

How to pick the best programmes

Quality in selecting a concept or show

An important part of an editor's everyday work is selecting material for the production or acquisition of programmes. TV professionals from North America and Germany talk about quality in this area, where they see common mistakes, and how they make their decisions.

Stories that engage children's inner potential for growth

Dr. Irene Wellershoff (ZDF, Germany)



Every editor is familiar with the uneasy feeling that, out of the thousands of manuscripts, concepts, and trailers they have to judge in the course of the year, they will overlook precisely those outstanding works – precisely that special quality – from which the greatest successes are born. This is what happened to the publishers' readers who rejected Harry Potter because they thought a story about magic was too old-fashioned. Most of the projects which wind up on my desk do not offer anything unusual or surprising. They are a synthesis of elements from past successes and conform slavishly to the supposed expectations of readers and editors. Professionally crafted and technically sound, they lack genuine vitality and that magical 5% which simply cannot be obtained by calculation. After I have looked at many such projects, I start to lose my bearings. I could decide for this one or that one, but ultimately I do not feel convinced by either. And then suddenly I come across something which leaves every-

thing else standing. I know it because suddenly I am reading with increased attention, feeling amused, and forgetting about time. This person has something to say about life. For the most part, one can recognise in stories which move us in this way the age-old archetypes of fundamental human experiences – e.g. the Cinderella myth – but these exceptional stories capture such experiences in new language and with contemporary imagery. And, for the most part, they have a sense of humour. I have experienced this with *Pettersson and Findus*, with the German productions *Wilde Hühner* or *Der kleine Ritter Trenk*. Such stories engage children's inner potential for growth. They expect something of them which transcends clichés, and they give them heroes with whom they can experience the whole roller-coaster ride of emotions – tears and fears as well as happiness. Form is not the deciding factor here – it may equally well be a feature film screenplay or an animation series – but good stories must fuel children's curiosity, fantasy, and their wonderful capacity to be astonished.

Series that stay in the head long after they were pitched

Linda Simensky (PBS, USA)

At PBS, we are continually searching for series that work well as narratives but also can seamlessly incorporate educational curriculum. We do make sure that each series has great characters and storytelling. Without those, no kids would keep watching the series. Even a series such as



FETCH! with Ruff Ruffman is based on storytelling and character and not just the competitions and science experiments that they do. Because we are PBS, we also require series to have an academic curriculum that needs to be well thought out, evident and obvious. That curriculum must be there from the development of the series through the execution – it can't be added on after the series is developed. Series such as *Sid the science kid* or *Super why* are developed with the characters, the big idea, and the curriculum at the same time.

I think the biggest problem today is the lack of ability to fully execute an idea. Oftentimes, people create series and their ideas are fascinating, brilliant, and huge, but they have no experience making series or they have no idea how to make their series. There are a number of things that can add to this – sometimes people have no background in kids' television, sometimes people are working with new technologies or new companies using technologies that they are not experienced with, and sometimes people are just ambitious and have grand plans but no way to really see the ideas through. It's the job of the development executive or the current series executive to be familiar with what the creator or producer is capable of and to carefully question everything to make sure the series that was picked up is the series that will be delivered.

My personal secret of finding the best programmes and ideas? I use my real-life movie viewing experiences to guide my approach. Sometimes when you watch a movie, you may not realise how it is affecting you at the time, but then you find yourself

thinking about the movie over and over. Even if you didn't enjoy it at the time, a movie's ability to make you think after you are done watching it is actually more powerful than its ability to grab you at the time. I often like the movie better if it sticks with me. This is the very idea I utilise when I look at series being pitched. Many of the series that I am working on now are ones that stayed in my head long after they were pitched. *Dinosaur train*, a series that is coming out this fall on PBS, is one that stuck in my head immediately and I kept thinking about it to the point where I couldn't imagine not doing it. The other thing I do is I ask myself how I'd feel if I saw the series go to another network. If I think I'd be jealous, I fight for it, but if I think it would fit better elsewhere, I don't worry about it.

Common sense combined with gut feeling

Frank Dietz (*SuperRTL, Germany*)

Every show is different and the reasoning why to go for a certain show also depends on the programmes that are already part of our portfolio. In general (and I admit it sounds very basic) the most important aspects remain the characters and the stories a show has to tell. One simply doesn't work without the other. Also we like shows with a well-sized portion of humour. I think most mistakes tend to be made in a co-production when each of the different partners has a clear-cut idea about what the characters and stories should look and feel like. After months of meetings, different opinions, and compromises this idea has already changed quite a bit. When the show finally is produced and is aired, there is often a substantial difference between original thoughts and reality. So don't get over-excited until you see the final product. When it comes to acquisitions a ratings success in



another country doesn't necessarily translate into a hit in your own territory. Don't be fooled by a so-called ratings phenomenon if you don't understand the mechanics of a foreign market.

Asked for my personal secret in picking one show or content, I would say there are no real secrets but common sense combined with gut feeling. The filter questions are: no. 1: "Would my kids like to watch the show?", no. 2: "Would I like to sit down and watch this show together with them?", and no. 3: "Would we all look forward to watching the next episode?" Three times yes makes a good basis for a decision...

Programmes that empower children

Brenda Nietupski (*Treehouse & Discovery Kids, Canada*)



Since 1997, Treehouse has built a schedule that encompasses a wide variety of children's programmes and formats from around the world and Canada. We search for programmes and ideas that empower children and never talk down to them. We make sure that programmes incorporate universal elements like music and diversity. We recognise that ideas on television may impact children so we avoid stereotypes and try to create a safe space where imagination reigns. When selecting either acquisitions or co-production projects for Treehouse, characters and humour are two important factors in looking for quality entertaining programmes for our preschool audience ages 2 to 5.

One of the most common reasons we may turn down a show might be that the programme has dry education. We see programmes that have education as their main element but they do not make learning fun from a preschoolers' perspective. One way to make learning fun is to empower the

children in your audience to know the answer before the character on screen knows. This is also very interactive. Another common challenge might be that a programme comes to us that looks very young but the concepts are complex and beyond a preschooler's cognitive development stage. Exploring disagreements and resolutions between friends is something accessible to a preschooler, but war is not a topic for our programmes.

In the end, I don't think there is a particular secret to finding the best of the best programmes for preschoolers. We try to select a wide variety of programming, we look for shows that are unique, and one must remain young at heart and love the genre. If you have a huge grin from ear to ear and your heart is warm, after screening a programme, chances are that the elements above are present.

Create long-term working relationships

Nicole Keep (*ZDF, Germany*)

We have to find the appropriate programme for our channel and its philosophy. In terms of content, look, and feel the title has to be correspondent with the other programme offers of our channels.

Big brands are helpful, of course – children love what is familiar to them. That's why we decided to co-produce *Jungle Book* with DQ Entertainment and came on board of *Little Nick* with M6/Method Films. My personal "secret" in finding the best of the best programmes is trusting my gut reaction, discussing the projects with my team. Besides observing the market closely and doing a lot of market research, we try to choose the right company (and people) for the specific programmes. Our aim is to create long-term relationships to achieve the best possible results – and have some fun at the same time. ■

