

# H O W T O PITCH

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# REALITY S H O W

The ultimate free guide on pitching unscripted television. How to create and pitch reality TV shows, documentary series, and unscripted television. Brought to you by two working television producers.



J O K E A N D B I A G I O

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# How to Pitch a Reality Show

## Ultimate Guide from Two Working Producers

Are you looking to pitch:

- Reality TV shows?
- Documentary series?
- Factual programming?
- Unscripted television?

You're in the right place. By the end of this guide, you will know how to pitch a reality show.

## Why Take Our Advice?



We're a married team, pitching, selling, and making unscripted entertainment for a living. TV networks trust our [reality TV production company](#) to deliver finished television series.

You can read about our shows in Hollywood trades like [Variety reporting on Don't Trust Andrew Mayne](#) or [The Hollywood Reporter covering MTV's Caged](#).

Joke Fincioen and Biagio Messina are named as executive producers (that's us). You'll find our production company, Joke Productions, listed as well. We've made over a hundred hours of unscripted television.

Every one of those shows began with a reality TV pitch.

## Why We Wrote This

The question we're asked most is "how can I pitch a reality show?"

It's no wonder...good advice on the unscripted television business is hard to come by.

A lot of the "reality TV advice" that litters the internet was written by people who've never sold or made a show, or don't understand how the unscripted television business works.

So we designed "**How to Pitch a Reality Show**" to be the web's best, totally honest, and insanely helpful free resource about pitching factual entertainment.

All backed up by real world examples and experiences from TV shows we've both sold and produced.

Our hope is that this guide saves you time and resources, and of course, that you consider **pitching your shows to us**.

This guide goes hand in hand with our site **Producing Unscripted**, which we built to teach you the ins and outs of making reality TV.

To stay up to date and get tips and info on pitching reality television, **get our newsletter**.

To hear us discuss many of these topics in depth (while having a blast doing it) be sure to check out our **Make Reality TV Podcast**.

(It was not easy for Biagio to talk Joke into doing a podcast. But it was SO worth it!)



## What We'll Cover in "How to Pitch a Reality Show"

There is A LOT here. If you spend the time to read, understand, and execute what we discuss, you'll be miles ahead of most people who pitch reality ideas to us.

- **FIRST:** We'll give you the background info you need to know about the reality TV business. You'll learn how different kinds of reality TV shows work. Plus, we'll break down why you should avoid pitching certain kinds of shows when you're just starting out.
- **NEXT:** We'll dispel some myths about reality TV "ideas." We'll explore why written descriptions have very little to do with how to pitch a reality show. You'll learn to create pitch materials, and how to make yourself valuable when pitching reality TV.
- **FINALLY:** We'll talk about where and how to pitch a reality show once you've put together your pitch package. From pitch pits, to production companies, to networks, we'll break down your options. And of course, we hope you'll **pitch to us, too**.

When you're done, you'll know how to pitch a reality show that excites professionals.

We'd love it if your concept is something we can make together.



# 1. Understanding How Reality TV Works

In section 1, Understanding How Reality TV Works, we give you an overview of different types of reality TV shows.

You'll learn:

- What types of reality shows different networks program
- How different kinds of shows are structured
- What kind of pitches new producers are most likely to sell.

Wrapping your head around the different genres, styles, and structures of unscripted television will give you a giant leg up on most new producers pitching reality TV.

## 1a. Different Types of Reality Shows



People tend to lump all reality TV together in one giant bucket of “unscripted stew.”

But there’s a wide range of reality TV shows out there, more properly called “unscripted programming.”

When you start thinking about how to pitch a reality show, it's important to recognize different reality TV genres and types of shows.

### Consider Movies...

For simplicity’s sake, let’s talk about movies for a second.

We've all seen plenty of films.

The Notebook couldn't be more different than Plan 9 from Outer Space, right? Some people enjoy Fincher flicks, some like The Farrelly Brothers.

Go to the movies and you can catch a comedy, a drama, a VFX laden blockbuster. Totally different kinds of films.

We all “get that.” Cinema’s over a century old.

But reality TV is a young form of entertainment, and people are still wrapping their heads around it.

**Mainstream “reality” is less than 20 years old. “Unscripted television” and “factual programming” have been a staple of cable TV for a lot longer. Still, when it comes to teaching us its vocabulary, reality TV can’t compete with decades of film.**

Because of that, the differences in genres of unscripted entertainment are often lost on the casual viewer.

If you’re going to learn how to pitch a reality show, you don’t have the luxury of being a casual viewer. You need to recognize what makes different types of reality shows work, and use that to your advantage when pitching.

## **Unscripted Television Has Many Faces**

- The First 48
- The Kardashians Franchise
- Master Chef
- Ghost Inside My child
- Deadliest Catch
- Basketball Wives
- Hack My Life
- The Voice

They're wildly different, yet all fall in the unscripted television bucket. (Often referred to in a generic manner as "reality TV.")

More times than we care to count, new producers pitching us concepts assume they know what how reality shows work, but haven't watched any recently (or ever).

Don't make that mistake.

The truth is few people take the time to understand unscripted television basics.

That's why so many reality TV pitches fall apart...almost immediately.

Nothing bugs industry pros more than someone who acts like they know how to pitch a reality show, but makes a ton of rookie mistakes.

**Better to own that you're a rookie right off the bat than try to "fake it."**

**We never mind when an enthusiastic person makes a few minor pitch mistakes. It bothers us when people over-compensate and act like a know-it-all (when that's clearly not the case).**

**Since you're reading this article, you won't make any of the most common pitch mistakes.**

**Instead of seeming like a "clueless newbie" you'll come across as an up-and-coming producer who's done their homework.**

## 1b. What Reality Show Pitches Do Networks Buy?

Want to break into the reality TV business?

Do your research. Understand what TV networks are programming.

Those pitching to us will often say something like, “My show would be great for MTV, Spike, OWN, and Oxygen. Could also work at Lifetime, Nickelodeon, ESPN, The Food Network. Oh, and History, TLC, Discovery, and The Game Show Network.”

Huh?

You might laugh. But at least one or two pitches a week boldly state they would work on all these networks.

That doesn't make your show look more attractive to production companies. We don't suddenly think, “Ooh, you mean I could sell this at ALL those networks? Wow!”

Instead, you've just hoisted a big flag that says, “Newbie here.”

### **Different Networks Buy Different Kinds of Shows**

TV networks pride themselves on being different from each other. And while a show that works on History might also work on Discovery, there's no way that same show could work on Lifetime.

We go into this in depth in [Top Secret, What TV Networks Buy, and Why](#).

For now, understand that different networks buy different kinds of shows. How to pitch a reality show changes with each network you target.

