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THE DEFINITIVE GUIDE “HOW TO CREATE A HIT FORMAT IN 10 LESSONS”

By 
thewit.com



INTRODUCTION

HOW TO CREATE A HIT FORMAT IN 10 LESSONS

LEARN THE SECRETS OF THE INTERNATIONAL FORMAT BUSINESS, AND DISCOVER HOW TO MAKE IT TO THE TOP WITH YOUR TV SHOW IDEAS.

WHAT IS A FORMAT, ANYWAY? WHAT IS A FORMAT BIBLE? HOW DOES ONE GET FRESH IDEAS, OR SELL THEM TO THE WORLD? HOW DO YOU PREVENT COPYCATS? DO YOU REALLY WANT TO BE A MILLIONAIRE?

THE FORMAT BUSINESS IS YOUNG, EMBODIED BY A HANDFUL OF WELL-KNOWN GLOBAL BRANDS LIKE “THE VOICE”, “GOT TALENT”, AND “WHO WANTS TO BE A MILLIONAIRE?”. IT ALSO SHOWS PLENTY OF POTENTIAL FOR GROWTH. HITS ARE SCARCE. NEW IDEAS RUN DRY. COMPETITION IS HEATING UP AND PLATFORMS ARE MULTIPLYING. THE NEED TO MINIMISE RISKS WITH STAND-OUT AND PROVEN INTELLECTUAL PROPERTIES IS EXPLODING.

THIS DEFINITIVE GUIDE GIVES YOU ACCESS TO THEWIT’S FINDINGS LEARNT THROUGH 20 ADVENTUROUS YEARS OF FORMAT EXPLORATION WITH AN ALWAYS FRESH POINT OF VIEW.

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CHAPTER 1

WHAT IS A “FORMAT”?

- **20% of new entertainment TV shows launched around the world are adaptations of foreign “formats”.**
- **44% of new TV game shows launched in the world are adaptations of foreign “formats”.**
- **6% of new TV scripted shows launched in the world are adaptations of foreign “formats”.**

(Source: *TheWit*, 2015)

1 BEHIND EVERY GREAT “FORMAT” IS A GREAT TV SHOW

A great tv show first airs on a channel somewhere in the world (usually the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands, in the cases of the most famous formats). It becomes successful there, and eventually becomes known beyond the borders of that country (with help from various sources, like thewit.com). A foreign broadcaster or producer takes interest in it. They think that success can be replicated in their own country, with the local language and actors or participants, because of the show’s appeal.

2 TWO WAYS TO ADAPT A FOREIGN SHOW: COPYCAT VS FORMAT

Drawing inspiration from other successful shows is a natural way to build your own success.

A foreign producer can draw inspiration from a foreign show they have seen, then build on it with other ideas; and from this *mélange*, create a new format they can sign under their own name. They will then incorporate current trends that reflect their TV viewers’ demands. That process is an organic form of research and development in numerous industries, like fashion. The difference is that the fashion industry can sell the same finished products under the same brand all around the world, whereas non-scripted television—which cannot sell “ready-made” products so successfully, due to language or cultural barriers—must provide the possibility of “local adaptation”, or “localisation”, thus creating a need for “formats”.

A format is like a clothing label that sells its patterns abroad, but not its ready-to-wear clothes; foreign buyers can then take that base pattern and add new elements, according to their own clients’ expectations. Simply put, a format is a “cultural” product, and as such is not as easy to copy as a well-known designer’s clothes.

“Copying” successful foreign shows is a risky solution; it only permits you to copy a structure, potentially leaving out the secret ingredients that make it work, according to the format’s creator and owner.

If a foreign producer is not talented enough or cannot invest much money, or simply doesn’t feel like creating their own “foreign-like” show, they can acquire and watch recordings of a hit show abroad, then replicate many of its characteristics, and change what they feel is inadequate or unlikely to please the local audience. They can replicate the studio, sets, and narrative—but will in no way be able to copy the title (which they do not own), the characters, nor the host—even if the ones they choose may resemble the originals. The participants, obviously, will be local.

By so flagrantly copying an original show—because at this point, this is all it is—the foreign producer faces risks. The copy may not be as good and savoury as the original. It may not be of the same quality. There may be missing elements they failed to identify, and that happen to be essential to the show’s success. Since they haven’t bought the “secret sauce” from the original supplier, their interpretation is likely to have a different and inferior “taste”: It may not work, even fail, and be rejected by the audience!

CHAPTER 1

WHAT IS A “FORMAT”?

Think about it: If the “secret sauce”—the format—sells, that’s because people have attributed value to it; it isn’t all wind. A format’s foundation is critical to making the show work. In addition to the skill and learnings incorporated into building its success, the experience and knowledge of the show’s innerworkings must be transferred. The foreign producer who copies therefore risks commercial failure (although, to be fair, some copies often become more successful than official adaptations!).

A format is not a mere mechanism; it is property that shouldn’t be violated.

A foreign producer who “copies” a format risks infringing on the intellectual property rights (IP) of owners or relevant parties, such as a producer or a TV channel. (Bear in mind that there are no formal “format rights”; this does not exist.) The consequent legal battle can be long and frustrating. If such a theft goes to trial, the solution is uncertain and depends on local business legislation; namely, a local judge’s opinion, which varies according to the time and the country in which the conflict takes place.

That’s why distributors and producers throughout the world choose to protect themselves rather than defend themselves. They organise and formalise the main elements that are characteristic to their show, creating a **format**. The resulting format becomes a form of “intellectual property” which, like any property, can be bought and sold on the market according to some basic rules and agreements.

3 A FORMAT IS AN INSURANCE POLICY AGAINST RISK

The best and only solution for a foreign producer interested in a show from another country is to purchase the format, thereby purchasing the rights to its adaptation and exploitation for the specific market(s) he is serving. The “format” can be a very simple package. It can be sold “plain and unvarnished”, to be built like IKEA furniture; or it can be sold as a very complex, multi-optional product, with parts and specific directions; and in some cases, it can be sold as a fixed formula, to be respected and changed only in specific circumstances.

To increase the value of a format, the seller’s main goal is to sell a maximum amount of components in the package. This is possible by offering as much insight and detail as possible, and by offering expertise and consultation so the format can be successfully adapted abroad. People’s definition of a format’s shape can vary greatly. But in general, a format package includes lots of different components: An idea, the skills required to implement that idea, experience on the market, ratings, (proven) success in one or more markets, and more. Buying a format isn’t just buying an exceptional idea; it’s about buying a formula for that success with a minimum amount of risks, thereby saving time and money. Still, a formula doesn’t completely protect you from the danger of failing. A “paper format” is more paper than format.

In the late 1990s, when formats first began taking shape, a format was understood as a show that was sold, adapted to the local market, and aired in at least one foreign country. In other words, an original show became a format as soon as it was replicated in another language and for another viewing audience. Before being exported, a show was not a format; that is to say it had not been *formatted*, or transferred abroad. The fact that it was sold is what made the title of format applicable, and also what bestowed it with commercial value. Not long after the success of these formats, interest spread in this concept and nearly everything became a format, even mere ideas and concepts of TV shows, as long as they were written on paper. Thus the paper format was born. An idea became a format even before it had been tested anywhere in the world, and were immediately offered on the international market, with no reviews, no proven success, and no experience.

CHAPTER 1

WHAT IS A “FORMAT”?

A paper format can come with:

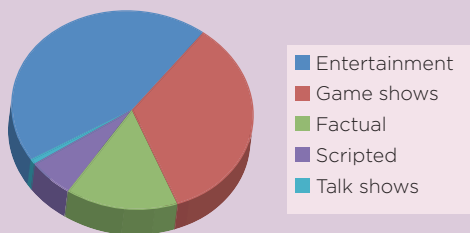
- A pitch, concept, or idea
- A written development
- A mood tape made of extracts from other shows that helped inspire it
- A 3D animation showing how it works, for minor costs

By definition, a paper format has never been produced, even as a pilot, nor tested before. Buying a format which has never been broadcast or piloted is like having a pilot's license for a plane you have never tried to fly. It is valuable, but by no means does it offer the thing that made formats so successful in the first place: the ability to minimise risk when the show is produced and aired. Paper formats do not minimise risks as regular formats do, and this is because they skip the creation and development phases that are critical for testing an idea's quality in a market. Some are even made available before they are really ready to be commercialised. Unlike its tried-and-tested sister, a paper format is essentially a bet on the suitability of the creator's concept, its genius, and its capacity to exist on the screen. It's cheaper, but it's paper.

A format is a proven efficiency.

FORMATS FIGURES

Hit formats are entertainment and game shows formats

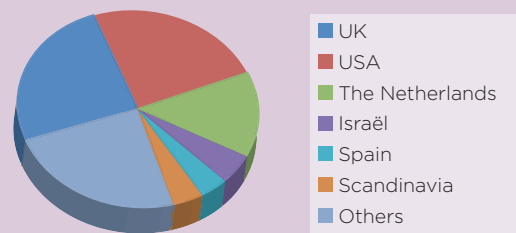


Top format genres:

1. Entertainment formats
2. Game shows formats
3. Factual formats
4. Scripted formats
5. Talk shows formats

Source: *thewit.com*, as of December 31, 2015.
Genres of the top 100 formats ranked by the number of local adaptations featured in THE WIT FRESH DATABASE (new versions after a break, spin-offs and channels' switches are included).

Hit formats come from the UK, the US and the Netherlands. Israel, Spain and Scandinavia emerging...



Top territories of origin for formats:

1. UK
2. USA
3. Netherlands
4. Israel
5. Spain
6. Scandinavia (Sweden, Norway and Denmark)
7. Other countries

Source: *thewit.com*, as of December 31, 2015.
Territories of origin of the top 100 formats ranked by the number of local adaptations featured in THE WIT FRESH DATABASE (new versions after a break, spin-offs and channels' switches are included).

CHAPTER 2

THE SECRET SAUCE OF TV FORMATS

1 THE BEST-SELLING TV FORMATS SHARE 5 COMMON INGREDIENTS:

- A powerful, simple, and explicit **title** that is easy to understand and remember.
- A recognisable **visual and sound identity**, including a logo, studio, and music—so viewers know instantly what they're watching.
- A **life-changing stake**. The most successful formats are contests or game shows. If taking part is vital for contestants, watching will be thrilling for viewers.
- A **dramatic construction** generating suspense, serialisation, and emotion.
- A **stand-out attitude**. Being different from what already exists is paramount. When first released, the most successful formats brought something new to their respective market: A *unique selling proposition* (USP).

Last but not least, they are all part of a **booming TV genre**; that is to say, a successful format is based on a genre, such as talent contests or game shows, that is currently in high demand.

2 THE 5 TOP RECIPES FOR A FORMAT'S SECRET SAUCE

A • Find a solution to make up for the weaknesses of previous shows in the same genre.

"Who Wants to Be a Millionaire," a general-knowledge quiz open to people with average knowledge.



