

Kidscreen

By Doug Vitarelli

Years ago I never thought of myself as the type of animator who would have his own show. For the longest time I just wanted to be a production artist who created great work. My model was always the Nine Old Men, Art Babbitt, Ken Harris, etc. I love to animate. Just love it. Figured I would make the occasional personal film and that would be that.

And if that's how life turned out I think I would be pretty happy. But then something happened a few years ago. I became a father. And like many artistic people who have kids I became creative in a whole new way. I was drawing with crayons and playing with blocks. I was watching a lot more animation because "That's what Daddy does". And then there were the stories. Everyday on the way to school I had to make up a new story. After a few months I started to jot them down on my way from nursery school to work. After a while I had filled up my sketchbook with stories, characters, plot lines and character designs so I could show them to my son when he was older. Unexpectedly I had an animated television series.

So I created a bible and decided to pitch it. Because I'm a freelance commercial artist I only know a few people in the series business and that's only because of the occasional ASIFA East events so I decided to go to the Ottawa International Animation Festival's Television Animation Conference. I networked, I pitched and I learned a lot. And I was really excited when I returned back to NYC only to become busy again and didn't go much about it after that.

Then I received an email from OIAF with a discount for Kidscreen, which is being held here in NYC. I was told that it was TAC on steroids. A friend that I met in Ottawa told me he was going and this was just the kick in the butt that I needed. So I showed my neighbor's screenwriter boyfriend what I had. He gave me some tough love comments, I redrew some of the art, had a shirt made at CafePress and viola! Series here we come.

Prep

A few weeks earlier I had searched through Kidscreen's delegate database and contacted everybody that was interested in acquiring property and sent them an email. Some never responded, some had similar shows and some didn't deal with my age range, preschool. But a few people are interested and we set up meetings. Others are interested but they are already booked for the entire conference and could I please send them the bible in a pdf document. So before the conference even starts I have 5 meetings, 2 speed pitches, a meeting for free legal advice and a bunch of talks to attend in my agenda.

Day 1

I immediately run into some people I met in Ottawa. Good start. Then I walk into the room to use a computer to check my email. There are 1500+ people that all seem to be talking to each other. Steroids and human growth hormone. A bit overwhelming but I check my email and an animator I met in Ottawa calls to meet up for lunch. He's looking to finalize financing for his show this week. He followed up after Ottawa. Then I start to meet people.

The best place is just standing around while you're waiting for something. I was outside getting some fresh air and I struck up a conversation with a guy who's looking for an animator. He shows me his property, gives me a plush toy and insists that I get back in touch with him. Cool.

Then I have my first meeting. She likes the artwork, questions why my lead character is a dinosaur, has me tell her one of my three stories and is impressed with my knowledge and passion for Olifant. But I'm not a proven commodity and she offers some advice on where and how to get interest. I tell her that I've won at Annecy and that impresses her. I'm going to use that a lot more now.

The rest of the day is not very eventful. I begin to look through some of the paperwork I never got around to because I was working until the day before the conference and find some people that I want to contact and begin sending out some emails. I think it's fruitless for this week but my friend from Ottawa says that a 10 minute conversation can lead to months of follow up.

On my way out I meet 2 people while we are waiting to get our coats that are looking for preschool properties. At the end of the day I have 15 cards.

Day 2

I have a meeting in the morning with at one of the big ad agencies about a job I'm going to start next week. The vibes tell me that this job will not go smooth so I'm glad that I'm getting a good day rate. But bad vibes don't go away all that easily. I get to the conference around 11 and have nothing and have nothing to do until 2. Time to network!

But there are no lines to stand in and the few people I talk to aren't really good contacts. Then I log onto a computer and send out more emails. Surprisingly I get a reply and they want to meet later that afternoon. So with some time to kill I decide to get my card signed by all the exhibitors so I can enter the raffle for a free iTouch. The last person I have sign my card is someone with whom I have a meeting with tomorrow but we decide to talk now. It goes great. And I find out that the person who responded to me is his boss. Things are getting better.

At lunch my friend is a bit bummed because his financing isn't going as well as he had hoped. I tell him that today had one bright spot but other than that it seems that everyone else is in a meeting but me. Bad vibes.

Then I'm off to a 5-minute speed pitch meeting. I have 2 meetings with networks execs. The first guy tells me that the last person had a great pitch (he had some animation and a toy) and that I had a lot to live up to. Bad vibes. My legs are cut out from under me. The wind has been taken from my sails. I spend 2 minutes babbling and then try and recover, but I don't. At the end he tells me that my idea is not in the age range that he's looking for at the moment. I give my next spot to someone else. I'm just not going to waste my or another person's time right now.

So I get a cup of coffee and go to see Craig Yoe. Craig saves the day! I walk out of his talk/question and answer meeting feeling much better about the intersection of art and commerce. I run into someone who had expressed an interest in my idea but was too busy to schedule a meeting with me but tells me to stop by and say hi. Well he sets me up for a meeting tomorrow and I decide to get out of Dodge while the getting is good.

Day 3

Only 2 meetings today so I hope they go well. They don't. At the first one I'm stopped in the middle of my first sentence.

"What's your hook?" he asks.

"What's a hook?" is my reply.

I'm still new to this. A hook is a one-two sentence description that "hooks" the person you're telling it to. The conference has only 5 hours to go and I hear the word "hook" 3 more times. My friend (the one who followed up) told me before hand that I needed one but I never did it. So I sit in on another talk with a broadcaster. These are great. They tell you exactly what they are looking for. I've only sat in on 2 of them and wish I could have done more.

After lunch I have my last meeting. He doesn't show so I walk around and talk to other people I've met. The energy is winding down. Even the coffee isn't helping anymore. There are people slumped over in chairs. Even the other people pitching (you can tell who we are because we all have the same look on our faces) seem not to care anymore. Time to just chill and wait for the party at the bar at 5. But then I see the guy who blew me off. He had a good reason, we exchanged cards and I promised that I would email him my bible (with a hook!). I decide to go to the "Pitch This" seminar next door. At Ottawa they destroyed the 2 artists that pitched to a panel of experts and the audience. The same thing happened today. They killed the woman who was up there. And I didn't win the iTouch so I just decided to meet my family and friends at a sushi restaurant where I concentrated on the sake.

Epilogue

Was it worth it? is the big question. And I would have to say it was. I really want Olifant to be a series and am willing to work hard and accept a few/many rejections because all I need is 1 person to greenlight it. I definitely need to do more, lots more, research for the next time I pitch. It's nice that I now have a huge database of names and email addresses from the conference to help me. But now I have to do a ton of follow-up and then I have a start to learn about the financial and legal end.

If you want to have a series I can't help you there but I can offer some advice. Be a known commodity (book, already have a show on air, maybe win an Oscar), work at a television animation studio, have a best selling book and know financing. Know a lawyer and get an agent. All of these things will make your life easy.

Here's some advice for people more like me. Be passionate about your work. Be prepared. Research. Practice responses. Listen to advice. Know what people are looking for. Put on your business hat because until you get a deal and start writing and storyboarding the creative aspect (except maybe the financing) is over. Follow up. And hope for good timing.

Oh yeah: www.dougvitarelli.com/olifant.html