## 1c. Watching Television With a Critical Eye

If you want to sell reality shows, watching a lot of TV is a must.

Nothing is more disheartening than when people pitch us shows that would never be on TV today (or that are already on TV! That happens often and proves those pitching haven't done their homework).

There's no sense in spending time on pitches networks will never buy.

What often happens is people pitch what they "think" would sell, even if those shows have been out of style for a while.

### Often Pitched Reality Shows that Have No Chance

For example, here are some often-pitched shows that aren't going to launch your career or get producers excited about working with you.

- arts and craft shows
- kids' shows
- bland health and fitness shows
- golf shows
- info-tainment shows
- old school, magazine style travel shows (i.e. "The 20 Best Hotels in St. Thomas")
- cooking shows (as in cooking over the stove one ingredient at a time).

If you turn on the TV today and look at what most major broadcast and cable networks are airing, you'd be hard pressed to find a lot of shows from the list above.

Yet these kinds of shows are some of the most pitched by people just starting out in the reality TV industry.

Sure, some versions of these shows show up from time to time, but they're not what most networks are programming today.

They're also not the kind of pitches that get production companies and networks excited about working with new producers.

In general, if there's nothing like the show you're pitching on major cable or broadcast networks, there's a good reason.

One of our goals with this guide is to save you from wasting time on reality show ideas that have very little chance of making it to air.

**The best way to do that is to watch reality TV. All of it.**

Before you ever start pitching shows, do your homework.

Watch a lot of TV. Know what kinds of reality TV shows networks are making today.

Understanding the market you're selling to shapes how to pitch a reality show, and what kinds of shows you pitch.

"My Pitch Is So Unique! It's Not on TV Anywhere."

We hear that a lot.

Guess what? There might be a very good reason your show isn't on TV. For example, maybe networks don't want that kind of programming.

Maybe you'd love to binge watch a hundred episodes of a basket weaving show. That doesn't mean enough of the general public would be into it to justify putting it on a TV network.

Often times these shows are far too niche for the broad audience that looks to a TV network for programming.

That's not to say there's NO audience for these kinds of shows, they just don't belong on television.

A lot of programming that is too niche, or is out of fashion on TV networks today (like step-by-step cooking shows and magazine-style reports) has moved on to YouTube, where it often does well.

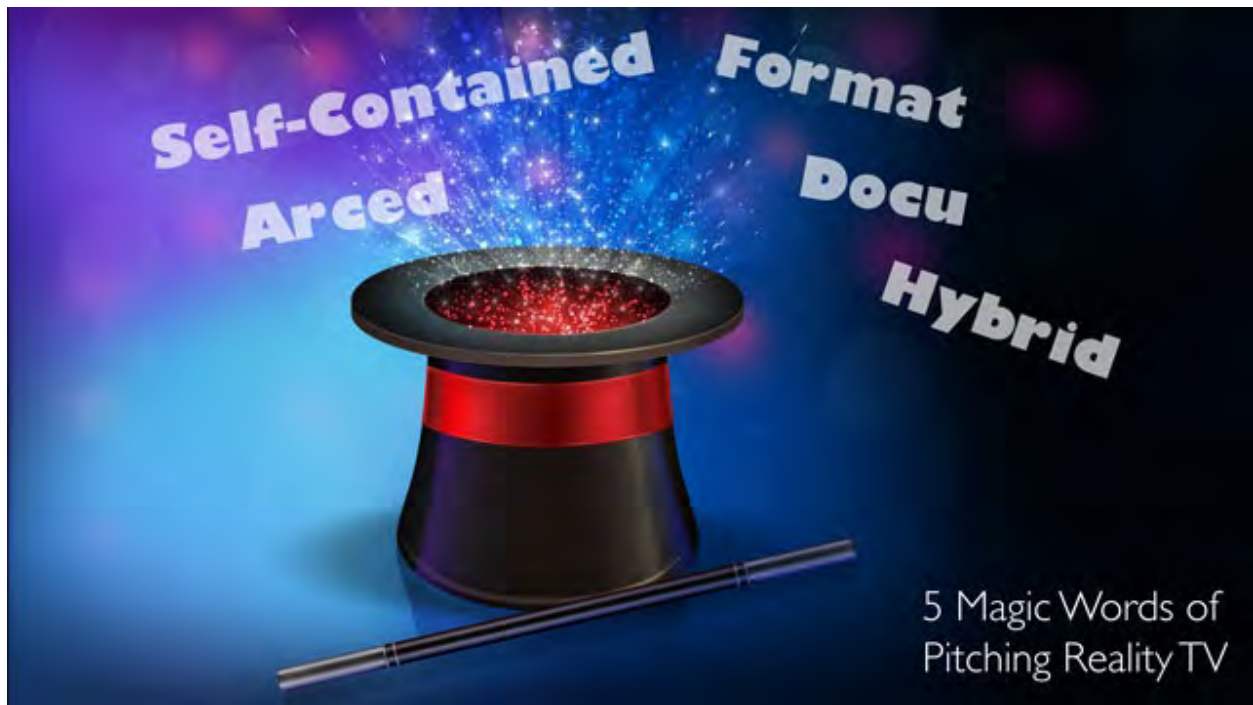
Don't discount making a web series if there is no network for your passion project.

For more on this topic, check out:

- [Make Reality TV Shows and Documentary Series with Joke and Biagio](#)
- [Don't Pitch These Four Kinds Of Shows](#)



## 1d. The Five Magic Words of Pitching Reality TV



Know these five words and phrases before you pitch your reality show to anyone:

- Self-Contained
- Arced
- Format
- Docu
- Hybrid

Use them right and we'll know exactly what kind of show you're pitching. As a big added bonus, you'll sound like a total pro.

Here's a quick guide to these "magic words" to get you up and running.

## **Reality TV Structure: Self-Contained or Arced?**

In broad strokes, reality TV structure falls into two main categories: Self-contained and Arced.

### **Self-Contained**

An episode of a show stands on its own.

- Intervention
- Undercover Boss
- The First 48
- Bar Rescue
- Ghost Inside My Child (one of our own shows).

These shows are all self-contained, also referred to as "close-ended." All parts of the story begin and end in one episode. You can play episodes in any order, it doesn't matter. Self-contained shows are easy for networks to replay at any time.

### **Arced**

(Pronounced ARKED) Continues storylines from one episode to the next. You can't watch them out of order, it wouldn't make sense.

- The Bachelor
- American Idol
- The Amazing Race
- Project Runway
- Top Chef

These are all arced.

Imagine watching episode 7 of a season of Survivor, then episode 2, then 9. That would be weird, right?

Arced reality TV shows are designed to be watched from beginning to end.

