

From Pitch to Production

Tips on navigating the rocky waters of animation development.
by David B. Levy

"The main mistake I've made is not being thorough enough. Not having every single question answered. That's a big no-no. Always have as many answers about your project as possible."

—Butch Hartman, creator of Nickelodeon's *The Fairly OddParents* and *Danny Phantom*

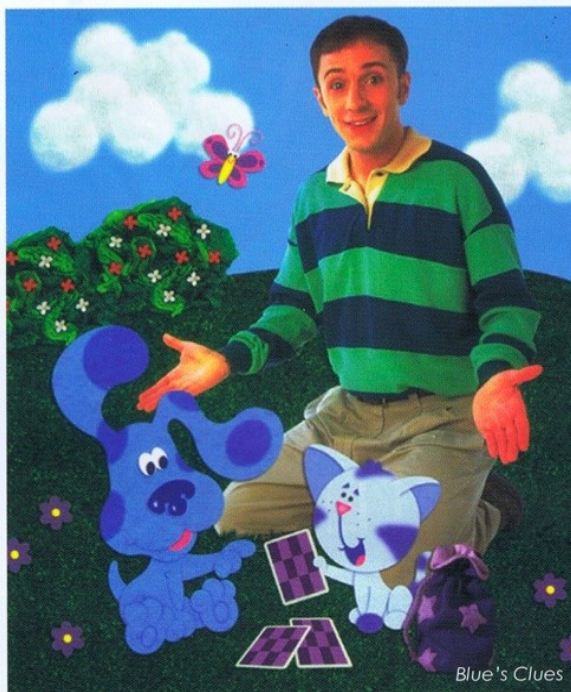
What do you have to do to sell an animated series pitch? Gosh, if we could answer that with one definitive answer for every creator and every project, there probably wouldn't be a need for this book. That would mean I'd have a lot more free time this year and a lot less trees would have had to donate their pulpy papermaking goodness. Unfortunately, there is no single universal answer to this question. However, we can assume that a well-connected and established creator has less to prove than a newcomer or a relative unknown to the industry. An easy formula here is: the less grand your reputation the more heavy lifting you'll be expected to do in the pitch process.

Recently there was a major backlash on an animation blog when it was leaked that the creator of a new animated show got picked up straight for series because the creator simply told his pal (who happened to be a top network president) that he wanted to do a series about music or something. Thus a series was signed, sealed, and soon delivered, completely bypassing the rigorous development track that other creators are left to navigate. On the bright side, the multi-season series order created employment for a lot of people. Development stories like this one are not reasons to give up. It would be naïve to think that all projects are carefully selected by merit and that all creators are welcomed equally.

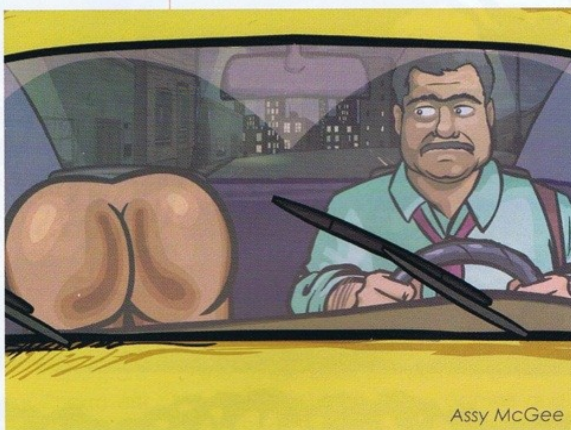
In another example, Cartoon Network's [adult swim] series *Assy McGee*

was greenlit after its co-creator, Carl W. Adams, showed a one-minute test film of the project to Mike Lazzo (senior executive vice president in charge of [adult swim]). "Great. Give us 20 of these," was Lazzo's response. Adams was temporarily dumbstruck. He had neither bible nor a concrete plan for additional episodes. The strength of the test film and Adam's ample experience as a key creative on such series as Cartoon Network's *Home Movies* was enough to warrant a pick up. Subsequently, *Assy McGee* proved itself to be worthy of a series, quickly earning a cult following, a high-profile sponsor, and even eventually employing this author as an animation director.