Before "WWTBAM" (distributed by Sony Pictures Television, 1998), questions in Q&A games were tough; participants and viewers needed specific knowledge in many subject areas to be successful. Unable to keep up, viewers felt abandoned. Over time, the "knowledge quiz" genre declined in popularity. In contrast, *"Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?"* starts with very simple questions.

In the rational and cerebral world of knowledge quizzes, "WWTBAM" soared by combining basic knowledge, emotional stakes, and a bit of chance. That's commonplace in 2016, but once upon a time, this approach was novel. Studying the weaknesses of older formats, and the possible reasons for their decline, is a very useful way to invent new, more successful formats.

B • Implement a successful formula from one genre into a new one.

"Masterchef": the talent competition for amateur cooks.

Daring to borrow a formula from other talent contests, singing ones in particular, was the stroke of genius that bred the success of "Masterchef", which has become world-famous since its revamp in 2009.

Before, cooking shows were limited to a small number of participants, and focused on advice and recipes. In the end, they were not very ambitious. "Masterchef" as we know it today innovated with massive casting and candidate auditions, as well as a harsh jury's comments and selections. Contestants are progressively eliminated until only one remains.

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THE SECRET SAUCE OF TV FORMATS

Distributed by ESG, “Masterchef” managed to make a big deal out of a mere cooking contest (“Masterchef” before its 2009 reboot), simply by using singing contest conventions to update the concept. Because of its familiarity, international viewers immediately understood the new formula. When people first watched “Masterchef”, they could instantly guess what was going to happen next. It looked like something they already recognised ... and yet it was new. Keeping the same successful soundtrack but changing the lyrics can be a clever way to cultivate new success.

C • Rely on societal trends.

“Masterchef”, a way to reinvent your life.

“Masterchef” may be considered the ultimate talent competition for the post-singing talent contest era. Children and teenagers often want to become singers, but part ways with that dream as they get older.

Many adults in their thirties develop a new, more “mature” dream, like becoming a chef or opening a restaurant. In some countries, “Masterchef” was marketed as a competition to crown the best amateur chef; but it also appealed to viewers as the *“best way to change your life”*. That was the way to hide the cooking behind the competition, as the act of cooking is not as universally appealing as singing (everyone sings in the shower, or listens to music, but not everybody takes an interest in the finer details of grilling or sautéing).

A broad audience could identify with this premise. Many viewers are adults who feel disappointed, exhausted, or nauseated by their first years working in big companies—by layoffs, lack of recognition, and ingratitude from employers. They believe that owning a small business is a way to get rid of all these difficulties, one that would empower them to live their passion and true calling; in this case, cooking. “Masterchef” offers winners and their families a chance to go beyond creative leisure and “win” a creative life. It is essential to be attentive to the aspirations of people of all ages, and find a format that corresponds to them. “Masterchef” and amateur cooking eventually became such cultural phenomena that they even created a kids’ version, “Masterchef Junior”.

D • Incorporate a paradox into a format.

“Got Talent”, a talent show open to the non-talented.

The title of “America’s Got Talent” (distributed by FremantleMedia, 2006) suggests that the whole country is talented, or that anyone can be talented, whatever their origins, whoever they are, whatever that talent may be—dancing, singing, tumbling, etc.—however short, fat, young, old, gifted, or average one truly is. This is exactly what made the show successful: The “freak show” or “ugly duck” element. “Got Talent” builds its cachet on unlikely stars, anti-heroes, and outsiders ... some of whom morph into true heroes, as in fairy tales. A format should present unexpected moments and people who can move the audience; smooth, perfect people are not all that interesting. A viewer should always be able to identify with participants.

CHAPTER 2

THE SECRET SAUCE OF TV FORMATS

E • Invert the principles of other formats.

“The Voice:” not-so-beautiful people, and not-so-naughty jurors.

What gave “The Voice” (2010, distributed by Talpa Global) its power was the way it opened the door to candidates who didn’t fit typical standards of beauty. By focusing on the voice, and not on the candidate’s physical appearance (which was the case in other singing competitions), unlikely stars were born. (Think about how surprising it was for viewers of “Britain’s Got Talent” when Susan Boyle swept us all off our feet!)

In the early days of “The Voice”, out-of-the-box candidates who would normally have been considered too fat, old, or bald to compete in other shows appeared alongside young, “perfect” teenage talent.

Another way the show inverted other talent contests in its genre was by placing celebrities on its jury. “The Voice” probably drew inspiration from the 2004 British format, “The X Factor”.



“The X Factor” (distributed by FremantleMedia) innovated by giving judges a coaching role. Previously, judges were only responsible for casting candidates; now each judge was responsible for carrying their candidates to victory. This component to the show added a new element of competition—and of course entertainment—because not only were candidates fighting for dominance; judges were, too!

“The Voice” exploited this idea and added a personal touch: The judge expresses her wish to invite a candidate onto her team, but the candidate can also choose her coach. The judge, therefore, is also under the spotlight. Paradigm inversion; format success!

CHAPTER 3

HOW TO FIND A GREAT IDEA: THE SECRETS OF TV FORMAT INSPIRATION

There are two sources of inspiration for big TV formats. Both are necessary:

- **Other formats:** This is how formats are born: By gleaning from—or reacting to—what already exists. In addition to other people’s formats, your own formats can also be enriched and improved upon.
- **Popular culture:** Radio, cinema, the Internet, books, fashion, music, art, changing behaviour ... It’s essential to be constantly on alert for what could become a TV format.

In many cases, the best format ideas found roots in other, pre-existing formats. They did not *copy* them, but rather drew inspiration from them. Typically, a new creation takes a few elements from the original, creating something new by moving in a new direction, often triggered by technological innovation and new business models. In the 2000s, the most popular TV formats (“WWTBAM”, “Big Brother”, and “Idols”) were all made viable by premium voting services.



Remember: Between inspiration—wherever it may come from—and the making of a format, some really hard work will take place.

1 MAKING A NEW TV FORMAT, USING AN INGREDIENT FROM ANOTHER FORMAT

In 2015, Talpa Global launched “The Puppet Show”, a talent competition for puppet masters. “Got Talent” often showcased puppet masters; a ventriloquist won “America’s Got Talent” in 2007, and again in 2015. But there was no talent show dedicated solely to puppet masters. Talpa built its own format with its own mechanics around a single premise: That it was not a copy. Puppet acts and talent shows are not formats. A talent show for puppet masters is not a format. Instead, it’s an idea that’s been worked into a format by Talpa. For viewers, however, it was just another talent show ... with puppets.

In some cases, a successful component of a format, developed and extended as a stand-alone format, can prove quite successful. This formula is seen throughout the genre: Cooking competitions gave birth to baking competitions, and competitions focused on desserts, for example. It works. Spinning off another format is also risky; what works as part of a mix may be too niche as a wholly dedicated format.

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Are puppets popular enough to entice an audience to watch, and continue watching, a show that is 100% dedicated to puppets? The same applies to pets, which are popular in “Got Talent” and on the Internet; see below for more.

2 THE INTERNET SHINES A SPOTLIGHT ON PEOPLE’S NEW PASSIONS

A • Lip Dub/Lip Sync.

In the Netherlands in 2015, Talpa, creator of “The Voice”, produced a format called “Lip Sync Masters”, a show in which people lip-dub songs or famous quotes. At first sight this format looks as though it may have been partially inspired by DubSmash, a hype smartphone app that appeared a year before, which allows users to take videos of themselves and lip sync any kind of music or sound. The app was a highly viral phenomenon; even celebrities got into lip-syncing on the net.

But “Lip Sync Masters” may also have been inspired by a previous 2015 US format called “Lip Sync Battle” (distributed by VMNI), where celebrities battled in lip sync performances. It may also have been inspired by some formats created some 20 years before by John de Mol, current head of Talpa, where children—or sometimes disguised celebrities—lip synced performances. In short, that’s one way a production company can get inspired: With a mix of previous formats, the Internet, and current trends.

B • Reaction videos

The Internet partially inspired one of the most widely-exported formats in the last two years: “Gogglebox” (distributed by All3Media International). In this format, viewers are filmed while reacting to the TV shows they are watching—probably a direct or indirect consequence to the “reaction videos” that flood the Internet, in which users film themselves reacting to pictures, other videos, and online gaming.

C • Consumer reviews

In 2015, the same British producer (Studio Lambert, distributed by All3Media International) launched “Travel Guides”, inspired by “Gogglebox” (filming reactions) and successful Internet sites (like Tripadvisor.com), where people give their opinions on places they visit. The new TV format presented travelers, who commented on their experiences as tourists.

D • Family covers

Watching so many parents sing amateur duets with their kids on the web, some of which became huge world hits, inspired Spanish producer La Competencia to launch “Stand Up for Your Country” (distributed by Televisa International) in 2015. This format was sold to a dozen markets. The candidates are parent-child duets who have become stars on the web.

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3 THE WEB CAN SUPPLY NEW FORMAT INGREDIENTS, BUT NOT WHOLE FORMATS

A • Funny animal videos

Not everything that works on the web produces huge, long-lasting TV hits. Some ideas are strong on the web for specific audiences, but can be difficult to adapt to television.

Online, for example, amateur videos of fun cats and dogs are very popular. On occasion, shows that incorporate these web videos attracted satisfactory TV audiences, but when past producers tried building TV formats about talented pets, they didn't always succeed. Few TV viewers are as moved by a talented dog as they are by even a slightly gifted child... However, dogs have twice won the British version of "Got Talent" by offering a hilarious spectacle, much like the videos you can easily find online. Consequently, it proved smarter to implement the "talented pets" component into "Got Talent's" preexisting TV format, and not make a full-length format out of it. It was good inspiration for a few minutes of television, but far less successful as an entire format.

B • Self-shooting

Over the last few years, people have grown accustomed to filming their sports exploits and outdoor activities on smartphones or action-oriented mini-cameras like the GoPro. Afterward, they post the videos online and share the experience with family, friends, or the world. Thus burgeoned the idea of a format in which people filmed themselves, since it's clearly something they already enjoy. This idea couldn't sustain a whole new format, but could perhaps be a strong selling point if positioned as an added value to an existing type of entertainment.

This probably how, in 2014, "The Island" (distributed by ESG) was created in the UK and the US, as well as a few other markets. The format follows the lives of people on an island with no production team whatsoever; they just film themselves, surviving in tougher conditions than those encountered on "Survivor". In this way, a technological innovation and an online trend produced an update to the well-established adventure genre, giving birth to a few other new real-life formats along the way. One such format was WBITVP's "Dashboard Stories", where people are filmed inside their cars while driving to an important place, launched in 2015.

C • Selfies

No one will debate global popularity of selfies, but they haven't inspired any significant TV formats yet. Some attempts have been made: Selfie contests, or formats with "selfie" in the title—so it looks like producers are at work, but haven't found the right formula just yet. Similarly, "food porn"—or taking a picture of one's dish before eating—is a social phenomenon that has yet to hit the right key in terms of inspiring a format. Fewer than five shows have been registered in TheWit's database so far.