Arced shows require a greater "buy in" from reality TV audiences. This makes arced reality shows a bigger gamble for networks.

Think about it:

Someone misses the premiere. Will they really start watching four or five episodes down the line? Probably not.

This means TV networks have to spend big marketing dollars to make sure an audience shows up on night one.

Not all networks can afford that. Plus, if no one shows up to watch, the networks' wasted a lot of marketing time and resources.

So arced shows can be tough sells, especially to smaller networks.

## **Reality Television Type: Format, Docu, or Hybrid?**

### **Format**

A format relies on tentpole moments that repeat every episode. A format can be either self-contained or arced.

Any show that has elements that repeat every episode is considered a format.

Myth Busters is a self-contained format. Survivor is an arced format.

In Myth Busters, the guys introduce an urban legend, then run experiments to see if it has merit.

On Survivor (though there are tweaks season to season) you see the same tentpole moments each episode:

- There's a reward challenge
- An immunity challenge
- Tribal council
- The famous, "The tribe has spoken" tag as a torch is put out

Audiences recognize these repeatable elements in a formatted show, and come to expect them. If a viewer tunes in late, they can guess what part of the show they're watching. (For example, if you see the immunity challenge, you know the episode is more than half-way over.)

To use our own reality TV series as examples:

- *Scream Queens* on VH1 was an arced format.
- *Don't Trust Andrew Mayne* on A&E was a self-contained format.

## **Docu**

Has its roots in documentary. More of a "follow real life as it happens" approach.

- *The Kardashians* follows the family through their every day lives.
- *Duck Dynasty* is a "docu-sitcom."
- *The Housewives* franchise is a "docu-soap."
- *Hard Knocks* on HBO is a true documentary series.

For the most part, there are no overt tentpole moments or repeatable format elements in these shows. There may be recurring events (dinners, parties, etc.), however, those repeatable elements don't drive story in the same way every episode.

## **Hybrid**

Also known as "hidden format." This is the workhorse of reality TV. It's like a follow-doc in that you feel like you're following peoples lives. However, there is a "soft format" element that returns every episode.

- Dance Moms follows Abby Lee, her students, and their parents in a follow-doc fashion. On the surface, it would seem like a straight-up follow-doc series. But the "hidden format" element is that every episode leads up to a dance competition.
- In our own show Caged on MTV, we followed a group of young adults living in small town USA. They all happened to be connected to the local mixed martial arts scene. The format element was that every episode ended in a cage match.

## **How Does Your Show Fit In?**

Look closely at your own reality show concept.

Is it an arced format? A docu-leaning hybrid?

We get hundreds of pitches through our submission portal. The ones that arrive using pro terminology snag our attention immediately.

So for instance, this description:

“I got these hilarious friends who hunt and play jokes on each other and make duck calls. They also have long beards. They argue a lot. Lots of great drama there. Funny too. Sound cool?”

...tells us much less than this log-line using reality TV lingo:

“I’m pitching you a self-contained docu-sitcom. It follows a family who’s made a fortune selling duck calls. They spend a lot of that money playing jokes on each other. Every episode follows some hilarious family drama, but in the end they all come together as one.”

For a spirited discussion and some cheesy Joke and Biagio moments, check out the podcast episode [Pitch Reality TV Shows and Documentary Series with these Five Magic Words](#).

## **1e. What Reality TV Pitches are New Producers Most Likely to Sell?**

If you're just starting out, avoid pitching arced competition shows. Unless you've got some incredible connections to a great piece of talent they're just too hard to sell.

### **Self-Contained Hybrid**

You're going to have the easiest time pitching a self-contained hybrid. It should be a show built around strong, real-life characters and have a repeatable story element.

Good examples of this kind of pitch are family business reality shows that feature a "client of the week" like:

- Pawn Stars (more format-leaning).
- Flipping Out (more docu-leaning).

Next best bet for an aspiring producer or filmmaker?

### **Self-Contained Format**

A self-contained format built around a larger than life character. That person needs major credibility in whatever world the show lives.

Gordon Ramsay's Kitchen Nightmares and Tabitha's Salon Takeover are perfect examples.

Our own show Commercial Kings with Rhett and Link on IFC is another. (Each episode they wrote and directed wild local commercials for small businesses.)

You can't pitch those formats without Gordon or Tabitha, or Rhett and Link, because we've all heard them a hundred times. There's really nothing new to the one-liners for those shows.

“We’re going to give really bad restaurant kitchens a makeover” sounds lame. But walk in with Gordon Ramsay and you have a hit.

You don’t have to attach someone who is already famous, by the way.

Networks love new, fresh faces. But the people you pitch have to be experts at what they do. Plus, they have to be as good as or better than the characters already on TV right now.

It's totally doable for a new producer to find someone like this (now that you know what you're looking for).

Here's a great post to help you recognize [great reality TV characters](#).

## **Do You Have to Have Talent In Mind Before Pitching?**

It’s not a good idea to pitch reality concepts if you don’t have something or someone real attached.

# 2. Preparing to Pitch Reality Shows

In section 2, Preparing to Pitch Reality Shows, we'll cover how to:

- Understand what makes for a good reality pitch
- Avoid bad internet advice
- Make yourself valuable in unscripted television
- Create reality TV pitch materials
- Protect your reality show concepts
- Build your reality TV career

Most aspiring producers waste hours, days, or even weeks preparing reality TV concepts that will never sell.

After reading this section, you'll know how to avoid these giant pot holes in the road to reality TV success.



## 2a. Reality TV Ideas, A.K.A. What Are You Actually Pitching?

Okay, we're about to burst a lot of bubbles out there. Let's rip off the band-aid and get it done.

You don't just create a reality TV pitch on a piece of paper, send it off to Mr. or Ms. Important, and make a bundle of money.

Pitching reality TV means pitching something real that you have access to film. Reality TV ideas are a dime a dozen, and ideas, in and of themselves, are pretty much worthless. Everybody has one. Many are identical or very similar to each other.

Even if you take that idea and turn it into a fleshed out treatment, it's still just a glorified reality TV idea. There's no "real life" substance to it.

Which means there's an overwhelming number of people (who pitch to us every day) convinced that pitching:

- American Idol for Bartenders/Rappers/Animal Trainers/You Name It
- Survivor set in the Arctic/On the Ocean/In Space/Wherever
- Cash Cab on a Train/Boat/Bus/Military Transport

...are worthy of paper pitches that can be five to fifty (!) pages in length.

### Is That You?

If you're an aspiring producer guilty of "creating" these kinds of shows, it's not your fault. There has long been a fallacy in Hollywood that "one big idea" can propel you to riches. It's like a great fairy tale told over and over again.

