

Documentary Pitching Forums - new perspectives in financial support for young filmmakers and Eastern European filmmakers of all ages

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The following essay presents the concept of pitching in filmmaking. By presenting the working mechanism of different pitching forums it gives a detailed description of the way young filmmakers and Eastern European filmmakers manage to get important financial support for their work. The study presents the pitching process from a practical point of view focusing on the problems that may appear.

A tanulmány a filmgyártás finanszírozásának egyik fontos pillanatát, a pitchinget mutatja be, részletes és pragmatikus leírását adva az ún. pitching fórumok működéséről, szem előtt tartva azokat a nehézségeket, amelyekkel a támogatásért folyamodó (dokumentum)filmes a pitching különböző szakaszaiban szembesülhet.

The word “Pitch” has several meanings. One of them is to throw your product on the market. In British usage it is the main meaning of the word; although in American usage it is not. However this word becomes more and more familiar for filmmakers, because of the growing popularity of the so called *pitching forums*.

Directors always had to pitch their film projects to the producers. That means that a film director goes to a film producer, and presents his film project, in order to see if the producer is interested or not in producing the film, which from the point of view of the film director mainly means, that the producer is ready to start fundraising for the project, or not.

Producers are generally very busy persons. They are running a few projects in parallel. So when a film director is calling them, they are generally in a meeting, or on a shooting, which means that when their phone is ringing, it generally disturbs them, so they are not happy to have long talks by phone. That means that the poor director has the opportunity to say only a few sentences. First of all he has to present himself very shortly, and then he has the chance to say one sentence about his film, in order to reach the interest of the producer. If the producer is interested, he might ask a question, so the director has the opportunity to tell other three sentences about his project. The goal of the director is to get to a meeting with the producer. If the producer after the first sentence of the director about his project says, that “very interesting, please send the screenplay to my office, and I will call you after I had time to read it”, the poor director can get disappointed, because the producer probably will never call him. So the interest of the director is to make the producer to want to learn more about the project, and about him. And that happens with the occasion of a personal meeting.

So the first phone call or the first sentences said with the occasion of an accidental meeting at a film festival’s party, or in a break, have very big meaning. That’s why filmmakers use to

develop a so called “one sentence synopsis” and a “three sentences synopsis” of their project. Because it is hard to improvise and to say in such a few words the essence of your film project. It is hard to capture in a few words the attention of a busy person. But once you did it, you can go further.

With the occasion of a personal meeting the situation is better. You can look in the eyes of the producer in order to gain his confidence, and you can say about 10 sentences to introduce your project. You can tell him your “half page synopsis” which is in fact a promise about what the film will be. But the goal is not to tell too much. Not to tell everything. You want to make him to want to learn more about what you as director want to do. To make him interested, which means that you make him to ask questions. And you want him to see in front of his eyes “his film”. You want to awake his imagination. You want to get into a dialog, because only after a real conversation you can raise his interest in your personality, which is also very important in order to make him read your treatment or screenplay. He should trust in the project, but he also should trust that you can make the film in a proper way. And please do not forget, that producers are not only instruments for fundraising, but they are experienced persons, who like to be creative as well, although that probably they do not have anymore the patience to work out each detail of a film project - which in the case that they got in use to run several productions in parallel, is normal. But many producers were film directors, or at least wanted to be film directors – at least those who are involved in European Art film production. But I do not advice any film director to work with a producer whom he doesn’t respect as a creative person, no matter how famous is he as a producer, because it is a big chance to get in conflict during the production, which can be very unpleasant considering the big amount of money which is involved in such productions.

Once the producer started to work with a director on a project, they generally can apply for development money. Hungarian filmmakers for example can apply for such project development money at the NKA (National Cultural Found) or at MMKA (Hungarian Film Found), but if the project can have international impact, they can apply for the support of the Media Program, which is an European found based in Bruxelles, but having his Media Desk Office in each of the European Countries.