4 SCIENTIFIC EXPERIMENTS AS INSPIRATION FOR SOCIAL EXPERIMENT FORMATS

"Big Brother" (distributed by ESG) is allegedly partially inspired by a scientific experiment called "Biosphere 2" in the late 1990's. Other formats, lesser-known than the aforementioned, have also drawn inspiration from sociological and scientific experiments, some of which were made by unknown

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HOW TO FIND A GREAT IDEA: THE SECRETS OF TV FORMAT INSPIRATION

researchers (although the experiments were fully documented on Wikipedia or cited in urban legends). This is how reality show participants find themselves in artificial communal life situations, or in role-playing games, with the goal of broadcasting their reactions when confronted with issues like racism, imprisonment, deprivation, etc.

In 2015, Swedish producer Mexiko Media leveraged the “six degrees of separation theory”, which assumes that anyone can be linked to anyone else through a maximum of six intermediaries, in an adventure game show called “Six Degrees”. Departing from some remote place on the planet, two celebrities had to meet a global celebrity in a maximum of six stages. In its sales sheet, Red Arrow International’s 2016 dating format, “Kiss Bang Love”, claims to be inspired by research indicating that “kissing is a powerful tool in our search for the right partner, and the average single person kisses 15 people and has at least two one-night stands before falling in love. The show puts this to the test by skipping the awkward dates, and kissing your way to the love of your life...”

5 CURIOUSLY, PARLOR GAMES HAVE NOT DIRECTLY INSPIRED BIG TV FORMATS

Numerous attempts at TV formats have been inspired by parlor games, but often prove unsuccessful because they weren’t visual enough, or were too cerebral (Scrabble, for instance, is far less fun to watch than it is to play). An exception from the ‘80s was “Win, Lose or Draw” (distributed by DMD), where contestants needed to guess what people were drawing. The show was inspired by—but not licensed from—the board game Pictionary, created a few years before. It worked precisely because it is a very visual game.

Some games are so much a part of popular culture and traditions that they inspire TV formats without any need for licensing. For example, the pencil-and-paper game Tic-Tac-Toe (XXO) inspired the classic and evergreen TV format “Hollywood Squares” (distributed by CBS Studios International).

6 BOOKS, MYTHS, AND LEGENDS

Two of the most important formats, “Survivor” and “Big Brother”, enjoy great impact because they rest on popular myths, or stories that everybody knows without having had to read them, like *Robinson Crusoe* or the tales of Orwell. These stories have deep roots in the collective memory of audiences.

On a lighter level, the 2014 dating show “Adam Looking for Eve” (distributed by WBITVP), which takes place on a tropical island, evokes Western cultural myths about the origins of mankind: A man called Adam and a woman called Eve, both naked in a kind of paradise. An effective format is often inspired by myths, dreams, and fantasies. This explains why so many are set on islands.

7 OPEN YOUR EYES IF YOU WANT TO COME UP WITH A GREAT FORMAT

Here’s a good way to find inspiration: Whenever you’re faced with a new encounter, ask yourself, “Would it be a good format?”. When you see something new that surprises you, while traveling, working, flirting, or shopping, pay attention to what you and others are doing, and to the structure of the situation itself.

A good format isn’t usually born ready-made ... but if something draws your attention, it is likely to draw the attention of others. Just take care not to ask yourself the question too often, as not everything can become a successful format.

CHAPTER 4

FORMALISE YOUR FORMAT: WRITE A FORMAT BIBLE

1 THE FORMAT BIBLE IS A BOOK OF RULES, BUT THERE ARE NO RULES FOR WRITING IT

Format experts talk a lot about format bibles. Some say a “format bible” can be written anytime before or after producing the first version of a show, to collect and check-list the show ideas, and to present the format to a potential buyer. However, if the bible is created before the show is produced, that makes a large part of the format bible theoretical ... particularly the production plans and the budget, which may be as unrealistic as start-up business plans.

Other format practitioners say the above doesn't describe a proper format bible but is more like a longform “pitch” (usually two to three sentences) or “treatment” (usually five to six pages). These people say a format bible should be more a “production bible”, based on proven experience and written to transfer this experience to a foreign producer. Whatever. Either way, it's always better to formalise a format.

Taking its name from the Bible, a “format bible” is considered a holy text in the world of formats. The format bible tells stories and features principles to observe and transfer. The rules of the format bible must always be followed. The word “bible” has long been used in Hollywood for the production of scripted series: A TV showrunner writes a bible so the writers of the series can imbibe their vision without repeated explanations. It can also be used as a sales document, to pitch a series to broadcasters or producers, so they can better understand the vision, too.

When TV shows began to enjoy international adaptation as formats, it became clear that creatives were needed to write recommendations and guidelines for foreign producers. Consequently, “format bibles” were born.

There is no format for a format bible. It will vary.

There exist some models, but no universal compulsory standard to respect, to help you write a format bible. The industry shares basic guidelines that need to be followed, as well as best practices to apply, which makes the format bible useful and functional. A format bible can be any number of pages. The older the format is, and the more often it is produced, the longer the bible becomes. It is possible to enrich the bible with potential variants and innovations to the format. The biggest format bibles can consist of more than 300 pages.

Several versions of the bible can be made: A short version, meant mostly to sell the format (first acceptance of terms), and a longer and complete “ready-to-produce” version (“the production bible”) for the producer who will adapt it. Format bibles are usually written in English, to save time and costs of translation in the country that is adapting it.

Writing a format bible is not an obligation, but it is strongly recommended.

- **FORMALise your format for yourself.** As a format creator, you must write down all the elements of your format. Writing a “bible” enables you to see how the mechanics unfold. Writing episodes helps imagine any possibilities in future series. Before production, it forces you to budget your programme, and a budget cannot be estimated without writing some sort of “bible”, which should include the number of people, the size of studios, the number of cameras and the editors involved, etc.
- **FORMALise your format to sell to a broadcaster.** Writing a bible can help you write sales documents. The bible is not the sales document you'll offer in a meeting with a broadcaster, but it should include a show pitch and answers to all the questions a broadcaster may ask you. If you have not even filmed a pilot, the bible will be entirely hypothetical, but it will be your primary working document.
- **FORMALise your format to sell abroad** and to facilitate the transfer of expertise from the original producer to the adapting producer. Parts of the bible can be edited into a sales sheet, and after a sale abroad, you must deliver the so-called “production bible” in any case.

CHAPTER 4

FORMALISE YOUR FORMAT: WRITE A FORMAT BIBLE

- **FORMALise your format to give it life and value.** A bible means your format is more than an idea, more than just air ... even if it isn't on air yet. It's work. It has rules or a formula. It was thought up, and now it exists. It even almost has a market price!
- **FORMALise your format to protect it from copycats.** The format bible includes the "recipe" or "house plan". The original creator or format producer is the author and, therefore, the owner of the blueprint that yielded the TV show. The more detailed the blueprint is, the easier it is to demonstrate when it has been copied. The format bible shows you are its author, the owner of this intellectual property, and will help you secure (and protect) your revenues.

2 THERE ARE TWO PARTS IN A FORMAT BIBLE: THE "WHAT" AND THE "HOW"

The "what" is mostly dedicated to the description of the format. The "how" is dedicated to the production of the format if sold and produced (including real figures or estimates). Put differently, the first part, the *what*, it is more for selling. The second part, the *how*, is for doing. As you progress in the document, and in the production process, you can look back at some points, detailing them in a more concrete way in updated versions.

Here's how format bibles are often organised:

A • The cover of the format bible.

Your cover should include:

- **The title of the format.**

When a format is clear, a good title comes always comes fast. In the best cases, a fast title may become the final title.

A sentence is not recommended for a title, because it's harder to translate for export, making it difficult to build a local brand or following. (The perfect counter-example to this is "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?")

If ready, add a graphic representation of the title in a logo; a picture helps clarify the format's universe.

- **The name of the producer.**

- **The name of the distributor of the format, if any, and his or her contact details.**

- **The date of this version of the bible.**

B • The table of contents.

The order of segments may vary, depending on the format and the importance of each segment. But game rules must be rapidly announced in a game show, as well as the setting if it is central to the concept.

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C • The show concept: The reason why this unique format deserves to live!

This section must include:

- **The promise of the format.**

What desire or urge does it provide, allow or satisfy for viewers? A few examples: *Who hasn't dreamed of becoming a star singer? Why not laugh with celebrities who can't cook?*

- **The pitch.**

Carefully choose one or two sentences that say it all. For example: *Thousands of wannabe singers are auditioned and shortlisted by a jury before the viewing audience votes for the winner, who will sign a recording contract.* At first reading, the pitch must sound unique, original, and different. It must also be *justified and legitimate*. Even if it isn't truly different deep down, it has to somehow feature a new element or a twist.

D • The series overview.

This should include the number of episodes (one-offs are harder to sell), episode duration, story arc, etc. Budget and scheduling consequences are huge, even if they change with each broadcaster's needs. Most formats must adjust to a client's needs. Even so, take advantage of this time to explain your overall business vision.

E • The format's track record (if any).

Beyond the quality of your format idea, the track record determines your format's price. Selling a format is selling a track record. To the buyer, a successful track record represents a higher chance of success. Be enthusiastic but honest with your format data. Buyers do double-check, and some formats that lack a good track record manage to sell themselves abroad as well; not all countries are the same, and the factors that may result in success or failure are many. In some cases, they may have had less success, but may have still generated revenue for their creators.

F • The description of the format.

- **Style.**

How will the format be shot—like a documentary? Like a “shiny floor” show? Like a drama? For example, “Survivor” in the US is constructed and edited like a drama. But in the original 1997 Swedish version, it was filmed more like a documentary series.

- **Casting.**

In each local version of a format, the cast must be uniform: The same number of participants, the same types of participants (amateurs, celebrities, young, old), etc. Even if, in practice, these factors are negotiable, it is imperative to set strict rules from the beginning. This proves that success is reliant on your *formula*. It shows that changing elements might make it collapse, and that it only works the way you describe it. It is crucial to show that you own this format and only *you* have the keys to get it off the ground. This is how you protect the value of your format, and your contribution to it.

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- **The host, if any.**

Is it preferable to have a famous host? Perhaps a celebrity? Or should it be someone new? In a format, the host is a character. They don't all have to look the same, but must have the same personality characteristics in every country. Who is your host? Someone empathic, authoritarian, or athletic, for example? Hair, makeup and clothing can be part of the host's character. For example, in the game show "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?", the host had to wear a black suit and tie in all countries, to lend the image of a kind of tempting devil.

Formats that travel well don't necessarily owe their success to hosts with strong personalities, but a strongly characterised type of host is always helpful. If, in your original version, your host happens to be an outstanding personality with exemplary attributes, like a famous athlete or intellectual, this is not exactly what you are selling to a format purchaser in a foreign country. It is too difficult to find hosts with the same qualities everywhere. Their personality must remain in the background. For the German format "Beat Your Host" (distributed by Banijay International), where a famous and unique German host faces off with an ordinary contestant, the producer had a hard time finding an equivalent host with the same brand equity abroad. The format finally did a bit better when it reformatted itself as "Beat The Star", where contestants faced off with a local celebrity instead of a host. But in this case, the format relied heavily on the quality of local casting, which is a weak point for a format.