Many people pitch reality shows as if they are playing the lottery (usually with the same results). "Here's an idea, I'll take a shot at the big time."

A big part of this misconception is due to some...

## 2b. Bad Web Advice

The web is a mixed bag. There's some "okay" advice out there, but a lot of it is either:

1. Out of date.
2. Written by people who've never actually sold a reality TV show.
3. Irrelevant or useless for aspiring, unestablished reality TV producers.

What's wrong with what's out there? A LOT of the results focus on writing elaborate treatments. These articles give the impression that a "solid write up" and a friendly letter could launch your career.

One site that has some otherwise nice info blows it big time with this quote:

"Pitching a reality TV idea is as simple as communicating a Title, Logline, and Synopsis (format). This applies to all formats of reality-based ideas."

NO. WRONG. BAD.

Someone please sound the Family Feud buzzer as long and loud as possible.



The real shame here is that talented writers and creatives take advice like this and waste hours writing useless paper. (Especially since similar advice about reality TV treatments clutters sites all over the web.)

It's a writing-centric approach that stems from scripted TV. After all, in the scripted world, written treatments are very important.

But people who give this advice to aspiring reality TV producers don't understand this simple fact:

New producers and undiscovered writers don't bang out the next *Amazing Race* in five pages and two lattes at Starbucks.

## 2c. Ideas versus Execution

Selling a reality show is never about the idea itself...it's about the execution of the idea -- and whether you can get it done.

Being able to "make it happen" is FAR more important than any elaborate write-up you can put together.

### **Reality TV: Ideas vs Execution Example:**

You've got a music show concept you think is on par with The Voice.

You planned out an entire season, sample episodes, the whole enchilada. (After all, you read how to do it in one of those web posts that made it seem easy.)

You've got:

- Ten awesome pages filled with exciting format.
- Surprising twists and turns.
- Even a 360 marketing approach guaranteed to blow Hollywood's mind.

No one cares.

Unless you've got CeeLo Green judging and a record company putting up a prize, you don't have a show.

Getting big names on board and someone to offer a phenomenal prize -- well, that's the hard part. That's what producing a large-scale, network level reality show is all about.

It's cutting through the legal red tape, closing the big deals, and getting stars to say "yes" that matters.

That's what makes these giant blockbuster TV shows happen.

That's what producing is all about: putting together a great package (more on that below).

It's NOT about the write up any of us create in a vacuum somewhere. (Which will get re-thought and re-formatted a million times by the network anyway.)

**Don't worry.** None of this means new producers can't break into the business.

On the contrary, by following tips that come later in this guide, you can up your chances of success quite a bit.

## 2d. You Can't Pitch What You Don't Have

Just starting out? Chances are you have no access to music superstars, big name talent, or the Hollywood clout to make headline deals.

No power agent in your corner, no weekend parties at Clooney's Italian villa.

So why underline that by pitching the next "Big Celebrity Reality Show" or some other idea that requires all the might of showbiz to produce?

We get piles of pitches that have "creative" celebrity hooks. But the people pitching them have never met a celebrity in their lives.

By the way, we've worked on shows with celebrities ourselves. They're hard to cast.

We're repped by CAA, a pretty big agency. Even with their help and giant networks on board, it's not easy to get stars to say "yes."

So don't fall in this trap of pitching shows driven by celebrity. You might think that makes your idea feel "special."

It doesn't.

It comes down to this: you can't pitch what you don't have access to film.

We've actually been pitched a reality show set at The White House several times. Unfortunately, no one pitching that particular concept had ever checked with P.O.T.U.S. first.

This is why trying to "create" these types of reality show pitches when you're just starting out is a total waste of time.

We're hammering on this point because it's where the vast majority of pitches we receive go wrong.

### **What To Do Instead?**

In the next section we'll give you the secret of how to turn things around. Do this one thing and entertainment professionals will take you seriously.

## 2e. Make Yourself Valuable



Step back and ask yourself how you can bring more to your pitch than just words on paper.

What can you add to your idea so that it comes alive?

Do you have access to:

- Some interesting people?
- An exciting, visual world?
- A book author?
- An edgy new business that's taking your city by storm?



For example:

- Maybe you know about an amazing underground sub-culture. Could you film it? (Like Travis Bible and Steve Harris did after they first pitched us a log-line that became MTV's CAGED.)
- Perhaps you've discovered a shocking world never before seen on TV. (Like Suzanne Stratford did when she brought us parents with a problem. Their children remembered living and dying in past lives. That became multiple seasons of Ghost Inside My Child.)
- You could be friends with the next Super Nanny or Gordon Ramsay. Can you convince them to make a show? (Our friend Andrew Mayne is an amazing magician. We sold a reality TV series to A&E starring him.)

Fast Company's [FastCoCreate.com](#) did a behind-the-scenes piece on producing that show.

See this article from [Susan Karlin](#) on making [Don't Trust Andrew Mayne](#).)

Notice in all three of these examples, there was something more to the pitch than just words on paper.

Real people, real lives, and real stories were already along for the ride.

## **What Else Makes You Valuable?**

Filmmaking skills of any kind.

Are you a great shooter? Editor? A documentarian with several projects under your belt? Hard-core YouTuber? Terrific story teller?

Wanna know what gets us excited?

When a talented filmmaker walks in and says, "I found these amazing real-life characters and put them on tape."

(More on pitch tapes and sizzle reels below. Tip - don't spend a lot of money on them. Ever.)

Now, you don't necessarily have to be a filmmaker to pitch reality shows, but it's a nice bonus, and always gets our interest.

## 2f. Pitching Reality TV: Five Ways to Make Yourself Valuable

Here's a simple list to get you thinking about how to add value to your pitches.

- **Find a Great Real Life Character**  
We've hit that one plenty in this article. You get the big picture.
- **Provide access to a unique world**  
Can you get cameras in someplace no one else can? You know someone who knows someone? Have a family member in an elite police squad who might let you film? Access is valuable.
- **Get the rights to an exciting property (like a book or a podcast).**  
The first show we had a company card on was Foody Call, based on a book. It wasn't a famous book. It wasn't even in book stores at the time. But Chad Gervich managed to talk the author into letting him pitch it, and we came on board to produce.
- **Bring useful filmmaking skills to the project.**  
If you're a great filmmaker your skills are helpful well beyond the pitch phase of a project. You can work on the show by filling a line item in the budget. That's a win/win for everyone.
- **Have a great personality.**  
Making reality TV shows and documentary series is hard work. The hours are long. The stress is high. The pace is fast. Your great attitude and grace under fire means we'll enjoy being in the trenches with you should the show run for ten years.

The most important part of your reality pitch is the real assets you bring to it. Check off whatever you can from the above list.

