



Ed Stafford – First Man Out: Discovery Channel is seeking brand-defining series and tentpole specials

Summit exposes squeezed middle

Indies optimistic as Realscreen highlights trend for brand-defining shows or low-cost fillers

BY JESSICA GOODFELLOW

Producers flagged shrinking mid-range factual opportunities, greater pressure to find new funding models and a desire from networks to move beyond their heartlands as key themes to emerge from the Realscreen Summit.

Held for the first time in New Orleans, the relocation “breathed new life” into the market after 20 years in Washington, as indies left feeling optimistic about the opportunities in the factual space.

One significant trend is diminishing demand for mid-range factual, with the market continuing to split between blue-chip, brand-defining shows and low-cost, high-volume fillers.

ITV America chief executive David George said the networks are trying to work out how best to compete with the deep-pocketed SVoD operators, while filling hours in the linear schedule, leading to a squeezed middle.

“Most networks now want content that eats up linear hours at a low price point and affords them the ability to take some bigger, high-priced swings,” he said.

Discovery Channel chief brand officer Nancy Daniels appealed for brand-defining series and tentpole specials, an approach echoed by rivals including History – which is seeking mega-docs – and Canadian channel Love Nature, which

is focusing on higher-value, lower-volume projects.

Dinah Lord, co-founder of All3Media-backed Caravan Media, highlighted an “enormous need for dial-turning pieces of content that are really going to stand up against the SVoDs”.

But Lord flagged that such projects are expensive and come with significant risk.

That pressure has led to greater openness towards transatlantic co-productions and more flexibility around rights, according to Talos Films co-founder Julian Hobbs.

“American networks are more focused on domestic content than ever, but they are willing to seed rights and spin out different formats overseas,” he said.

Talos Films is co-producing eight-part docu-drama *The Witches Of Salem* with Canadian producer-distributor Blue Ant Media.

Budget pressure also means indies are increasingly asked to bring money to the table – either via co-production partners, screen funds or private investors – as the networks’ traditional model of fully funding projects in return for global rights becomes unsustainable.

“Producers are expected to invest more time and energy in [financing] projects than ever before,” said Talesmith chief executive and creative director Martin Williams.

Williams added that producers must also be armed with an “extra

element” to secure a commission, which could include exclusive access, book or podcast rights, talent or social media data to prove an idea has a potential audience.

At Realscreen, Futurism Studios president Geoff Clark floated the idea of putting a sizzle on social media and using the number of views as ammunition to win a commission.

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DAVID GEORGE
ITV AMERICA

Despite digital buyers dominating talk at Realscreen, a number of producers bemoaned their lack of presence. “I would like to have more streaming platforms at this conference,” said ITV America’s George. “As those players start to infiltrate the market, we want to see more of them.”

He suggested Netflix’s absence may be due to its shift to focus on Europe, having reached saturation point in the US.

Talesmith chief operating officer Ulla Streib added: “Those people who aren’t here are the ones disrupting the market the most.”

Elsewhere, Hobbs said he had witnessed a “thaw” from

networks to broaden the scope of their programming, having previously stuck tightly to their core brand values.

“People are loosening up,” he said. “Channels are engaging in a way that they weren’t before. A year or two ago, there was a lot of fear in the air and they would cling to what was working and duplicate ideas over and over again.”

“If they want to be wide-spectrum networks, then they need a wide spectrum of shows,” he added.

The shake-up at Discovery following its merger with Scripps Networks Interactive last year also emerged as a theme.

In her keynote, Daniels indicated that greater collaboration could mean shows graduating from Scripps’ smaller channels to Discovery’s flagship brands. Ping Pong Productions’ *Expedition Unknown* transferred from Travel Channel to Discovery Channel in May.

She also highlighted the opportunity for flagship shows to be supported by related programming across its portfolio, akin to Food Network’s shark-themed episode of *Ridiculous Cakes*, which helped celebrate the 30th anniversary of Discovery’s Shark Week earlier this week. [Ⓜ](#)

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