- **Any other member of the cast.**

What kinds of judges compose your jury? Are there any participating professionals, like psychologists, fitness experts or survival experts? Also, is there a voice over—for interviews with witnesses or candidates, for example?

- **The decor, from location to set.**

Decor is core to a show and your format. Does it take place on a remote island, a secluded house, a live stage, a concert hall, or an arena? Also think about decorative elements, like the red armchairs in "The Voice". Your decor is critical to your format's identity. It suggests that alternate decor won't exude the same energy (or the same results), even with the same mechanics.

Include a set description. The placement and visibility of the studio audience plays a part in the format. Is the audience visible? The more present it is, the more entertainment and spectacular colour your format will have. Also include the set plan, with details on lighting, graphics and animation. You can illustrate these with photos of already-produced episodes.

Generally, format licenses ask that the graphic look remain consistent in form and design, even when the format is translated into the language of the respective country.

- **The mechanics of the format.**

What is at stake, and what is the prize? For example, a prize can be money, a contract, or a life-changing situation. Include the rules (i.e. the dramatic construction): Auditions, challenges, battle rounds, contestant rankings, elimination, and finale. If any exist, you can also present alternative rules, tested in other versions.

- **The editing and directing styles that make the show unique.**

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• **The music.**

You may remember the music (the song or jingle) of some formats. The music you select for your format has to be able to travel. Exploited well, it can generate a lot of revenue for you.

• **Script development, further detailed rules, & different episodes.**

This section depends on how “scripted” the format is, but your bible should include the script of several key episodes. For a game show, it is necessary to provide a database of questions. If the format has not yet been produced, think up possible scenarios so that, during the production and editing phases, everything is planned. Anticipate your clients’ needs to help them save time: What happens in the first and subsequent episodes? How could situations evolve?

Your assurances should be demonstrated with tapes of the produced show, which you must provide. In the second part of the format bible (the production bible), provide a running order sample for one episode, with the timing.

G • Proposals for special shows.

Demonstrate your format is scalable, that it has wings and can fly. Suggest possible episodes with celebrity guests, or other special editions, and spin-offs. If relevant, include any special rules or a special running order.

H • Multi-platform.

The extensions on other platforms for your format should be included in your format bible. You have to extend your format territory and define the limits of your property. Sometimes they are part of the mechanics and are indispensable throughout the format. This may include components such as live voting or online participation.

Even if it is an extension that is not essential to watching the show on its main platform (the TV screen), it is in your interest to sell the option in the bible. For example, in 2015, for its celebrity dance competition “Dance, Dance, Dance”, Talpa Global also sold an app that gives access to exclusive live backstage content during the TV broadcast, enabling viewers to film themselves dancing at home and pick their own green screen for background. Owning a proprietary technology helps sell it as a side order to formats rights, and prevents a local broadcaster and producer from building on your brand with their own ideas to create a revenue stream for their own benefit.

I • If you have gone into production, the “production bible” should include technical specifics: The how-to’s.

In a format, you sell a track record and know-how. Establish that you are the only one with these unique capabilities. A non-exhaustive list of what you should include:

- *The production crew:* How many people are needed and each person’s role.
- *The production consultants:* Here, you are selling a consultant’s (generally a “flying producer”) intervention on the production phase abroad, to approve the format’s localisation. They ensure that your high standards of production are respected. They also bring experience from other productions in other countries; they know what has been tried, what works, and what does not. A consultant’s job is usually done in one or two trips (sometimes up to 10), at different stages of production. Sometimes the work can be done over the phone. Will the consultant fly in business class and sleep in five-star hotels? Will he speak English or the local language? All these questions must be answered and elaborated upon.

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FORMALISE YOUR FORMAT: WRITE A FORMAT BIBLE

- *The production plan:* Based on the previously-produced version of your format, or on your projections, provide as much information as you can—schedule, calendar, set plans, camera plans, lights, sound, etc.
- *Logistics for traveling.*
- *The music list:* With audio files attached and information on music rights.
- *Video content on DVD or files:* Include graphics and any font specifications.

You can also include any advice you may consider useful to the foreign producer, based on your experience. For example, information on how to handle contestants is important. Elaborate on how to train them so they play their part well, how they should rehearse what they have to do or say, or develop the way they must behave.

3 **RULE #1 FOR THE BOOK OF RULES: A FORMAT BIBLE IS CONFIDENTIAL.**

A format bible is like the key to your home; don't entrust it to just anyone. You should only give it to someone under the seal of a confidentiality agreement and after a license contract has been signed.

Some format rights holders only give the bible to the producer, and not the broadcaster, to limit circulation risks. Without access to the bible, copycats can try to imitate you but will never be able to do as well as you do, because they do not know the secrets that only its creators and producers know.

CHAPTER 5

HOW TO ENSURE YOUR TV FORMAT IS UNIQUE

1 A FORMAT MUST BE UNIQUE; OTHERWISE, IT IS NOT A TV FORMAT AND HAS NO VALUE

There is demand in the market for copycats. Throughout the world, broadcasters require a product that looks like one they cannot obtain because it was already bought by a rival broadcaster. In these cases, the final result strikes audiences as “second-hand”; often production is low-cost and local. Avoid such markets for exportation because they will not help your format flourish.

2 THE FORMAT MARKET IS A PREMIUM MARKET: WE BUY FORMATS LIKE LUXURY DESIGNER BRANDS

We buy a luxury product because we believe it has a unique ingredient that can make us beautiful like no other can. It is the same for a TV format. Like a product that sells the dream of beauty, a format sells the dream of success and riches. Otherwise, there would be no reason to pay a license fee to a rights holder; you may as well produce a product on your own, without the fancy brand.

3 IT IS TOUGH TO BE UNIQUE, BUT YOU HAVE TO TRY

Of course, nothing is invented: All formats are partly inspired from previous formats, even from other pieces of popular culture. A new, unique format moves one step forward in an unexplored direction, or one step backward—into the past, to revive a good but half-forgotten idea. A unique new format is a combination of other unique formats and different streams of inspiration, with at least one really new idea. A format may be unique in its concept, casting, setting, or goal. It has to offer something original, at least in the pitch. It is not necessary to be different in the whole format, as previously described about the bible section. Such a format is not possible and would have no meaning.

The goal is not to be “alien”. You must speak the modern language and follow trends. You don’t want to throw viewers off balance, but take them into familiar territory. This is what viewers like, after all; but show them what they haven’t seen along the way. This is the balance you must strike—between already-seen, and never-before-seen. *It’s a matter of frame of mind; when you see a successful format, instead of asking yourself how to do the same, ask, how you could do better? How could you innovate or improve this format?* To sell your format abroad, ensure it doesn’t resemble other formats. In some cases, even if you are not copying a format, you might have had the same idea as someone else at the same time.

4 YOU NEED TO RESEARCH IN ORDER TO INNOVATE

You have to know your market and your future competition, both at home and abroad. You can do that in a non-systematic way:

- Watch TV at home, and abroad as much as possible, to see what is being broadcast.
- Search specialised web sites at home and abroad to learn what is being developed.
- Get information from your network of media professionals.

You can also do it by [subscribing to a permanent watch service](#) whose clients are the primary broadcasters and producers from all over the world, such as [thewit.com](#).

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Founded in Europe 20 years ago, TheWit has established itself as the most influential source of information on international content trends. The conferences given by TheWit, during international markets like MIPTV and MIPCOM, are trendsetting and have a huge impact on the business of formats.

Subscribers to this paid and independent service, financed through subscriptions and advertising, get access to databases, newsletters, reports, and videos about TV and digital content available around the world, as well as information about projects being developed by producers and broadcasters.

With this tool, you'll learn more about the world of production and the creation of TV formats, in which it is critical to acquire a high level of general knowledge. You can also get inspiration to create your own format, and information to help you understand how to position it on the market by identifying niches left unserved. This data can provide the tools you need to create a product with a unique selling proposition—which will help you avoid wasting your potential client's time. If you present a format that you wrongly consider fresh, you lose credibility with that person who, like everyone else, wants to be different and to be the best. On the contrary, if you offer really fresh ideas, that person will contact you regularly, listen to your high-quality suggestions, and become a regular client.

5 **DO NOT MISTAKE “UNIQUE” FOR “ORIGINAL AT ALL COSTS”. DON'T GET WEIRD!**

When you see that many things have already been created, it can be tempting to seek originality at any cost: Something never before seen, extreme, offbeat, or bizarre. You must be out-of-the-box, but not off-the-road. Television is not a contest against mad scientists, or a competition for the most extravagant idea. You'll often hear, “Oh, but there's not a lot of new stuff out this year at MIP.” But the purpose of the format game is not innovation; it's success. To be successful, you must bring something to clients that they don't yet have, but wish they did, even though they can't explain what it is. This is what it means to be different from the rest; unique.

A unique format comprises elements that are not unique but that you have assembled in a unique way to illustrate something that only you have seen.

6 **WHILE AN IDEA ISN'T UNIQUE, A FORMAT MUST BE TO ENSURE SUCCESS**

Do not mistake an idea for a format. There is a difference between the two. An idea may generate a format, but this is not always the case. A format must be developed in detail and must contain a number of unique elements that distinguish it from existing formats. As an example, take “The Voice” which can loosely be described as a talent show for new singing talent. That is an idea, not a format in itself. It is by further developing this idea to include unique elements, like blind auditions with rotating chairs, and coaches competing against one another, which makes it a format.

Many people have ideas for TV shows. Very few are capable of inventing a TV format. An element, a segment, an idea for a format, may be similar to those in other formats. But a format is not allowed to look exactly like any other one. Many ideas have already been thought up or used before, or producers may be working on a similar idea already. That being said, few original formats have been created. To know whether your format is unique, test it, share it, and talk to your entourage about it. If, at the beginning, they say, “Okay, I see”, and conclude with “Okay, I get it, it's a good idea”, you have won. It means that, first, they have situated it and it means something to them; they can get into it easily. If you've surprised them, they'll want to go all the way with you to find out how it ends, and how your idea develops into a format.

CHAPTER 6

IS IMITATION THE SINCEREST FORM OF FLATTERY? HOW TO FIGHT COPYCATS

Your format is your property. You plan to make money by producing it yourself, or by licensing it to other producers in your country or abroad. You do not want it to be stolen. You do not want anyone to copy or imitate any part of it, or make money off of your brilliant ideas. It happens often, whether intentionally or not. Everybody imitates everybody else, especially when some products or ideas are in higher demand than others. However:

- **No legal protection against the copy of formats is valid in all countries.**
- **You can only prepare yourself to react effectively under attack.**
- **It is more effective to settle disputes out of court, among business partners, than before a judge.**
- **The best protection for your format is its uniqueness and depth: The strength of your idea, with the devil hidden in the details.**
- **Further protect your format by making a brand out of it: Your idea can be stolen, but your brand cannot be.**

1 TRUSTING THE LAW TO PROTECT YOUR FORMAT IS INEFFECTIVE AND UNCERTAIN.

Even if you believe your format belongs to you, that it's your "brainchild" and your IP, all countries around the world have different laws, including those on copyright and intellectual property. Not all countries are willing to acknowledge that a TV show format is intellectual property. Do not trust a judge, in your country or abroad, with the future of your format; they know nothing about TV, they only know the law. Across the world, format rights do not exist. It is extremely difficult, long, and costly to win a case. You do not want to make lawyers richer for a disappointing result. If you think your format is being copied in Denmark, will you hire a Danish lawyer? Is it worth it? Investing money for revenue acquired by a copycat is a serious decision. You may want to wait for the format to be sold in a larger market, where the cash amounts at stake are much higher.