The reason is that when you find real-world assets to go along with your pitch you have more than an idea.

You have the beginning of a "package." More on "packaging things up" in our next section...

## **Helpful Links on Adding Value to Your Reality Show Pitches**

Adding value by finding great real life people? Check out [6 Must Have Traits of Unscripted TV Characters](#)

Learn more about great reality TV worlds: [Great Reality TV Worlds Have These Four Qualities.](#)

Want to approach a book author, business owner, or any other entity about developing a show around them? Be sure to check out [How to Turn a Book, or Any Property, into a TV Show.](#)

We talked about [five ways to make yourself valuable \(and more\)](#) with the awesome Stephanie Palmer over at [Good In a Room](#).

(By the way, [Good in a Room](#) is an amazing site to help you do better in Hollywood pitch meetings, especially if you're also a screenwriter. Highly recommended.)

## 2g. All About Your Reality TV Pitch Package

The number one thing you are pitching is a package -- not an idea.

A "package" consists of all the creative and real-world elements that come together in your reality TV or documentary series pitch.

Creative assets are your pitch materials (see more below).

Real-world elements are things like celebrities, books, businesses, families, or real people attached to your project.

Don't freak out if you're thinking you have no access to anything of value.

It doesn't mean that if you live in the middle of nowhere you have no chance of putting together a great, pitch-able package.

In fact, let's say you live somewhere in middle America. Maybe you discover a terrific new fashion boutique. It's run by sassy 20 somethings you think could play well on MTV, Oxygen, or ABC Family.

The first step in putting together a pitch package could be a short tape you make yourself (doesn't have to be perfect).

### What Goes in Your Initial Short Tape?

That tape should do a few things:

1. Show off the personalities of the young ladies you discovered.
2. Give us a sense of their business.
3. Hint at the kinds of stories we'd see each episode.

Additionally put together some photos, and a SHORT write up of how the show would work.

Now you've got a conversation starter. With this big piece of the puzzle, you've got something reality TV industry pros can take a look at.

### **This Will Instantly Set Your Reality TV Pitch Apart. Why?**

Here's how most other people would pitch the above show:

"I have a write up of a reality TV idea here. What we're gonna do is go find some interesting fashion businesses, and look for fun young women to follow around. It's gonna be great! What do you think?"

Here's the conversation you'll be having instead:

"I found these terrific girls who started a new fashion boutique that caters to high-end prom dresses. They have great personalities which you can clearly see on this quick tape I put together. I also brought a short write-up about what they do, including a few sample story lines. I see it as a self-contained hybrid. We follow the drama of the boutique and the owners lives, but there's a new prom dress delivered each episode."

Congrats. Your pitch is officially better than 80-90% of what we hear from people who pitch to us.



If a production company is excited about your project, they will work with you to make a pitch tape or sizzle reel for your project at no cost to you.

They may require your time, but never your money.

You certainly shouldn't waste months of time putting a sizzle reel together. That's not how to pitch a reality show, either.

Here's the short list of things you want to have together to pitch any kind of reality show:

- **Great Tape (2 to 5 minutes, shorter is better).**
  - On the down-and-dirty side, your pitch tape should at least show off your great characters and what they do. Doesn't have to be perfect. We've sold shows using Skype footage taped off of a computer screen. After all, if your characters don't pop on Skype, they won't pop when you put a \$20,000 camera in their face, either.
  - On the high-end side, your tape should feel like a television promo for the main networks that make sense for your reality show pitch. Go to their websites and watch promos for new shows. Think of your tape as having that kind of energy, but longer interviews.
- **Short Write-Up**  
(1 or 2 pages max.)  
No one's going to read it at first. Probably won't even give it a glance. Just make sure it's a super tight, fun read. If people want more, they'll ask you for it, and you can give them exactly what they need. Big long documents at this stage are pointless.



- **Anything Extra That Brings Your Reality TV Show to Life.**

For example:

- If you were pitching Duck Dynasty, give the people in your meeting a duck call. It's fun and shows what these guys built their fortune on.
- Going out with a gold prospecting show? Might be cool to bring some real gold and fool's gold to the meeting. See if the exec can guess which is which.
- Selling a magic show? Make sure your magician's in the meeting with some great tricks ready to go. (Andrew did a whole routine for A&E execs after we showed them our pitch tape.)

### Should You Shoot Your Own Reality TV Pilot?

You should NEVER film a full TV pilot if your intention is to sell a show. The only reason to produce a full pilot is because you can learn a lot doing it. But if selling a show is your end goal, a full pilot doesn't help you (and usually hurts you.)

We break it all down in this series of posts: [Should I Produce My Own Reality TV Pilot?](#)

A few helpful resources related to this section:

Check out [What Goes In a Pitch Tape? Should You Make One?](#) to learn more about pitch tapes and sizzle reels.

Don't spend too much money creating shows: [5 Steps to Develop Shows without Going Broke](#).

We discuss editing tapes that feel like TV promos in [Steal This Editing Secret](#).

Here's exactly what we like to see in reality TV and documentary series [paper pitches](#) (and it's probably a lot less than you think you need).

## 2i. How To Protect Your Reality Idea While Building Your Career

Many aspiring producers and filmmakers freak out about pitching their ideas. Why?

Because they think those ideas will get stolen.

Screenwriter John August's [Blog](#) has a great post [about this topic](#), and we followed up with [Did My Idea Get Stolen? Focus on This Instead](#).

Please understand we are not lawyers and are not offering reality TV legal advice.

Our goal with this section is to explain the day to day reality of how our business works, especially when it comes to "ideas."

We hope these insights will give you a more practical approach to protecting yourself, while at the same time increasing your value to your own pitches.

When in doubt, always consult a lawyer.

### **Similar Reality Shows On TV at the Same Time**

First of all, consider this: Wife Swap and Trading Spouses. Pretty much the same show, right? Subtle differences, but essentially the same idea. They were on the air, at the same time, on two different networks.

Another example:

One of our mentors went around all over town pitching "Survivor set in the business world." Instead of getting voted off the island, people would get fired. No one bought it.

Mark Burnett sold the same idea, called The Apprentice, with Donald Trump a few months later.

Why?

Well, as you now know, it's not about the idea. It's about the execution of the idea.

Our old mentor was pitching words on paper. Burnett was pitching Donald Trump hiring somebody for a dream job. See the difference?

When people freak out about their idea getting stolen they're missing the big picture.

We go into great detail on this subject in [Why Ideas Aren't Enough](#), and the podcast ep that follows it up, [Unscripted TV Success Secret](#).

Bottom line -- professionals don't want to steal your idea. We have enough of our own ideas to worry about.

But if all you're pitching is words on paper, your reality TV pitch is not going to be that unique.

