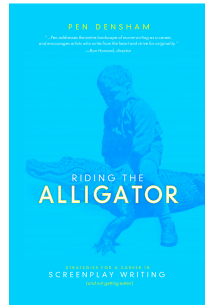


From the author of *RIDING THE ALLIGATOR*...



10 Secrets to Writing Success!

Pen Densham, co-founder of Trilogy Entertainment Group, considers himself a triple-hyphenate: a writer – producer – & director. He and his partner John Watson have been Oscar Nominated twice, have produced 15 features and over 300 hours of television. He writes for both TV and feature films and is personally responsible for reviving 'The Outer Limits' and 'The Twilight Zone' series to television, Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves, etc. This year he is one of the Producers on Phantom – written and directed by Todd Robinson, starring David Duchovny and Ed Harris. His personal favorite is Moll Flanders, which he wrote and directed, starring Robin Wright and Morgan Freeman. Pen also teaches as an adjunct professor at USC Film School. His book on screenplay writing for publisher Michael Wiese is - "Riding the Alligator: Strategies for a Career in Screenplay Writing ...And not getting eaten"

1. Write from your heart! As a writer, trust your instinctual creativity and write from your passion. When you don't value what you create, why should anybody else? When you chase a fad or a fashion that is not from your heart in an effort to sell something, there is a danger when obstacles come, you will soon abandon your efforts. When you love what you are working on – it feels less like work and more like a personal discovery. It brings your original and unique voice to the front. Even when you are hired to write – bring your authenticity to the game. Passion is a great way to help immunize your self from the pain and uncertainty of the artistic process. And sometimes it can be enrapturing.

Things are beautiful if you love them.
Jean Anouilh

2. Don't worry about rules. Collect ideas anyway they come. Write the way things feel to you. Have fun! A well laid out script with no feeling is crap no matter what. I often break supposed cardinal rules. I write my scripts partly as poetry, my character's thoughts in the descriptions, I write in BLOCK LETTERS to make points: etc. I call it fusion writing. Write from your voice. Imagine there is a roof inside your head that limits your upward thinking. Now reach in and toss it away. Your personal creative universe is up there! A fresh, inventive and passionate script is more likely to sell. More likely to attract major actors. More likely to satisfy and grow you as an artist.

Rules and models destroy genius and art.
William Hazlitt

3. Don't overwhelm yourself. Scripts are not as complex as they seem. Movies are really short stories. If you took all the white space out of a feature script and looked at it just as prose – there is probably only 40 to 60 pages of words. Features usually break down into three acts - beginning - middle and end. Yep! (Maybe in a shuffled order if you use flashbacks). ---- Act 1 - The characters get into gear. Act 2 – they explore but fail to reach their goals. Act 3 – they recover and develop as people as they struggle to reach their ultimate resolution. Scripts are often not as complicated or as overwhelming when you look at them like this.

I don't think there's any artist of any value who doesn't doubt what they're doing.

Francis Ford Coppola

4. Ignore your inner nagging thoughts. They are seldom accurate perceptions of what you are actually achieving. It is deeply unfair to criticize your navigation skills when taking a journey into unknown territory. Try not to demoralize yourself. I call my first draft “the Lewis and Clark”. Any freaking way to the coast - is the correct way! Do not criticize yourself for the odd wrong turn, the weather slowing you down, having to stop for supplies. - There is no bad route when you are on a voyage of discovery. Just keep going! Look at your early script drafts as explorative, until you find solidly what you like. When you get to the Pacific Ocean – your script's ending, celebrate! Next, put the freeway through with a polish, knowing what you have discovered and which signposts are needed to bring your readers on the journey with you.

Creativity is allowing yourself to make mistakes. Art is knowing which ones to keep.

Scott Adams

5. Give your main characters a major flaw in their back story. I struggle to find my character's inner demon. Usually one, defining horrific incident in their lives that they have not recovered from or invested their courage in changing. I call these back story incidents “Nuggets”. Like the seed in a fruit, my story is really servicing the character overcoming this damage and becoming who they should be. The character is defined by the effect of his or her demon. When the character struggles to change – we see the conflict in their soul and root for them to become the fulfilled person that is crumpled inside. Even villains are heroes in their own mind and can have a potent back story issue, a nugget that drives them. I firmly believe we are creatures who are evolutionarily conditioned to pay deep attention to the behaviors of others as a survival and success strategy. It makes the writer's task much easier when you realize your are exploring a nugget, a single very simple but compelling internal human story.

And by the way, everything in life is writeable about if you have the outgoing guts to do it, and the imagination to improvise. The worst enemy to creativity is self doubt.

Sylvia Plath

6. Don't judge your progress by other finished movies. Evaluating your fledgling work in comparison to the successes of others can be demoralizing. You don't know how they got made. Maybe their journeys were more perilous than you think. Regard your first draft as a pencil sketch. When museums Xray the paintings of great masters, like Leonardo Da Vinci they find many false starts, sometimes total compositions that have been erased or painted over. Does that mean that Leonardo was an indecisive idiot? Being perfect is impossible!!! Expect some road bumps on your creative journey. Writing is naturally a series of discoveries, growing your vision is a normal part of the artistic process.

Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once we grow up.
Pablo Picasso

7. You are never too overwhelmed to write! How to fight procrastination. WRITE A SINGLE LINE A DAY. This is the most undemanding and easiest way to overcome resistance and writer's block. Make a point to open your files and write the least threatening amount of work. One line!!! It keeps your mind primed – even on a day filled with the clutter and debris of modern life – you will have assigned a portion of your personal processor to the task of your creative passion. It will be working away in the unconscious. Truthfully, we don't write – we get out of the way and let our inner mind free. And some days when you are only going to write “just one line” – you will find a treasure of new thoughts pouring forth.

If you hear a voice within you say 'you cannot paint,' then by all means paint, and that voice will be silenced.
Vincent Van Gogh

8. Choose carefully who you share your early work with. I never show a first draft to the outside world. I share it with trusted people who I call Story Midwives. Empathetic kin, who understand the artistic process. Sensitive people who want to help you push through the pain of creative birth without making demands about what the child should be. Midwives help my child grow with supportive comments. So they get strong enough to face the less caring and dogmatic business world it will eventually have to succeed in.

Vision is the art of seeing what is invisible to others.
Jonathan Swift

9. Trust your brain to solve your problems. It is normal not to have all the solutions at once. Take a break when you run into a block. Sleeping on it – works! Tell yourself you are just playing – don't make the stakes gigantic. I find I get some of my best ideas in the shower. Using my muscles seems to free my mind. All art is built on the foundation of the discoveries of others. Sometimes I watch other movies that feel like they might inform me. Ideas often are ricochet from the screen into my head and come out as entirely different but powerful contributions.

Lesser artists borrow, great artists steal.
Igor Stravinsky

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10. Treat your work with the respect it deserves. You have invested a lot of time and effort. First impressions are important. You need that financier, star, director, etc to see the best version of your work. To sell a script that is the foundation for a large investment, it must make sense to the widest audience. Before your script goes into the wild: Proof the spelling. Make the layout as eye friendly as possible. Make sure that your story points are really clear; I call this “A-hole Proofing”. Every obstacle you remove to a good read is one less reason for a pass. Use trusted readers to give you feed back to make sure you have achieved your goals with clarity. Then share it with the rest of the world.

True art is characterized by an irresistible urge in the creative artist.

Albert Einstein

11... huh? I said no rules!

Find an emotionally powerful title. A great title is like the wrapping on a gift it. It makes you want to open it! – Did the word SECRETS and SUCCESS in the headline above get you to read this... mmmh?

I love to share my observations, philosophy and hopes with fellow artists. I consider it a great honor to be a literary Story Midwife to others. But, I also have a rule – “Ignore everything I say that goes against your natural creative instincts”. Your process is sacred to me.

If you would like to see videos on selling and creating, and download a free chapter designed to fire up your creativity from my screenwriting book website – click - (ridingthealligator.com). Good hunting!

From the author of *RIDING THE ALLIGATOR...*



10 Secrets to Selling Your Screenplay ...And Not Your Soul!

Pen Densham, co-founder of Trilogy Entertainment Group, considers himself a triple-hyphenate: a writer – producer – & director. He and his partner John Watson have been Oscar Nominated twice, have produced 15 features and over 300 hours of television. He writes for both TV and feature films and is personally responsible for reviving 'The Outer Limits' and 'The Twilight Zone' series to television, Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves, etc. This year he is one of the Producers on Phantom – written and directed by Todd Robinson, starring David Duchovny and Ed Harris. His personal favorite is Moll Flanders, which he wrote and directed, starring Robin Wright and Morgan Freeman. Pen also teaches as an adjunct professor at USC Film School. His book on screenplay writing for publisher Michael Wiese is - "Riding the Alligator: Strategies for a Career in Screenplay Writing ...And not getting eaten"

INTRODUCTION: “CREATIVE ENTREPRENEURISM”

As a four year old I was impressed by seeing my parents making short films for the movie theaters (even riding a live 7 ft alligator in one of them), and that caused me to have a life-long desire to conjure emotional and visual magic with a story and a camera. And, if you are reading this I suspect you have similar urges to create and feel validated.

At 15, I sunk into a fit of gloom as the education system tried to tell me that my fledgling artistic desires were not going to bring me an income, that – I should get over myself and submit to torture by math!

I fled school and have spent most of my life trying to invent my future. Sometimes I call it “the illusion of freedom” because I still had to learn to define my writing, photography and filmmaking to appear to conform to society’s expectations and developed my own form of salesmanship to get paid by those who did not necessarily know how to value my imagination. I call this “creative entrepreneurship”.

One of the most frequent and earnest questions I get is: “how do I sell my work?” I empathize with all who have artistic instincts for whatever kind of talent I believe we have to be responsible to our creative efforts by doing our best to expose them. This can

sometimes be very daunting for those with a gentle nature. The word “selling” can negatively remind us of used-car sales manipulation. But, how about we reframe the process as, “Effectively communicating about what you have created – so others are more able to understand its value and buy it?”