Consider that your format could be produced in many countries (without you); you'd have to sue in each country, where the tort will have been recorded, and where it will fall under different laws. Even in the USA, the most lucrative market, you must choose the state where you want to sue. In 2015, "The Voice" (Talpa) was sued by an Irish citizen who believed they plagiarized his idea. A judge in California dismissed the case on grounds that he felt it was not in his jurisdiction, since Talpa had no California office!

Most of the lawsuits launched over the past 20 years, involving the biggest formats of the world, have stopped neither plaintiffs nor defendants from continuing to thrive, for different reasons.

Overall:

It is not a court that decides the survival of a format; it is the viewers that decide once and for all. If you want the viewing audience to vote in your favor, your best protection is a great idea.

2 THERE IS NO SINGLE DEFINITION OF A "FORMAT COPY". IT DEPENDS ON PLACES, CASES, AND CONTEXT

In court, the more unique and identifiable elements of a format have been used in a copycat, the likelier it is that it is a case of copyright infringement. However, recognizing the number of similarities—and their overall value to your format's uniqueness—remains subject to the opinions of experts and judges. Furthermore, the notion of a "copy" is relative. Right or wrong, fair or unfair, your format or someone else's format can be considered a copy by anybody, anywhere, and cause problems anytime. Therefore, you need to be ready (better safe than sorry!).

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3 WRITE YOUR DAMN FORMAT BIBLE!

If well-written, it will clearly distinguish the elements that make your format unique and demonstrate that it is an intellectual creation. This is why it is critical to include visual elements in your format bible. Visual elements are often easier to protect from copies (as artistic works under copyright) than “ideas” are. They provide the attraction, and are integral to your format. Remember: the red chairs in “The Voice” are unmistakable.

4 REGISTER YOUR FORMAT AND ITS FORMAT BIBLE IN A PROFESSIONAL DATABASE TO GIVE IT A DATE OF BIRTH AND ANTERIORITY

If your format is aired somewhere and video recordings are available, your format already exists in the public domain. If it has not been aired yet, it is even more critical to register it in a database. This gives it a formal and public existence.

Registering it in a database will not guarantee protection against any attack/lawsuit and will not give you any specific rights, but it will enable you to:

- Have a trace in case of attack. Having your concept—or, better yet, your format bible—registered in an independent and well-known database will be crucial for defending yourself.
- Dissuade attack. If someone sees that your format was registered in a database, it's like posting a warning sign that says “alarm-protected” on the entrance of your property; it may scare thieves off (even if the alarm is not on).

You can register it:

- In a database or institute protecting patents or brands in general, or copyright, or writers, depending on your country's administration since there is no specific “official” database for formats.
- In a database run by professionals who seek to defend good practices in the format business. The *Frapa* association (frapa.org) provides a paid registration system with confirmed date of receipt. Since this association is approved by many format professionals, it is recommended. The association also offers out-of-court mediation services in case of dispute (the best solution).
- In a database specialised in registering and catering to authors wishing to make names for themselves. For instance, the US-based tvwritersvault.com is where many independent authors register ideas in the form of a simple pitch, hoping professionals will see and buy them:
 - When a professional subscribing to the database looks at their pitch, authors are informed.
 - This is how an author found grounds to sue “The Voice”: A Dutch production company, supposedly close to Talpa, had checked his pitch, titled “Voice of America”, on the site before “The Voice” was created. In 2015, the author of a format pitch on arranged marriages attacked the format “Married at First Sight” (distributed by Red Arrow International); for different legal reasons, they both had their lawsuits dismissed.

More so than a format bible, a pilot, or even an animation, helps prove the existence of your format: Incorporate all the essential elements of the mechanics, the theme, set and design, and more.

CHAPTER 6

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5 ACT LIKE A PARANOID GENIUS

Before you wrote the format bible, you may have talked about your idea to other people. Moving forward, write down and date everything before you talk about it—including who may have mentioned this idea or that one, and when (in meetings, emails, etc...).

Confidentiality warnings: top secret!

Broadcasters listen to many format pitches and refuse most of them. They may even refuse yours. You may later see them air a show that bears similarities to one you pitched them. In the UK in 2015, producer FremantleMedia was surprised when channel Sky1 aired music-driven game show “Bring the Noise”, produced by someone they pitched just a few years before, when he was the director of that same channel. The music-driven game show even shared the same title. “Bring the Noise’s” attorney denied any connection.

As often as possible, in a way that isn’t rude and megalomaniac, have prospects sign a nondisclosure agreement (NDA) or confidentiality agreement before viewing the idea. Marking your format bible with a “confidential” notice on its cover, and in headers on each page, will emphasise the confidential nature of the work to its (few) readers.

6 SELL YOUR FORMAT TO THE RIGHT BUYER

Sometimes international buyers may buy formats without any intention of producing them. In some cases, they might buy a format just to prevent someone else on the market from acquiring it, possibly to compete with one of their own productions. Their intention is to block it and let it die in the market, leaving no room open for competition for the show whose rights they own. In the worst-case scenario, someone may purchase your format with the sole intention of accessing your format bible and discover the secrets behind its making.

This is what the producer of “Survivor” suspected Endemol of doing in 1998. Endemol optioned “Survivor” for the Dutch market, but could not sell it to a Dutch broadcaster while developing their upcoming “Big Brother”. “Survivor’s” producer refused to prolong the option on the format, then sued (in vain). This is why it is best to sell your format directly to a broadcaster, rather than to a producer, since the broadcaster is more likely to air it. Some format distributors even sell with the obligation to produce a series, or penalties can occur. This happened in 2013 with Keshet International and their best-selling format “Rising Star”. As a matter of fact, many producers have a hard time buying formats because sellers do their best to privilege broadcasters as clients.

7 DO NOT MESS WITH A POSSIBLE CLIENT OR FUTURE PARTNER

International TV is a small world. Before taking legal action, and even knowing how uncertain the outcome is, you must use dissuasion: Out-of-court discussions between professionals, which may be more effective. In 2015, Korean producers CJ E&M, owners of the format “I Can See Your Voice”, felt they’d been infringed-upon when they saw a Chinese show on iQiyi.com titled “Oh My God Singer!”. This show was licensed from a format titled “Is That Really Your Voice?”, created and distributed by Global Agency. By talking to Global Agency, CJ E&M managed to comprehend and resolve the issue. Global Agency was able to go on with the marketing of its original format, which appeared to be less close to the Korean format than the Chinese adaptation.

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To be more persuasive, CJ E&M publicised a comparative study they made between their show and the Chinese show, sending it to TheWit to ensure we would spread the word ... or at least not publish any erroneous information.

8 **SELL YOUR FORMAT FAST!**

Once your format has been aired on a channel, copycats may get to work right away. Even before this, once your format has been shown publicly, perhaps in a professional trade event (at MIP in Cannes, for example) even as a simple “ bible” or a clip, you may well see your idea pop up in a different form, in the same trade event, a few months later, signed by another company (It’s happened!). You must sell the original format faster than copycats can sell their copy. Therefore, timing is key to the international marketing of your format. Think about this before you show it publicly in any capacity: At a professional event, a pitch competition, and of course on a TV channel.

Pick an international distributor, if possible, before the first airing of the format—or better, immediately afterward (if your format was successful, financial conditions will be to your advantage). At a minimum, prepare sales materials in English, as well as an international title and an English website. Be ready to answer potential requests. You will dissuade copycats from attacking you if they see that your format is already on the international circuit. Follow Hollywood: To fight piracy, Hollywood tries releasing movies and series as soon as possible, simultaneously in all countries. With a format, it isn’t possible to do this, but get as close as you can to that solution by rapidly occupying the stage. The faster you secure format sales, the more legal contracts you’ll have. When someone buys your format, your sales history gives it a stronger legal existence ... and better protection.

9 **BUILD A FORMAT BRAND**

For two reasons:

- It’s easier to legally protect a brand than an idea.
- One can try to copy an idea, but not an idea *and* a brand. Clients and viewers are well informed, brands are passed around the world, and buyers will always prefer an original idea with the original brand (if they can afford it).

CHAPTER 6

IS IMITATION THE SINCEREST FORM OF FLATTERY? HOW TO FIGHT COPYCATS



A. Develop a brand identity for your format:

Titles, catchphrases (“This is the Voice!”), logos, set elements, etc. Your format must sound and look unique—like the one and only! (This slogan is not unique, however.)

B. Register your brand elements.

These may be registered in your country and some foreign countries as word marks, figurative marks, or designs. Be aware that separate trademark registrations are generally required for different countries and for different categories of products and services.

C. Register Internet domain names for your brand.

Registering a domain name is a necessity when you have a good global title. Two months prior to launching “The Voice” in Holland in September 2010, Talpa registered multiple .com domain names for potential versions of the show for Germany, Ireland, Spain, Italy, and Canada. Don’t forget social media! Also register usernames on Facebook, Twitter, etc.

10 YOUR FORMAT’S GOT TALENT!

Selling a format, a format bible, and consulting is simply selling a track record and know-how. Don’t get robbed by those who know your know-how: Instead of buying the original format, a foreign producer might hire the team that worked on the original production if they can provide the exact recipe to replicate a show overseas. This actually happens.

When US network CBS sued ABC in the “*Big Brother*” vs. “*The Glass House*” case in 2012, they focused their lawsuit on “Big Brother’s” producers, who allegedly stole trade secrets when they went to work for “The Glass House”. When possible, lock down exclusive agreements with talent (stars/hosts) or other carriers of your know-how (question-setters/writers/technicians). If you can, pay them very well! Protect your HR (human resources) in order to protect your IP. Most importantly, hire great producers.

11 INVEST IN GREAT PRODUCERS, NOT GREAT LAWYERS

There are ways to dissuade copies and theft, and to protect your format effectively, but experience proves the law of the market is more powerful than the Law Itself:

- Most format disputes are settled out of court because a trial takes too much time. Most of the time trials fail, and you put your relationships with clients and business partners at risk.
- Viewers have the final word: They decide which is the best, the original or the copy. Bad copies generally disappear from the market and are forgotten. If viewers keep watching both versions, it means that they are actually quite different!
- **The best way to protect your format is to make it unique. Invest in creativity, not legal fees.**

CHAPTER 7

HOW TO SELL A TV FORMAT

To sell your original format to a broadcaster or producer, you'll need...

At least:

- A short version of your format bible, which includes your pitch and presents the format (while explaining how unique it is).
- A video: A trailer, teaser, or mood tape.