Chances are someone else is pitching (or has pitched) the same thing.

Skeptical?

Remember, Survivor premiered in 2000. Amazing Race in 2001. American Idol in 2002.

Well over a decade for each of those shows to seep into our brains.

Over those years someone has already pitched permutations of every "big idea."

In fact, at RealScreen a few years back we visited a panel with network executives. The moderator asked if they'd received any truly unique ideas in the last year.

Every executive said "no."

Every one of them.

Over the course of a year, a handful of top network executives had not seen a single idea that was truly original.

It's all been pitched.

Again, the only thing that makes your show different is how it's packaged up.

The base idea? It's been around.

## **So what's the lesson here?**

The best way to make yourself valuable to a pitch is also the best way to protect yourself:

Build your reality pitch around someone or something real.

Fifty other people might pitch reality shows about restaurant makeovers. Only you are pitching a show following the wild restaurateur you connected with.

Your good relationship with the talent or assets you bring to a project protects you. So do your own filmmaking abilities. That's what makes you valuable.

Those things are worth far more than any service you pay to "prove" you wrote something down on a piece of paper. (Use those services if they make you feel better, but be real about what you're trying to "protect.")

Now, that's our opinion. You need to do what's right for you, but we believe worrying about ideas getting stolen is a waste of time.

When it comes time to make a deal (after a production company or network is interested in your show), that's different. You should have an entertainment attorney look things over.

Just please...for heaven's sake...hire a real entertainment attorney who specializes in reality TV.

Do NOT hire a local general practice lawyer who's never worked in reality TV.

Nothing is more disheartening than having a deal fall apart because of an inexperienced attorney. They have no idea how the reality TV business works, what to ask for, or what's standard practice in our industry.

# 3. Where and How to Pitch a Reality Show

In section 3, "Where and How to Pitch a Reality Show" we share:

- Overcoming challenges of pitching reality TV shows early in your career
- What a "soft pitch" is and when to use one
- What happens when a reality TV network says, "I want your show."
- Pitfalls of pitching directly to networks
- How we broke into the unscripted television industry (you can take the same steps)
- How production companies can speed up your TV career plans

Okay, so you've taken our advice. You've stopped focusing on simple reality TV ideas and started thinking about your reality TV pitch package.

You've found some amazing real-life characters, and put them on tape (whether a rough video or elaborate promo).

You've pulled some photos, written up a short treatment, and are aching to pitch your reality TV package.

And you don't know anyone in the TV industry. Now what?

### 3a. Pitching Reality Shows Early in Your Career



Back in the day when VHS was still a thing and there was no Twitter or Facebook, the two of us, Joke and Biagio, had no one to pitch to. (That's about the same time our diet consisted almost exclusively of Ramen noodles.)

So we told a lot of white lies (more like stretching the truth). Snuck into some places where we shouldn't have been allowed. Accidentally **fooled a former president of NBC** into giving us a job.

It all turned out okay because we worked our butts off and made sure we delivered on the big promises we made.

#### **Today's World Is Different.**

You're not going to lie your way into a production company or a big agency. (Social media and the web have pretty much killed that. Too easy to find out who you really are!) So what are your options?



### 3b. Should You Ever Pay to Pitch?

The common way new producers and filmmakers pitch their projects is at pitch pits, classes, and seminars. There's nothing inherently wrong with going to these types of events. You just have to prepare to do your best, and make sure you get your money's worth.

The problem with paying to pitch is that it's like speed dating. The people hearing the pitches are slammed with one meeting after the next. By the end, they're bleary-eyed, and even good projects can be forgotten.

#### We've Been on Both Sides of the "Speed Pitch" Table

At times it can be disheartening. When you're pitching it's fast and furious and exciting in the moment. Later, when you don't hear anything back, it's frustrating.

Receiving pitches at a pitch pit is also hard. There's no real time to course-correct somebody if their pitch is off. Certainly no real time to build a relationship. Later, it's hard to remember who exactly pitched what.

So it's not ideal for people on either side of the table. Still, there are success stories that come out of pitch pits, so we'd never say, "don't do it." Just know what you're getting into.

Our solution was to start our site, [Producing Unscripted](#). It allows you to pitch to us here for free, instead of paying to pitch to us at a seminar somewhere. It also gives us time to really think about a pitch before deciding if we can be helpful. You can access our free members only pitch-portal by signing up for [our newsletter](#) and following the directions. **Note:** we talk about this in depth in our podcast episode [Should You Pay to Pitch?](#)

### 3c. The Soft Pitch



**NOTE:** Only "soft pitch" to those buyers and sellers with whom you have a relationship. That means network execs and production companies you know well.

Do not soft pitch agents, managers, or the guy who does craft service on Master Chef. They won't be helpful in this stage.

You can soft pitch us through our portal (learn how to [pitch to us here](#)), but please read this entire section before you do, or check out our podcast episode [Soft Pitch Blueprint](#).

A soft pitch is probably different than what you imagine.

Most soft pitches we get are no more than the seed of an idea. As you're about to see, a simple idea never qualifies as a soft pitch.

## What Is A Soft Pitch

A soft pitch is a conversation about a project you're thinking of investing more time into.

A soft pitch works best **after** you've discovered a great asset to build your show around, but **before** you film with them.

## Why Give a Soft Pitch?

The reason you soft pitch is to gather important information. You want to find out if there's any reason that your show would be impossible to sell.

For instance, you might have discovered great characters in a world that recently bombed on TV -- no one will buy that. (Has happened to us more than once.)

Or your idea might be a M.O.P. (Most Often Pitched.)

For instance, right now ghost hunting shows are a M.O.P.

(There are so many being pitched that networks sent out word they don't want to see them right now. It would take some pretty amazing ghost hunters to overcome this issue.)

## Soft Pitches: Before and After

Here are some examples of good and bad soft pitches:

**Bad:** "We're going to travel the country and find real life witches. We're not just looking in the spookiest corners, but in every day places, too. We'll even see that witches are normal people. How's that sound?"

**Good:** "I discovered these young witches who run a shop selling witchcraft products. They're up for doing a show. Here are some photos I pulled off Facebook. Would you like to see some tape?"

**Bad:** "How about an extreme survival show starring people who insist on living like cave men? What do you think?"

**Good:** "I met this crazy survival dude who insists on living naked and eating only what he kills. But he lives the middle of New York City. Here's a YouTube video of a news story done on him. Should I put together some more tape?"

**Bad:** "What about a show that follows a public defender working gang crimes?"

**Good:** "My brother-in-law is a public defender specializing in gang-related crime. Here's a letter saying we have permission to film with him and his department, and a list of cases he's working on. What do you think?"

