engaging and I’ll stop mid-pitch.” Asking what’s not working for them can startle them into revealing the truth, so she can address the concerns head-on and revise her pitch on the fly. “It’s not a pitching strategy, it’s desperation.”

Sometimes the clue a pitch isn’t going over well isn’t so subtle. “In a meeting that’s going well, the person you’re pitching to is usually not texting at the same time.” Yes, that’s happened to Sawatsky and Williams. So has an executive dismissing their idea and literally flicking their one-pager back at them. (Williams: “After the meeting the assistant asked, so, do you want to leave any material?”)

While engaged questions tend to indicate a positive response, an interrogation indicates the opposite. “Most of my bad pitches were because the audience didn’t want to be there,” says Barken.

If you’re
making the
people in charge
of the department
laugh, you know
you’ve got a
good chance.

“They’re just picking holes at it. They’re clearly not interested, not going to buy it, but for some reason they’re stuck there listening to you and they’re going to have some fun.”

“Sometimes you know the project doesn’t have much of a chance because of who they send to meet you,” says Farrell. “If you’re making the people in charge of the department laugh, you know you’ve got a good chance.”

In the end, luck and timing play a big role, so passion and a thick skin are required.

“You can get bogged down in second guessing what the broadcasters want, and they suffer from the same thing,” says McGowan. “Everyone wants the next *Walking Dead* or *Orphan Black*, but you’re always two years behind because of how long it takes to get a show into production. It’s much better to write the show you want to write.”

Pure’s Amo would agree. “*True Detective* happened and suddenly everybody seemed to be in the market for limited series — including a Canadian network that put us into development for several more years. Heads rolled there and we were shown the door. The moment after my partner and I hung up on the call that cut us loose, we contacted the CBC and here we are, in production. Funny thing is I don’t think getting a ‘commercial idea’ into production would be any easier. So if you’re going to pitch something, it might as well be something you love.”

So that’s the article in a nutshell. Any questions? ■