Possibly:

- The video of the pilot if already shot, or of an episode already aired.
- The track record (airings, ratings, etc) of the format if it has already been aired.

1 THE LITTLE BIBLE

Your prospect, like a TV viewer, has a limited amount of time to listen, read, or be enthralled. So depending on the context and timing, transform your format bible into a sales sheet, as a paper version or a PowerPoint presentation. Focus on:

- The promise.
- The title.
- The pitch.
- The storytelling.
- The track record (if any).

Depending on the timing and context, incorporate:

- The style.
- The casting.
- The setting.
- The mechanics.
- The script development.
- Digital extensions and ancillary products.

2 THE VIDEO

Now that you have a small PowerPoint version of your format bible, it's more likely that the person you pitch will understand it ... but then they have to sell it to their bosses. This is the tough part. You must *absolutely* show footage. After all, it is TV, right?

A • A clear format helps make a clear trailer.

If your pitch (and therefore your format) is clear and coherent, it should be easy to make a trailer. Take the sentences from your pitch and put images to them. Demonstrate the mechanics by visually and audibly underlining key moments of drama.

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B • Dear TheWit, I don't have any video footage of my format. What should I do?

If you don't have a pilot or an already-aired episode, work with footage borrowed from pre-existing shows to produce a "mood tape". For a talent show, take generic footage (casting auditions, crowd, singers...) that isn't too recognisable from "The Voice" or "Idols". This practice is tolerated among professionals. The advantage of borrowing footage from another format is that you can convey the sense of predictable success and a formula that works. Reminders of past success always reassure us, even if they aren't one's own.

The danger of borrowing footage from another format is that it is difficult to highlight the specificity and uniqueness of your own. You could be mistaken for a copycat product. In cases where you have made a draft in which you have not invested much, and must thus harvest footage from elsewhere, tricky questions may arise: "Why didn't you invest more? Was it for lack of time or lack of forethought? ...Or could it be because you don't believe in your idea?" Inviting such thoughts is never a good idea.

C. If you have time and money, go for animation.

If you lack live-recorded footage, computer-generated animation can help producers convey the look and feel of a show better than an oral pitch, and for a much smaller investment than a trailer. An animated full-length or short-form pilot, or even just an animated trailer, can illustrate your ambitious set, visual identity and characters (which of course can behave much better than real participants can). Depending on time and budget, you can combine animation and live action if it helps you draw closer to your final vision.

3 THE BUYER'S FIRST-HAND EXPERIENCE

If your prospect "gets into" the format, like a participant of the future TV show itself, it's even better than a bible or a trailer: Your prospect should laugh if it is funny, sing if it's a singing format, or want to play along if it is a game...

Your prospect has to live their format and feel it in their gut. If they feel the emotion your format seeks to convey, they'll understand what's at stake and will believe in its power to move people.

At the MIPCOM and MIPTV markets in Cannes, international distributors organise private parties to give buyers the first opportunity to play a new game, specially reproduced for them in a private room. At MIPTV 2015, US distributor WBTV even invited the host of upcoming US game show "500 Questions" (slated for air on ABC) to subject potential buyers to the format. And at MIPCOM 2013, distributor Keshet International had buyers in Cannes vote live for winners on their smartphone apps while watching an episode of the talent show "Rising Star", live from Israel. This extra effort to engage prospects likely helped the show become the fastest-selling format ever!

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4 A WIN-WIN FORMAT

It isn't easy to sell a format. It requires time and money. Mostly, though, it takes energy and passion. Convincing someone to buy a new and unique product is convincing her to take a risk. It is often safer for a channel manager to keep their job by renewing a format rather than investing in an unknown format ... and starting from scratch. This is true, even of declining formats. Even a good track record for a format abroad does not guarantee success elsewhere. However, not buying a promising format is also risky: A channel manager's decision not to buy a format creates an opportunity for a rival channel to buy it and be successful. In this case, failure to acquire the format defeats their channel and gives the competition an upper hand—but by then, it is too late for them to order a copycat in hopes of picking up the pieces. This is the hand you have to play: *Convince them that it is riskier to not buy your format than it is to buy it.* Show them that, given the chance, you would not only watch it; you'd buy it yourself!

Two of the biggest formats in the world were first sold with help from clever deals that hinged on the notion of FOMO (“fear of missing out”) and collaboration, fueled by the desire to help the format exist (because it was too good not to).

“Big Brother” was first sold to a small Dutch broadcaster, thanks to a co-venture. Costs and revenues were shared between both producer and broadcaster.

“Survivor” first sold in the US, thanks to producer Mark Burnett's personal involvement in securing advertisers ahead of the broadcast.

Since then, many producers now offer to share both risks and revenue with broadcasters. *Selling a format requires inventiveness to drive audience desire, and inventiveness to complete negotiations.* If you believe in your format, you'll adapt to any potential outcome.

1 THE NINE “F FACTORS” OR “FORMAT FACTORS”: QUALITIES THAT ARE INTEGRAL TO SELLING A FORMAT INTERNATIONALLY.

If your format enjoys domestic success, that only means it appeals to a local audience. It may or may not have international appeal. To make sure, check whether it has the nine “F Factors”.

A • The title.

Not an issue. It can be changed to better adapt to foreign markets. Korean format “Grandpas over Flowers” (distributed by CJ E&M and Small World IFT) was rebranded “Better Late than Never” for the US market in 2016. This alteration also facilitated its overseas marketing overall. Even translated in English, the original title confused foreign markets and was too focused on “grandpas” (an unattractive theme for some Western markets), rather than on legendary actors, which is the format’s true focus. The new, international-friendly title has the additional benefit of bringing drama to the format: It helped us understand that these celebrities must do something before it’s too late.

B • A strong visual identity that poses a dramatic question.

It is critical to be visually distinctive and instantly recognisable, no matter which language you use. Keshet International, an Israeli producer and distributor that develops shows with export in mind from the very start, understands this requirement well: The singing contest “Rising Star” features a rising curtain. The dramatic question this poses is, “Will the curtain go up this time?”



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In the game show “Boom!”, a (fake!) bomb is central to the concept. The question is, “Will it explode?”



In “Trade Up”, a key is needed to start a car, begging the question, “Will the car start?”
Meanwhile, for “Who’s on Top?”, air pods go up or down. “Will they go up?” the audience wonders.



There are many other examples. In “Got Talent”, it is the three crosses on the jury’s desk. Will they light up?

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C • An extremely simple principle.

A TV viewer needs to understand the rules and objectives of a game in a quick glance, even if the sound isn't on. Otherwise he or she will change the channel. The previous examples can be used again: Images speak for themselves. What are the people on screen doing? What do they have to do to reach their goal?

Once you understand the importance of visual coherence, you recognise the importance of being innovative or unique for your format to travel. It is what sets you apart, because you cannot completely break the visual and narrative codes that viewers are used to. A format must recall something well known: Remember, viewers like what's familiar.

A strong visual identity and a simple principle will make your show easier to promote. It will stand out amongst multi-channel/multi-platform competition.

D • Be universal: A format must be culturally neutral to be transferable.

The most universal ideas are the most personal—for example, the quest for love. This quest belongs to everyone, everywhere. Conversely, the least universal ideas are the most cultural—like the search for a bride or groom. Everybody wants to fall in love, but not everybody goes about it the same way, or dates the same way. What's more, not everyone wants to marry—and of course, even cultures interested in marriage marry differently. Viewers in different markets will be more or less receptive to various formats depending on your treatment of this ritual.

In 2004, Global Agency's first hit format was a Turkish show called "Perfect Bride". It sold in a few countries—South Korea, India, Lebanon, and Russia—but was almost impossible to sell in Western countries (with the exception of Italy) for one reason: The show's male bachelors lived with their mothers, who had the power to choose the "perfect bride" for their son. This concept was inconceivable in countries where future mothers-in-law have no power at all to make this choice, and where the concept of an "impossible love" is no longer a common reality. A few years later, in markets where "Perfect Bride" was not introduced, "Who Wants to Marry my Son?" (distributed by WBTV) successfully proposed a similar idea: To help male bachelors find love ... by enlisting their mothers. The difference is that, unlike "Perfect Bride", the structure of this format was highlighted as more of a comedic element than an everyday reality for most men. It became a big hit in Western Europe.

Not all markets take weddings seriously—as in countries where arranged marriages are not a social norm, and people make such decisions autonomously. Based on this premise, "Married at First Sight" (distributed by Red Arrow International) launched in 2013, beginning its journey in Denmark before traveling to a dozen Western countries. In this format, a man marries a woman he has never met to see how long they can live together. If it doesn't work out, they can divorce after one month. This format can really only be sold in countries where marriage is seen as a contract that can be broken without cultural stigma. Every format will enjoy a different reception—and different possibilities—depending on the cultural aspects of the market. *The formats that travel best have a universal quest for a central theme.*

Personal quests are universal. Everyone wants to be a hero, to overcome obstacles, and to triumph in the end. This is the narrative—the possibility—you'll find in most entertainment formats. There can be variants, which are also familiar to us: The underdog who becomes a hero, for example. Less universal is the setting and/or location of this personal quest: Whether you choose singing, business, or the jungle, this small difference will ensure a format will not resonate the same way in different markets. However, the desire to be seen and become famous is no longer a controversial ambition in any country, because the phenomenon is so powerful.

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There are, of course, exceptions:

- **Children:** Some countries hesitate to use children in talent shows because it subjects them to stress, selection, elimination, emotion, and tears. In Spain and Latin America, broadcasters are less sensitive to this issue; kids singing competitions are often successful there. Consider “Little Giants” and “Stand Up for Your Country”, both distributed by Televisa Internacional.
- **Money or the corporate world:** “The Apprentice” (distributed by FremantleMedia), in which young, ambitious adults compete to land a job, was widely adapted, but most successful in the US and UK. It took 10 years to arrive in France, where it immediately failed. Though the setting and participants were local, the premise didn’t positively resonate in local work culture.
- **Cooking:** The quest for culinary success is enshrouded in positive values and self-fulfillment. “My Mom Cooks Better Than You” (distributed by FremantleMedia), a Spanish format where two mothers face off in front of their kids, was first adapted in European countries where mothers still play the traditional role of cook and leader of the household. In some countries, this distribution of roles seems old-fashioned (“Perfect Bride” is also a good example of this). Also, cooking shows focused on local recipes don’t always travel well; their deep locality will strike other markets as “ethnic”.

The participants’ personal quest must be universal, and put in the service of stakes recognised across cultures.

Today, singing seems to be the most commonly shared desire!

E • An all-terrain format.

Broadcasters’ needs vary, depending on time slots, scheduling structures, target groups, etc. A format will be more likely to travel if it is capable of adjusting to the client’s demands in length and frequency. For example, in the US, “Masterchef” airs weekly and each episode is one hour long. In the UK, Australia, and Denmark, it might air three to four times a week, also for an hour each. You must be able to adapt your format’s size to broadcasters’ needs, which can include time slots, show length, and budgetary constraints.