Notice how the bad soft pitches are nothing more than ideas, whereas the good versions have real people and places in mind.

Fact is most soft pitches we get are like this:

- "How about a show in an Italian restaurant?"
- "I want to make a weight loss show that's really, really real."
- "We get a bunch of guys who are friends and follow them from city to city doing interesting things."
- "It's a cooking show about healthy food that tastes great."
- "A reality show set at The White House -- I'm sure if we can get a network on board we can make this happen."

Throwing out a bunch of reality TV ideas to see what happens is not soft pitching -- it's a rookie mistake.

It's definitely NOT how to pitch a reality show.

So instead base your soft pitch on something or someone you've already connected with.

By doing so you instantly make yourself valuable. After all, you've made a discovery and connection with something that might be a show (way better than a simple idea).

Plus, it allows us (or other pros) to give you better advice on how to proceed.

No matter how great the characters or the world you discover, there's no sense spending all your resources packaging it up if no TV network wants it.

### 3d. What Happens When A Network Wants Your Reality TV Show?

Are you a third-party approved reality TV production company (like us?) Or are you teamed up with a production company?

Then the network usually starts a multi-step deal, under the umbrella of a "development phase."

#### Development Phase

Development can involve any one or several of the following stages.

There can be a lot of overlap between these phases as well. But here's a general breakdown of the steps we go through once a network is interested.

- **Paper Phase**

The network likes the show in general, but wants to develop a more specific take for their air. This phase could involve delivering:

- series budgets
- a series bible (document explaining how a show works).

This is finally where the long, in-depth pitch documents come into play. There's no sense in writing them before now, because every write-up is going to be very specific to the network that's paying for it.

- **Casting Phase**

Casting periods can exist for several kinds of shows.

For instance, say your show is a self-contained format built around a big character, like Kitchen Nightmares. Then you would need to find potential kitchens to go in and fix.

If you're doing a big competition show you might have to find the contestants before the show gets picked up.

On our show **Scream Queens**, for instance, casting the competing actresses was crucial to the show's pick-up.

- **Reality TV Presentation Tape**

Think of this as an extended pitch tape or mini-pilot. About 15-20 minutes in length. Also deliver everything mentioned in the paper phase.

- **Non-Airing Reality TV Pilot**

Full length reality TV pilot. About 22 minutes for a half hour show. About 44 minutes for an hour show. Since it's non-airing, you can skip expensive "quality control." (Broadcast standard color correction and sound mixing. Though you should still do what you can in-house to make your pilot look and sound great.) Because it's non-airing, you might also be able to avoid delivering some legal documents. (Like releases, clearances, etc. Clear it with your network first.) You will still deliver everything mentioned in the paper phase.

- **An Airable Reality TV Pilot**

The pilot is color corrected and sound mixed to broadcast standards. All the legal paperwork (releases, clearances etc.) are also delivered.

Should the network choose to air the pilot tomorrow, there would be no technical or legal issues. Also deliver everything mentioned in the paper phase.

If all of the above goes right, you get...

## **A Series Order**

Yay! You made it. Your reality TV pitch is now a reality television series.

And now the excitement really begins.

### **3e. What If You're Not Third Party Approved?**

Then the network will pair you with a third party approved **reality TV show company**.

Sometimes, they'll introduce you to several, and let you choose which one you like the best. Sometimes they'll pair you with just one company and say, "go."

For example, many networks bring us shows that producers have pitched to them.

Recently, we've been brought shows by VH1, Oxygen, MTV, and Lifetime.

All are in various stages of the "road to series" cycle. Some will make it all the way, some won't. That's how the game works.

It took us a long time to get to the point where networks would also bring projects directly to us (as opposed to us always pitching them).

### **3f. Will Networks Meet With You?**

If you're a new producer and don't have an agent, probably not.

If you do pay to pitch at a seminar or pitch fest, you might be pitching to lower-level execs.

They may or may not have the power to move your show up the ladder.

However, that is one way to get a network "face to face."

Also, if you pitch to a network first, you might have less choice over which production company you end up with. (Network politics can be crazy.)



### **3g. The Problem With Pitching to Networks Directly**

If you don't have an agent and can't just pick up the phone and get a network on the line, your options are limited.

You'll be "hacking" your way into whatever meeting you can manage to land.

So say you get a meeting with someone at History, but your show is also right for Discovery, NatGeo, and Spike.

You don't have anyone in your corner to call those networks and make sure they're also seeing your reality show pitch at the same time.

This eliminates any chance that there will be a competitive bidding situation on your show.

It also means the single network you met with won't be in a hurry to get back to you. They know you're not pitching anywhere else.

Finally, all things being equal, you're at a disadvantage.

Networks choose projects from established production companies over pitches from new producers.

This was the dilemma we faced when we were starting out.

### 3h. How We Broke In



**OUR COMPANY, JOKE PRODUCTIONS. MAKING REALITY TV, DOCUMENTARY SERIES, FEATURE DOCS, AND MORE.**

What finally opened the doors for us was teaming up with bigger reality television production companies we trusted to take care of us.

Some production companies want you involved in the production of the show. Some don't.

We wanted to team up with those reality TV production companies who would let us work on the shows, learn, and grow.

We were lucky enough to do that.

That's how we got to where we are today:

- TV Shows On Air
- A Powerhouse Agent
- A 7000 square foot facility next to Universal Studios
- Relationships with networks who both buy our shows and bring us shows

Clearly, we benefited from teaming up with seasoned professionals along the way.

It's good for everyone.

### 3i. Benefits of Pitching to a Production Company First

Are you looking to build your career, stay involved with your show as much as possible, or learn the unscripted TV business from the inside out? Nothing beats teaming up with an established production company who is willing to mentor you along. (Again, that's how we came up.)

True, not every production company is the same, and we wouldn't want to represent that. But speaking for us, a big part of the reason we team up with aspiring producers on shows is because we like the people pitching to us.

We love sharing the thrill and excitement of someone's first show with them. (As well as being there to console them during the times things inevitably go wrong.) Every time we team up with an aspiring producer, our goal is for them to learn as much as possible, and feel that their creative input is valued along the way.

#### Why Do We Care?

It's not just that we're "great people" (though we try!) Of course, we get something out of doing this, too.

When producers have a good experience with us, they pitch us more shows. Plus, they tell other aspiring producers we're great to work with, and that brings even more potential shows our way. It's a win-win for everyone.

When you consider that we're making ourselves so easy to find on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), [YouTube](#), and [Google+](#), you can bet we want to protect our reputation. Our goal is always to be fair, easy to work with, and an open book about the process of making a TV show.

So at Joke Productions, it's a simple conversation when we do team up with someone who pitches us.