And after the project it is developed, they can apply for production money at the National Film Found or Film Center of their county. But the support they can get it is never 100% of the budget. As in smaller countries the film distribution doesn’t bring serious money for the producers, so they have to find somewhere more money to put it in the production. In eastern European countries it is no private money involved yet, especially not in art film or documentary film production. So nearly the only chance is to make international co – productions. And this is the point where pitching forums can help a lot.

A pitching forum is in fact an organized pitch. Some can call it pitch industry. At such forums many commissioning editors from different Televisions of different countries are sitting around a big table, and the film companies are presenting their projects. A project is generally pitched by the Film Director and the Producer of the project, but in many cases, in order to

support them, they are taking with them one commissioning editor whom they already have on board. This commissioning editor is generally from a TV from the country of the producer and the director, and it is important to have him, because otherwise the others may ask themselves that “if a TV from your country does not trust you, why should I?”

Among the commissioning editors can sit producers as well, but generally they sit among the audience. They are also important, because they might be interested in coproduction, and they might bring coproduction money from the cinema found of their country. But very often, especially in the case of documentary films, the main focus is on commissioning editors from major TV stations.

So what can expect a film project from such a forum? There are about 4 answers what you, as a film director or producer can get from a commissioning editor regarding your project. The first, and the more probable is: “I am not interested”. And that doesn’t mean that they do not like the project. That means that they do not have slots to show in which they could show your film. Another possible answer is: “show it to me, when it is done, because I might be interested in acquisition”. That means, that the project is interesting for him, but he doesn’t trust enough the filmmaker, or he is not enough sure about the project, or he doesn’t have money by the moment to put in. The third possible answer is: “Yes, I am interested. I want a pre-buy”. Pre-buy means that he is interested to show the film, and he is already sure that the film will fit to his slot, and will be interesting for his audience. In television pre-buy also often means that he is taking the screening rights for his country. So you cannot sell the film anymore to other TV distributor in that country. But it also means that he is giving the money, before the film is done. So it is risky. Pre-buy generally doesn’t mean that the TV is paying less, than in the case of acquisition, because it’s risky. For pre-buys it is generally the same money like for acquisitions. So one may ask, what is the sense for a pre-buy from the point of view of the commissioning editor? The sense is that the commissioning editors know, that many film project would never be done without their support with a pre-buy, because of the lack of finances. From the other hand, they also want to be sure that they will have enough films to fill up their slots. Many of them are planning for two years in front. So often happens also that, they don’t even have the right slot for your film, but they already know that in the next year they will have. If they don’t know it for sure, they might say, that “please get back to me after a while”, or “I might be interested in acquisition”. But pre-buys can mean not only prepaid acquisition, but also cooperation. It depends on the contract, but once they pay, they might try to have an influence on the projects development in order to make it fit for their audience. And that can mean that they want to see rough material, they want to see rough cuts, and they try to make you to shoot something additionally, or try to have an influence on the final version of the film. Very often they transfer the first part of the money before shooting, the second part after watching the rough cut, and the final part after delivering the film. So they try to have an influence nearly like they would be co-producers. The fourth type of answer you can get is: “Yes, I am interested, so I want to be a co-producer.” That means definitely more money, but more influence, and percentage from the rights (and part from the probable financial successes) as well.

But let's see what a film production team has to make to get one of those answers. First of all they have to apply with a project to a pitching forum. Many possibilities can be found on internet. Different forums have different regulations, but generally it is needed a short biography and filmography of the director and of the producer, a short description of the production company, a short description of the project, and a presentation about the financing status of the project. After that they receive a letter if the project is accepted or not.

If the project is accepted, they generally have the possibility to go for a three days workshop, during which they are prepared by tutors how to present their projects. This includes several group meetings, and individual meetings with professionals, which I have to say that really make sense, because filmmakers have the opportunity to test their form of presentation, and to improve it. And what is very important, to whom they should address their presentation - because as it was told before, not everybody is interested in everything. Such workshops in the case of documentary films are held by the organizers, but also by the members of the EDN (European Documentary Network), an international team, but based in Denmark. They know very well what is the situation on the European documentary film market, and they are publishing each year an EDN guide, which is very helpful for filmmakers and distributors, because it contains all the contacts to all the commissioning editors interested in documentary, from many TV stations from all over the World.