All-terrain formats last longer: “Big Brother” and “Who Wants to be a Millionaire?” were quite expensive at outset; today they air on lower-budget niche channels as well as leading ones. In the US specifically, “Who Wants to be a Millionaire?” went from event primetime to weekly primetime, and finally to weekday daytime airing. Meanwhile, “Big Brother” airs weekly on the CBS network during primetime, while in Germany or Sweden, it airs daily on channels with lower market share. If your format is truly flexible and scalable, it should be able to deliver big ratings for big networks at outset, then big ratings for smaller networks later in its lifecycle.

F • A renewable format.

A format has more value if it can be renewed season after season. In a scripted show, the cast doesn’t change much from one season to the next, but the plots evolve (most of the time). In a non-scripted format, the cast changes but the main plot changes very little. Variations may occur in secondary plots. In your format, make viewers want to watch a different cast play out the same story (or game) again and again.

G • A repeatable format.

The number of runs and reruns authorised for a format is generally indicated in the license contract. Being able to repeat episodes is an economical asset for some broadcasters, and can therefore increase its value. This is where studio-based game shows are interesting: You can keep watching

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old episodes, any time of day or night. Even if people appreciate new episodes, repeats pay big for money-tight broadcasters or producers. Your format thus becomes part of a library of ready-made episodes that draw income on a regular basis.

A locally made production can be syndicated as a ready-made tape for other local channels in the same country or elsewhere. This is often the case for comedy formats: You can repeatedly watch “Candid Camera”, which surprises people on hidden camera, or any other prank show. But this also presents a drawback for talent shows are presented as “live events”, such as sports competitions: They’re less interesting once you’ve discovered who the winner is.

Shows that generate a lot of buzz have a limited life cycle; they must be watched right away, preferably live, episode after episode, on a serialised basis, so viewers can talk about them afterward. A format where each episode is self-contained has the economic advantage of being repeatable. However, non-repeatable, big event-shows can also yield “big event” revenues.

H • A “spin-off-able” format.

A format’s value rises if its IP can spin several new brands off the original show. Offering variants prolongs its lifecycle while maintaining the same general rules. Variants can include adult contestants, child contestants, professional contestants, amateur contestants, famous contestants, former contestants, champion contestants, losing contestants given a second chance, unknown contestants, male contestants, female contestants, couple contestants, parent-children contestants, and regional contestants vs. non-regional contestants, to name just a few!

In Denmark, “Masterchef” successfully spun off no less than 10 new formats, including a version in which jury members became contestants. In Colombia, “The X Factor” spun off under a brand never seen anywhere else: “Factor XF”, where contestants were duos from the same family.

I • A format with potential ancillary products.

Another potential revenue stream for the hit format owner—and in some cases the most lucrative—is the ancillary product: Home videos, inflight broadcasts, apps, internet games, board games, CDs (a natural extension for singing competitions), original music scores, magazines, recipes, various forms of merchandising, etc. This includes licensed products of absolutely anything imaginable.

Programmes linked to mass consumption markets have enormous opportunities here. “Masterchef” can potentially sell its license to many food industry advertisers, one of the most lucrative markets of all. By creating a format in which an avenue for ancillary products is easy to imagine, your format will be all the more attractive for international distributors, producers, and foreign broadcasters, who will be eager to share this additional revenue stream with you. To make it worthwhile, it is critical to negotiate for a good percentage. Format owners/licensors typically ask for 50% of all net receipts.

2 CHECK YOUR FORMAT SALES SPECIALIST

Unless you have an in-house sales team that knows all the most important format buyers in the world, an international distributor is probably more qualified than you are to market your format. Whether or not they belong to a production or broadcasting group, most distributors are on the lookout for third-party formats to sell: In other words, formats they don’t own, because they were not created by one of their international production branches. It’s not a bad idea to sell to a group with a strong international production network like ESG, or FremantleMedia. It maximises your chances of getting your format on air, because these companies have established strong relationships with

broadcasters. International groups buy third-party formats for their own local production companies, and in some cases resell them to local independent production companies with the ability to bring the format to life.

International distributors do their own research, scouting for the best available formats around the world. Through their networks and local affiliates, they know a lot about what's going on in the territories in which they operate. They also stay informed through premium information resources like thewit.com. Most companies acquiring third-party formats subscribe to TheWit.

Here's a tip: Pitch directly to distributors and try to start a bidding war.

Some format creators also try to raise the profile of their formats before contracting an agreement with a distributor by getting exposure at trade conventions like MIPCOM and MIPTV in Cannes. For example, when presented at the much-attended Fresh TV conferences held by TheWit, some formats get instant offers from distributors (and broadcasters) because of the publicity offered by the selection ... before even being shown at the venue! Others even promote their planned appearance at FreshTV presentations to distributors, to get them to sign a distribution agreement ahead of the MIP markets. Either way, it's important to get a distributor attached and ready to sell your format before attending trade fairs where you plan to make your format public. Otherwise you risk being copied because the world will know about your show ... and, of course, you'll consequently lose sales opportunities.

3 **CHECK THE LEGAL TERMS OF A DISTRIBUTION CONTRACT. DON'T GET SCREWED!**

The basic and common rules used by distributors are as follows:

Through a distribution agreement, the producer grants the distributor, by way of exclusive license, the right to exercise format rights for a defined duration and in a defined territory or list of territories. The distributor will negotiate and conclude, in its own name, format licenses, and can have rather wide discretion as to the type and terms of any licenses granted to third parties. To do so, the distributor must be authorised to distribute copies of the format bible, various materials, and DVD viewing copies of the original programme to licensees (provided by the original format producer).

The format owner can authorise or forbid the distributor to register, in its name, domain names related to the format in foreign territory, and can permit (or not) licensees to do the same in the licensee's name. In exchange for this and other services, the distributor may ask for approximately 30% of all net revenues generated by the format:

- First, on the sale of an "option" to a licensee (a local producer or broadcaster) who can have, for a limited period (6 months for an average amount of 5000 euros in most cases), the exclusive right to develop and sell a local version of the format to a local broadcaster.
- Secondly, in case the format is produced in a foreign territory, you can ask for about seven to 10% of the final production budget a licensor gets from a local licensee producing the format (depending on the number of series produced, and the track record of the format).

These are general rules, but everything can be handled case-by-case, particularly the ancillary rights, which are a major source of revenues for format creators, sought after in order to be shared between producers, broadcasters, and distributors.

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HOW TO ADAPT YOUR FORMAT ABROAD

Selling a format abroad does not necessarily oblige you to localise it. But localising a few elements, like the host and some twists, may help the format progress, both locally and internationally. You must define the level of localisation you're willing to allow. It is about knowing what can change, what cannot change, and the degree of risk involved in making specific changes. If you localise well, you may increase the value of the format.

As previously mentioned, **your format should be universal and culturally neutral**. You have removed from it any overly explicit reference to local traditions or behaviors you know are not interpreted the same way all over the world. Theoretically, in such a case, there is no need for localisation. Secondly, **your format bible and license should clearly establish rules to follow for a local adaptation**. Any deviance from these guidelines cannot occur without your authorisation.

1 BY DEFAULT, THE LOCAL VERSION OF A FORMAT SHOULD BE THE CLOSEST POSSIBLE TO THE ORIGINAL FORMAT

A • For artistic reasons:

...because you *strongly* believe that your format only works the way you created it, and airing it on your domestic market taught you lessons you now want to transfer to your licensee. You are experienced, you are a professional, you know better than anyone how your creation works. You know what works and what does not. Everything in your format must be important, like each piece of a jigsaw puzzle. If you admit an element is less important than any other, your format loses legitimacy and market value.

For example, Talpa Global asked judges in local adaptations of “The Voice” to talk about “artists” instead of “contestants”. Why? To increase the value of the voices, and emphasise the quality of the casting and performances, which are central to the format. In this case, they differentiated themselves from other singing competitions by showing respect to contestants. This is part of the identity of the format.

B • For financial reasons:

If an adaptation artistically moves away from your standards for budget reasons, and gives up some production value, the whole image of your brand might be affected. You want to maintain international standards. If standards are not respected in one territory, and the adaptation is a failure, the global value of your brand will decrease. It is also in your interest to ensure that your licensee does not change any aspects, and that they use the software, technology, logos, music, questions, etc., that you intellectually own instead of developing their own resources behind your back.

Everywhere in the world, Talpa Global acts as the sole provider of building plans for the rotating chair of “The Voice”. It is not up to the local licensee to create a new model they could later market as a by-product. Selling a format is a transfer of expertise as well as technology. Maintaining the same level of quality and selling an identical product everywhere generates better profit.

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2 **SELLING A FORMAT ALSO IMPLIES FLEXIBILITY WITH THE LICENSEE**

Even if your format is theoretically universal, sometimes there are cultural differences that a format holder may not be aware of.



The 2015 game show format “Babushka” (distributed by Armoza Formats) centered in its title and concept around giant wooden Russian dolls that have to be opened to win money, or not. The first local version of the format was made in Turkey, where they replaced the Russian dolls with giant cooking pots that are typically Turkish, holding other pots inside.

What is it about the format that remains distinctive? Its mechanics. However, it lost a major part of its distinctive visual identity (and title). Now, at first sight, it looks more like older game shows, like the 2000s hit “Deal or no Deal” (distributed by ESG), where players had to open the right suitcase or box in order to win a prize.

3 **A FORMAT THAT CAN BE ADAPTED DIFFERENTLY, DEPENDING ON THE COUNTRY, AND CAN GIVE BIRTH TO TWO FORMATS— DOUBLING ITS POTENTIAL REVENUE**

The aforementioned “Deal or no Deal” was adapted around the world with the same concept, but in two very different-looking versions. In some markets, the original Dutch version was faithfully reproduced; players had to open suitcases filled with banknotes. In other markets (Italy, France, Spain, the UK), they opened shoe boxes.

Thanks to alternative forms of staging, the format has become even more powerful worldwide because it was able to offer broadcasters multiple versions. In the Netherlands, Endemol was able to sell the two different versions of this same format to two different channels (under different titles).

4 **THE HOST IS THE FORMAT’S PRIMARY LOCAL ELEMENT**

The host and contestants are a format’s first local elements. They speak the local language, and the host may even be locally known. A format bible defines the role and personality of the host and

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contestants. Contestants' character types may be cloned all over the world, from one country to the next, even if strong character variants emerge.

The host's personality, even if it isn't very distinctive, will, without fail, add colour to the format. The host always localises. They are visible, identified, and, by nature, love to steal the show.

The local host may inspire new format developments.

In the US in 2010, comedian Steve Harvey started hosting the local version of classic game show "Family Feud" (distributed by FremantleMedia, first US version in 1976).



His personality and hosting style emphasised the comedic side of the format and enlarged its potential; some international broadcasters now want to do a US-style comedic version, while others want a less funny adaptation. The format's value has doubled!

