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Imperfect Pitch

Online screenplay ideas underwhelm Sundance

by Peter Braunstein



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YOU'VE GOT THE PERFECT SCREENPLAY IDEA, sort of *Doom Generation* meets *Runaway Bride*, but you've given up on taking Hollywood by storm -- until the Internet gives you entrée to key industry insiders.

That was the noble idea, at any rate, behind ShowBIZ Data's online Worldwide Pitch Festival, which ran concurrently with Sundance from January 21 to 29. Through an online auction, creative amateurs were given the opportunity to pitch story ideas to Hollywood moneymen searching for the next *Matrix* or, worst-case scenario, Nicolas Cage vehicle. The site streamed a handful of videotaped pitches from points as distant as India and Mexico City to a putative audience of bidders, pitchers and other interested parties. But, in this instance, e-commerce didn't seem to whet Hollywood's perhaps mythical thirst for new ideas.

Launched in 1997, ShowBIZ Data (www.showbizdata.com) is a feature-film database covering everything from detailed box-office stats to development slates. The pitch fest was launched as a promotional lure for the Los Angelesbased company. Pitches were placed on the block before a jury of unnamed "Hollywood professionals and venture capitalists"; one lucky seller was promised "a chance to participate in a million-dollar production deal."

Like many film-industry insiders turned Web entrepreneurs, ShowBIZ Data CEO Oliver Eberle believes the Internet is revolutionizing the flow of ideas into Hollywood. "It's the big collapse of the old world onto the Internet. More distribution channels mean more ways to get your film made," Eberle says, adding, "I'm actually tired of saying the words *Blair Witch Project*." Maybe that's because last summer's rallying cry, "You can be the next *Blair Witch Project*" (a project propelled by an online cult following), has since come to mean, "You too can have 15 minutes of indie-Net status before being hurled into a creativity-sapping web of co-optation and spiraling production costs, and consigned to cranking out *Blair Witch* prequels and sequels for your distributor-slumlord until the franchise bleeds out."

Unfortunately, Eberle's dream of an eBay for pitches didn't materialize. As of our deadline, two days short of the closing bid, the online pitches hadn't attracted a single taker -- which may speak to the daredevil futility of counterprogramming Sundance. With most of the Hollywood crowd busv attending screenings for a

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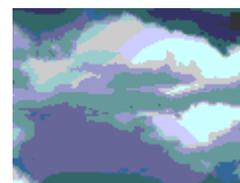
Peter Braunstein checks out online screenplay pitches.

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...of the heavy, nose-down, early-morning screenings for finished films, nursing hangovers and discussing Minnie Driver's Golden Globes dress, few had time to log on, much less download the plug-ins necessary to surf through video pitches from the heartland.

Add to this the fact that many sellers wanted tens of thousands of dollars for movie ideas that were, to put it mildly, opaque. The pitch videos featured static head shots of people sitting in darkened crevices of their apartments, sort of like the testimony of witness-protection people on *Unsolved Mysteries*. One man, who proposed an occult thriller about Hitler and a psychic spy ring while swivelling in his desk chair, wanted \$500,000 from prospective bidders. There were pitches about an ancient-Egyptian serial killer, a town plagued by a '70s dance virus, and an Internet psychopath. (ShowBIZ's ground rules for journalists prevent us from going into more detail about individual pitches, much to our regret.)

Peter Ross, an aspiring screenwriter from Columbus, Ohio, wanted \$20,000 for a story about a group of teens who bond with each other while trapped in a mall. To stress the viability of his scenario, Ross filmed his pitch in an actual mall, where he asked benumbed onlookers whether they'd go see a film that he describes as "*Breakfast Club* meets *Die Hard* -- but not with Bruce Willis."

"I hate to reference other films like in *The Player*, but it's the only way to get through to normal people," he explains in a phone interview. Ross welcomes any opportunity to connect with an otherwise impenetrable Hollywood establishment. "The Catch-22 in Hollywood is that you can't get an agent until you've sold something, and you can't sell anything without an agent."

ShowBIZ Data also gave Sundance attendees a chance to pitch away in person at the Interactive Lounge, located in the heart of Park City at the club Harry O's. There, on-camera pitches took place open-mike style, in front of hundreds of cold, drunk people who could presumably rip off their ideas at will. This live event was emceed by none other than "pitch king" producer Robert Kosberg, who also held a well-attended seminar on the finer details of plugging one's dream scenario.

Kosberg, who approaches pitching with the same hyperkinetic zeal that the Tom Cruise character in *Magnolia* brings to cruising, has also staked out a presence online at www.moviepitch.com. There, he solicits e-mail pitches from anyone with a concept. "I'm very frustrated by the fact that our culture doesn't value ideas," says Kosberg. "You hear producers say that ideas come a dime a dozen. That's certainly true for bad ideas -- but good ideas are one in a million." Or at least \$15,000 -- that's what a woman from Ozark, Arkansas, earned after Kosberg sold her pitch about a man who lives in the Statue of Liberty to PolyGram/Working Title Productions. (Kosberg declined to identify her. If the film actually gets made, the woman stands to make another \$100,000.)

Even if the online pitch fest had been less of a bomb, Hollywood veteran Eberle never promised pitchers a fast track to a six-figure screenwriting contract. "The pitch festival won't change the fact that once someone decides he likes your idea and puts it in

that, once someone decides he likes your idea and puts it in development, you'll probably be involved in the same nightmare that everyone else is," he concedes.

Ultimately, Hollywood insiders are used to pitchers approaching them with the requisite flatulence and servility. Online pitches, which reverse the power dynamic and turn producers into foragers, may not ever suit the ego requirements of the industry -- regardless of what outsiders have to offer.

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