A presentation of a project means that the team has 7 minutes to present its project. Then there are 7 more minutes for a Q and A (questions and answers) session. During this session the commissioning editors are asking questions, and the film team tries to answer them. It might happen that the moderator of the discussion is asking questions, or provoking questions and answers.

During such a presentation the film team needs to say a few words about themselves, a few words about the financing status of the project, and of course to present the project. Such presentations are always difficult and stressful. It is so, because generally such a pitching forum takes three days. The presentations are one after the other, and after a few hours the commissioning editors got really tired. But also if you are at the beginning, you are risking that the commissioning editor will forget about your project until the break. So, very often you have to capture the attention of the sleepy commissioning editors. Because of that each presentation needs to be built up very carefully from the dramaturgical point of view. If you start to speak simply about yourself, half of the audience is already sleeping, because they don't know why they should be interested in you. But for example if a man begins its speech with a sentence which says that "I am a woman..." he captures the attention of the audience. And later we find out that what we heard by the beginning, it is in fact a fragment of a letter of a South American politician, who is in fact a woman, and the filmmaker wants to make a film about her... - but he succeeded to capture the attention, so everybody is listening.

Such pitching at such forum is generally both verbal and visual. That means that filmmakers have the possibility to show a trailer of their projects. The trailer generally includes the main characters, it is made in the style in which the film will be done, and shows a situation which can be part of the film. The trailer cannot be too long, because otherwise do not remain time

for speaking. So it seems that the ideal length for such a trailer is 2 minutes. But it really has to be capturing, and convincing with its quality.

Even after a successful pitch, during the Q and A very seldom we can hear the sentence: “Yes, I am in”. More often we can hear: “Well, I am interested. Let’s talk about later”. Then the follow up starts. In Amsterdam pitching forum (IDFA - International Documentary Forum of Amsterdam), for example you have to catch those commissioning editors in the lunch break (in the case that after the big emotions which you are going through during your pitch, you still remember who said what). But many of them just disappear. It also makes sense to check your message box, because it might happen that somebody had no opportunity to express himself around the table, but it’s leaving you a message that he wants to talk with you later. In Jihlava pitching forum (in the Czech Republic) for example, the organizers are very well prepared for the needs of the filmmakers. So when you finish your pitching, you immediately get a paper on which are written some of the opinions of different commissioning editors, and the organizers are arranging personal meetings for the filmmakers with the commissioning editors. They can force the commissioning editors to do that, because they are paying them to be there.

And the follow up continues after everybody is going home. Because there are still a lot of details to be fixed. For example the length of the film. It is so nice to have a lot of pre-buys, or co-producers, but what happens if everybody needs another length, because the length of his slot. It can happen that Channel 4 needs a 47 minutes version, TV Ontario a 60 minutes version, TV Denmark a 52 minutes version, and YLE Finland wants the Cinema version of the film (for ex. Around 90 minutes), because they have an open end slot for documentaries. Then the filmmaker has a problem, because for getting the supports, he has to make several versions. Often it doesn’t make sense to complicate life. Co-production it means more money for the production, but it is also increasing the budget with around 30% (because the expenses of signing the contracts, making several versions and copies, and so one). It can happen that the pre-buy is less than the expenses of transfer of the film from PAL system (needed in Europe) to NTSC needed for example by TV Ontario. So before signing the contracts, a very careful administrative work begins.

Internationally well known filmmakers do not need to go to such pitching forums, because they can get in direct contact with the different commissioning editors / just because they already know each other. So the pitching forums are a kind of talent market, very helpful for young and talented filmmakers. It is a possibility to make the step from a smaller, national audience, to the international audience. To make the step from the very low budget productions, to a normal, medium budget production.