We want you to be as involved in the production of your show as you want to be. We want you to take on as much responsibility as your experience allows.

You should learn a lot, enjoy the process, and come out the other side a much better and more experienced producer, able to handle even more responsibility on your next show.

If you have a look at our [testimonials page](#), we think you'll see that we live up to that statement.

# 4. Pitch Your Ideas To Us

In section 4, "Pitch Your Ideas To Us" we discuss:

- The value of mentorship
- Working on the shows you pitch
- What happens if you don't want to work on your reality shows
- How to pitch yourself to star in your own reality show

We started this outreach so aspiring producers had a legitimate place to pitch their reality TV concepts without having to lie to people or pay to pitch.

We remember how impossible it was to get our pitches heard. But why did it have to be so hard? We were talented back then.

If we could find the Joke and Biagio of ten years ago walking around today, we'd snap them up in a heartbeat.

That's why we love discovering talented new producers.

Maybe you're one of them.

## 4a. We Believe in Mentorship

The reason we started **Producing Unscripted** is to teach you the right way to create, pitch, sell, and make reality shows, and to encourage you to pitch to us.

No, we won't team up with everyone who pitches to us. And not everyone who reads this will want to pitch to us.

When things do work out, we'll be working in hand with those new producers.

**"How to Pitch a Reality Show"** is just the beginning of the journey. We like to help aspiring producers build their careers.

Over the years we were lucky to have had great mentors. They were the rare producers secure enough in their own talent to share their knowledge.

Working with them was invaluable. Those experiences allowed us to launch our own production company.

Today, those mentors are still in business, making plenty of TV shows. We're thrilled to be their colleagues in the unscripted television industry.

It's their example we'd like to follow as we help new producers come into their own.

## 4b. What if You Don't Want to Work On Reality Shows You Pitch?

This guide, "**How to Pitch a Reality Show**" is aimed at people who want to pitch and also make reality TV shows and documentary series.

But not everyone wants a full-time career in reality TV. Some people want to take a credit and a small check and keep on living their lives.

We discuss how to do that in [5 Ways You Can Break Into Unscripted Television](#). You guessed it -- five different ways to team up with us, some of which are part-time.

## 4c. How to Get Your Own Reality Show

What if you want to star in your own reality show?

Are you an expert in an unusual field?

Do you have a TV friendly life packed with drama, comedy, action, adventure?

(Or any other descriptive word that would make your life a TV show?)

Do you think you're the next Gordon Ramsay, or that your family is even better TV than the Kardashians?

Good news: If you want to be in front of the camera, not behind it, no one expects you to put together a pitch tape.

To pitch to us, just [sign up for our newsletter](#), and follow the instructions on how to pitch us a show.

When you get to the submission portal, at some point you'll get a question. "Are you submitting as a Producer (behind the camera) or Talent (in front of the camera)?" Choose Talent.

Submit links to some short video clips telling us about you, your family and/or business.

Make sure to tell us why you think you'd be great TV. (If you post these on YouTube, be sure to make it either a Public video or Unlisted video, not a Private video.)

These can be shot on any camera that's handy, including your mobile phone or web cam. Just make sure we can see and hear you.

You can still follow our tips on putting together **your short paper pitch**, but your short videos are what matter most.



# 5. What Have You Learned?

Okay, you're over 10,000 words into this article...good for you!

It's a lot to process, we know. But making it this far has put you miles ahead of most who pitch to us and other industry professionals.

Now that you understand the "lingo" and reasoning behind pitching reality TV show the smart way, the checklists in this section will make it easy for you to pull everything together.

## 5a. 15 Things to Remember about How to Pitch a Reality Show

In a nutshell, here's what you now know about how to pitch a reality show:

1. Watch TV so you understand what kind of reality show you're pitching.
2. Use the Five Magic Words of Pitching Reality TV.
3. Starting out? You want to pitch a self-contained hybrid or self-contained format built around a real person or people.
4. Avoid pitching arced competition. Too hard unless you have major connections to some incredible talent and assets.
5. Ideas are never enough, you always have to attach someone or something real that you have access to film.
6. Ditch all that bad advice from the web that tells you to waste time writing in-depth treatments. They will never make it to air the way you write them up anyway (the network will change it all).
7. You can't pitch what you don't have, so no more shows set at The White House (unless the First Lady and her husband are on board).
8. Make yourself valuable by bringing assets and filmmaking skills to the table.
9. You're never pitching a simple reality idea, you're always pitching a reality television package.
10. Your most useful pitch material is great tape. Everything else is secondary.
11. The best time to soft pitch is after you discover a great reality TV asset and before you decide to film. If you're going to soft pitch a reality TV idea, it has to be based on something real you've already found.
12. That said, if you're just starting out, you might as well make some great tape anyway. You're going to need the practice.
13. The best way to protect your idea is also the best way to make yourself valuable. Attach something real to your reality TV project and forget about leaning on "paper" so much.
14. Pitch pits and seminars are places you can pay to pitch your projects...
15. But why do that when you can **pitch your shows to us** for free?

## 5b. Five Step Action Plan: Pitch a Reality Show The Smart Way

1. Find a real person, place, or thing to attach to your show
2. Develop that concept into a self-contained hybrid or self-contained format
3. Shoot some video to give a sense of the characters and their world
4. Write a short paper pitch to describe how the show works
5. Team up with a production company ([like ours](#)) and begin building your career.

## 5c. 7 Steps: How to Pitch a Reality Show to Us



Check out this [seven step cheat sheet](#) on how to pitch a reality show to us.

In summary:

Step 1: Know our first 8 episodes. Available on [YouTube with a clickable table of contents](#).

Step 2 — Access the Portal Sign up for the [newsletter](#) and access the members only portal. Follow the directions carefully. It is a test.

Step 3 - Find Shows We're Looking For Log in to the members only portal you accessed in Step 2 and check out the list of shows we're looking for right now.

Step 4 — Gather Your Best Materials...without spending tons of money.

Step 5 — Write your paper pitch. Here's how: [Paper Pitches: 5 Steps to Awesome](#)

Step 6 — Upload Your Submission Log into the members only portal you signed up for in Step 2 and follow the directions.

Step 7 — Hang Tight

You'll hear back from us in 2 to 4 weeks, maybe longer if we're in production. A personalized response from us or our offices. Not a form email, but not necessarily a long email!

# That's a Wrap

Congratulations! We know this was a long guide, and you've made it to the end.

You now have a great understanding of how to pitch a reality show the smart way, and how to greatly increase your odds of standing out from the crowd.

We hope you enjoyed reading "**How to Pitch a Reality Show**" and we'd love to get to work together with you soon.

Thanks, and hope we get to work together soon!

**Joke and Biagio**