There are lots of nontraditional success stories out there. One that comes to mind is how Fran Krause's killer Rhode Island School of Design student film, *Mr. Smile*, caught the attention of then Cartoon Network development executive Linda Simensky. The two first met at an animation festival in Sweden and soon Fran was invited to pitch at Cartoon Network. At the time, I was working with Fran on Nick Jr.'s *Blue's Clues*. I'll never forget the day that Fran told us he'd be leaving to make his own pilot,



Blue's Clues



Assy McGee

with co-creator Will Krause, for Cartoon Network. He was not even a year out of school! In Fran's development story, his student film became his most important pitch element, helping to pave the way for his early pitching success.

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Linda Simensky

Subsequently, Fran and Will Krause went on to score two more development deals with Cartoon Network over the next five years, culminating in a second pilot, which could lead to a series.

The three success stories above all show the importance of building reputations and relationships, which factor in to any development success story I can think of. Reputation and relationships are intertwined because both come from one's work history; the projects one has worked on, one's role on those projects, and how effectively one built and preserved healthy relationships with others in the industry.

Creator Etiquette and the Common Mistakes of Pitching

According to Linda Simensky, many people who pitch are either not that great at representing their property, or don't seem to know it well enough to make the pitch completely sound enticing. Simensky advises, "Creators should know their properties and be able to talk about them, rather than reading from the pitch or doing an unfocused pitch that doesn't really represent the idea. Give examples of how a show is funny, rather than saying it's going to be funny."

Over many years of pitching, I have learned to pitch my projects with enthusiasm, spontaneity and in the most concise manner I can. But I keep in mind that pitching is two-way communication. You have to have an understanding for how the pitch is being received while you are giving it. You have to be ready and willing to be interrupted by questions and comments. Most of us need to hone our basic communication skills before we can focus on our pitching skills. A good form of practice is to learn how to keep an audience engaged. Attend any industry panel discussion that



Spellbinding Characters: Many toon development execs say they're always hungry for original characters that capture the imagination of kids and their parents alike. Butch Hartman's *The Fairly OddParents* is a perfect example of a clever idea that became a hugely successful show targeting Nickelodeon's audience.

opens the floor up to audience questions, and you'll see how much trouble the average person has in expressing their thoughts or questions in a clear and concise manner. The importance of holding the attention of a development executive in a pitch meeting is not just because they've made time to meet with you, but because if you can't capture and hold their imagination for one meeting, how could your creation hope to capture an audience?

Linda Simensky, having received hundreds of pitches over the years, kindly offers a roundup of some other mistakes that creators and producers make when pitching:

- When you are pitching to a network, know what shows they produce and watch them before coming in. (You wouldn't interview for a job without knowing what the company does, would you?)
- Don't think that your show needs to be exactly like the other shows on the network. They have those shows already.
- Don't insist that you know a network better than its own ex-

ecutives. Besides, maybe the network is trying to do something different.

- Don't tell me that other networks really like the idea and are interested. The pitching process is a lot like dating. So if you wanted to date someone, would you tell that person that many other people were interested in dating you? Or that you were interested in dating other people? ■

This article is an excerpt from David B. Levy's upcoming book *Animation Development: From Pitch to Production*, which will be published by Allworth Press in September.



David B. Levy

Levy is the author of the *Your Career in Animation: How to Survive and Thrive* and has been an animation director for six series to date, including *Blue's Clues*, *Blue's Room*, *Pinky Dinky Doo*, *The Electric Company* and *Assy McGee*. He has also completed six award-winning independent animated films, including *Owl and Rabbit Play Checkers* and *Good Morning*.