5 **DON'T JUST LOCALISE FOR CULTURAL REASONS; LOCALISE FOR EFFECTIVENESS**

A local producer often has good ideas. Use some of them. In large markets, producers have faith in their expertise; they may sometimes feel superior, and that they know better than anyone else how TV works. For example, in the US, a common temptation is to buy formats and change them right away. So many people work in this market; so many creative resources and money is available. It is therefore common for a producer to want to use these resources to her advantage, to improve on the format. Additionally, new localisation ideas often emerge with ratings difficulties, and in such cases it is difficult not to listen to the local team's creativity.

6 **LOCALISE DURATION AND FREQUENCY: WATCH THE IMPACT ON SOME FORMAT POINTS**

Schedules and viewing habits vary by region. In the UK, primetime entertainment shows often last an hour, tops. In the US, shows last 42 minutes when you discount commercial breaks. In Northern Europe, shows can last close to two hours; in Southern Europe (Italy, Spain, Portugal, Turkey), they last three to four hours. Longer or shorter, a show has to adjust. To accommodate these differences,

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you must remove segments or invent new ones. To do so, you can increase the number of contestants, or spend more time on some moments. You talk more, explain more, or, on the contrary, get straight to the point.

By varying the show's intensity, the format changes. It becomes more or less talkative, music-driven, dramatic, emotional, and so on. Depending on their needs and success, broadcasters may ask to reduce or increase the number of episodes, or change the frequency from weekly to daily. Can the suspense from one episode to the next hold if you have to wait one week instead of one day to find out what happens?

7 LOCALISING THE TITLE MAY BE AN ADVANTAGE IN SOME CASES, AND A BAD IDEA IN SOME OTHERS

Some formats insist on keeping their original title in English, not translating it, for global recognition. “The Voice” maintains its title of origin in most non-English-speaking markets, but is sometimes accompanied by a subtitled translation in the local language. In French-speaking Canada, where the law protects the use of French, this was not possible; the title was entirely translated!

In some cases, it's a good idea to keep the whole title, or part of it, to ensure your brand's global resonance and bring an added value to the local audience: In many markets, globalised viewers value “imported” and “original” US or UK brands better than local ones. This is the case in China, where even local productions invent an English subtitle to look imported. It also happens often in France, where “Money Drop” (ESG) is still known as “Money Drop”. In Germany, by contrast, a “local” English-*looking* title was invented for the same format, to improve comprehension: “Keep the Money”.

If you localise too much, you risk losing brand recognition and attractiveness to a certain target group. But in most cases, a local title is chosen. The success of the formats trade relies precisely on the fact that viewers in most countries favour local-looking shows that mean something to them, rather having to make an effort to understand them. Most US viewers are unaware that “The Voice”, “Big Brother”, and “Survivor” were conceived in Europe ... and they don't care.

8 LOCALISING IS EASIER WHEN THE FORMAT RIGHTS HOLDER AND LOCAL PRODUCER ARE PART OF THE SAME COMPANY

In the US in 2015, the local version of “Who Wants to be a Millionaire?” was almost canceled. As years went by, the US adaptation introduced new rules that did not belong to the original British format. Negotiations over the show's cancellation revolved around who owned the rights to the innovations made—the US producer who developed them for the US version, or Sony Pictures Television, the owner of the original format?

When an innovation is brought to a version of a FremantleMedia or ESG format, produced by a local subsidiary company of the group, the innovation immediately increases the group's IP assets worldwide. If this were not the case, they would have to negotiate with the independent local licensee. A local innovation, if successful, can be rolled out elsewhere in the world, fueling the success of the format.

On the contrary, if an innovation doesn't work, never let it happen anywhere else. Each foreign market is a test bed that can potentially improve your format's longevity. Learn from both failures and successes.

CHAPTER 10

HOW TO MAKE YOUR FORMAT LAST FOREVER

Having a format air in several countries for a long time is a format creator's dream. For each episode aired, they get license fees on the licensee's production budget (~7-10%) and a generous share (~50%) of the ancillary rights, minus distribution rights (~30%), if any. Without added risk, it is a guaranteed annuity. This is rare, but possible. How can it be achieved? Is there a secret "fountain of youth" for formats? Do they have to undergo facelifts? If so, which ones ... and when?

1 LASTING FORMATS ACTUALLY CHANGE VERY LITTLE

If your formula is powerful at its beginning, with a simple, universal identity, unlinked to a technological disruption (voting apps for example, like those in "Rising Star") or a given sociological revolution (the legalisation of gay marriage, for example), experience proves it may last. In the US, the most competitive TV market in the world, formats aired on broadcast networks tend to be formats that have aired for a very long time.

For example:

- The game show "The Price is Right" (distributed by FremantleMedia) has been on air in its current version since 1972, following a previous version launched in 1956. The brand has existed for 60 years!
- The adventure game show "Survivor" (distributed by Castaway International) has so far enjoyed more than 30 seasons on CBS.
- "Big Brother" (distributed by ESG) has so been on air for more than 17 seasons on CBS.

What is the secret to the longevity of these examples? It's simple: *For all of these formats, you can describe their concept in a single sentence.* The concept stays the same, though alterations have been made with time: New players, or twists may have been added. In most cases, viewers haven't noticed the changes and will likely never remember them. The changes do not change the nature of the format. This means that the fundamental reason viewers are drawn to these shows remains intact.

If your format works, don't change it for the sake of change. Change aspects of the design, setting, or elements of the mechanics if absolutely necessary. Modifications made in formats are usually meant to reassure the producer, broadcaster or distributor, usually to keep them fresh, like an anti-ageing beauty crème. Are such crèmes actually useful? Micro-modifications can create twists and turns in the action ... but they must not change the main plot. TV viewers hardly notice a small update. And in any event, they *shouldn't*; it would destabilise their viewing experience.

2 FORMAT MODIFICATIONS ONLY WORK ON FORMATS THAT ARE HEALTHY. FOR OTHERS, IT IS ALREADY TOO LATE

"Got Talent" (distributed by FremantleMedia) introduced small modifications when ratings were still favourable.

A • Break the predictability of narrative and repetition to wake viewers up.

In the UK version of "Got Talent", as early as season 6, a "wild card" was introduced, enabling one eliminated contestant to be in the finale: A major turn of events! A second wild card, chosen by the audience, was added in the ninth season. With the same objective, a "golden buzzer" that introduces a break in the contestants' casting, and a powerful dramatic question, was introduced in the sixth season of the format in Germany in 2012, and in the eighth season in the UK in 2014. It appeared in

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a different form in the same year during the US's ninth season, then slowly progressed into other versions (in France, for example, under yet a different form, in 2014). Less important for the drama, but critical for marketing (to attract celebrity judges' fans), the number of judges sometimes oscillates between three and four.

B • You cannot save an ailing format with twists and modifications. Instead, you risk hastening its death.

TV viewers know why they watch a format. They could not care less about some producer's new twist. Viewers either like or dislike the feeling they get while watching, and have no reason to invest emotionally in a last-minute enhancement; they've already changed channels. Game over. When a TV viewer leaves, it is difficult to get them back. The trend is gone. The brand no longer has the same attraction. Since a hit is not a 100% guarantee of success abroad, a drop can't solely explain a drop in ratings in effectiveness. There is also context: The competition that influences the format's attractiveness. A format cannot do everything; modifying it will not save it.

In 2013, when the US version of "The X Factor" format encountered difficulty after two seasons, its "Boot Camp" and "Judges Home" components were dramatically shortened to make room for a formula called "Four Chair Challenge", which was first introduced in the Dutch version of the series. It did not prevent the Dutch and the American versions being canceled the same year.

The same year, the innovation was introduced in the British version, which was also experiencing difficulties. Despite other last-minute innovations, the format still declined in 2015. The format is probably less to blame than growing competition in all international markets from "The Voice", which made "The X Factor" look aged or gave it the air of a copycat.

C • A format is not an accumulation of twists. If you add too many, you may lose your core vision.

Even after adding modifications to "Who Wants to be a Millionaire?" in the US, including several changes of the host, the show is struggling with dropping ratings. In 2015-2016, the producers decided that their best move would be to return to the classic format, thereby bringing back the drama, tension, and increasing levels of difficulty as the game progresses. The producers understood that the show's format needed to return to what made the format successful at the very beginning.

D • Creating a new format out of an old one.

A format, even an old one, is a brand, and it is tempting to want to keep exploiting it. The complete makeover is easier when a show is no longer on air, versus when the show is being fully exploited. It can come back in pristine condition and become a full-fledged new property.

In Australia, "Who Wants to be a Millionaire?" left the air in 2007, after its last version introduced unsuccessful format modifications. Then, in 2009, the Nine Network launched "Millionaire Hot Seat", a reformatting of "Who Wants to be a Millionaire?": It's faster and shorter, inspired by a twist tested the year before, in the Italian version. This spin-off was later adapted in many countries. It still coexists on the market with the classic version. The spin-off prolonged the life and revenues of the original.

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E • Format regeneration: Redeveloping a format.

“Masterchef” (distributed by ESG) has had several versions. The third formula turned “Masterchef” into one of the most-sold formats in the world, catapulting its production company into the global big leagues. The first “Masterchef” launched in the UK in 1990. It morphed into “Masterchef Goes Large” in 1995 before taking back the name of “Masterchef”, still aired only in the UK. This is the version that British viewers are still watching. In 2009, Australian channel Ten adapted and updated the format by giving it a more competitive dimension, in the spirit of talent shows. The rating success was such that it was this Australian version that was sold worldwide afterwards.

Only the brand—which at the time only existed in the USA and in Australia, where the BBC version was aired in the form of ready-made tapes—and the notion of competition between amateur chefs judged by professionals, were kept. The rest of the format bible was new. This brand and idea had never been seen in most countries. It was innovative in the eyes of almost the whole planet. There may exist formats whose original idea was underexploited and that could be adapted to current trends. You could try to buying one, and turn it into something completely new.

Beware of format reboots.

You may be tempted to re-launch a format left dormant in a format library. Maybe you’ll even attempt it to put it in the same market it once aired in.

From the start, it has no novelty (unlike “Masterchef”, which, when it relaunched, had up until then only been exploited in English-speaking markets), and plays on nostalgia; you are trying to attract viewers from the past who loved it, as well as new viewers who have never seen it. It is risky. The viewers might be old (unattractive for broadcasters and advertisers in most countries), and younger viewers will judge it as a novelty, with no particular respect for its career. This means you have to be retro enough to interest old viewers, and modern enough to interest young viewers. Tricky. Young people like young things; they’ve likely already seen something similar that better addresses their needs than the old format you want to relaunch.

F • The best way to help your format thrive is to sell it in as many countries as you can.

Innovations and twists often stem from foreign productions of your format that tested new things, based on their personality, or the knowledge they have of local viewers. The licensees of your format abroad are an incredible creative reservoir; they are producers with a passion for your idea that can see things from a different point of view. The biggest international format groups (ESG, FremantleMedia, etc.) exchange different versions between producers, build idea boxes, organise international brainstorming, collect databases of challenge rules and twists, and so on.

In such cases, format bibles become collaborative pieces of work, and thus a global format bible emerges.

G • A travelling format will live a long life.

Help your creation travel. In return, it will infuse you with inspiration for your next format!

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