I have assembled some new thoughts, points from my Scriptshark blogs and my book “Riding the Alligator “ into this selling checklist, for us creative types. Whether you work solo, with a partner, or in a team. In a world where the future and technology seems to be changing with blinding rapidity, one thing is certain. No matter what the technology, zeitgeist or culture – human beings remain pretty much unchanged. We respond to emotions - innovations - myths and morals. And if you create fiercely from your inner universe, you are probably right about your instincts. So please nurture your courage and extend all the imagination and passion you use in the acts of creation to discovering how to share your work with the world. Out there, somewhere, should be other humans who understand and treasure what you are dreaming up.

“Success is liking yourself, liking what you do, and liking how you do it.”
-Maya Angelou

1. Create passionately: Be daring and no matter the genre, fight to find your voice.

Your work will be more unique, personal and powerful because it has the full weight of your life-force behind it - the essence of your subconscious, your life experience, pain, DNA, culture and family. It will be distinctive and stand out from the clutter. Smart buyers seek solid, original ideas - not clones of old ideas that were successful years back. Familiarize yourself with what has been created and successful in the past in your field. We all build on the shoulders of others. If you don't do something distinctive, different and perhaps dangerous (whatever that term conjures to you!) - how do you get noticed in the daily clutter?

Even if it is an assignment, create from your voice. Better to fly close to the flame and be seen, than to be hidden in the shadows trying to guess what others want. Tell yourself you have the right to explore your true nature, so you can sell your finest material to others. Working on what you love is fulfilling even if it doesn't have an immediate market; it develops your natural skills. And, I guarantee, you will fight longer and harder to sell what you authentically believe in.

I have noted the scripts I wrote that were more artistic, personal and, for me, dangerous, because I was not able to justify a market, but just had a gut instinct that I had to write them, have gotten made on a much higher ratio than the scripts I wrote for the studios at their direction. After experiencing my wife giving birth to our first child I changed my perspective about altruistic heroes and wanted to tell a story where people fought for humanistic reasons. I dreamed up a new view of Robin Hood. Three major studios strongly passed on my revisionist story pitch - I was encouraged to write it anyway by

our then assistant Mark Stern (who now heads the Syfy Channel) and was supported by John Watson my co-writer. Our script became Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves, one of Warner Brothers all time hits.

“Your work is going to fill a large part of your life, and the only way to be truly satisfied is to do what you believe is great work. And the only way to do great work is to love what you do. If you haven’t found it yet, keep looking. Don’t settle. As with all matters of the heart, you’ll know when you find it. And, like any great relationship, it just gets better and better as the years roll on. So keep looking until you find it. Don’t settle.”

-Steve Jobs

2. Confirm your hopes: Check your work with others you trust.

Chose your companions on your journey with an eye to your artistic goals. Avoid traveling with the embittered, jealous or demeaning. They are lost souls and cannot give you strength. Make sure your work is ready for the market by checking it with non-destructive people who share a love and knowledge of the field you are working in. Who can give you honest, caring feedback. I call these people “story midwives. They urge me to push through the pain of creative birth. Ask them to query you with the hard questions - flattery is not feedback. If only one person critiques an element of my work I consider it an opinion. When several people have the same response - that is a fact!

Feedback helps tune in your effort so others may clearly understand what inspired you. It is a normal but frustrating truth: great work sometimes needs many layers of effort to get it right. I’ve received really insightful comments that made me joyous, and growl with frustration at the same time, because I knew in my heart I had to go back and make the improvement. Simplify and proof your material before you expose it to buyers. Once you are convinced by honest supporters that it really hits your target - you can be confident and go out and sell it.

“The greatest mistake you can make in life is to be continually fearing you will make one.”

-Elbert Hubbard

3. Overcoming doubt: Do not abandon what you create.

No matter how potent and extraordinary something that has come from our minds is, we frequently find it difficult to judge its value. Worse, we may dream up vague excuses to bury it. Creative people often have more anxiety and difficulty selling what they birthed because they have such strong imaginations. Someone coined the term “Impostor Syndrome” for this self-haunting. We can see many reasons why our work should be better or that “we don’t deserve success”. Does that feel familiar to you?

Despite winning many awards including Oscar nominations for our short films, when John Watson, my Producing partner, and I first came to Hollywood we were sure we had to hire “real” movie writers and couldn’t possibly be good enough to do the work ourselves. We were cured of that concept by seeing projects we loved interpreted by the professionals, in ways that totally missed our goals. We started to write because we realized we couldn’t serve our passion projects any less well than they already had been!

Exploring your artistry as an original voice can be astoundingly fulfilling, but, be prepared for a personal marathon. Van Gogh paid for his wondrous uniqueness by not selling anything in his lifetime. But, Er... look at his prices now! Choosing to venture forth to find a market will often be stressful, but ask yourself one simple question, “would you rather look back on your life and see you occasionally made a fool of yourself, or blundered into a few unknown obstacles in a quest to expose what impassioned you? Or, would you like to be guaranteed 100% failure, by never trying?” Embrace creative entrepreneurship.

“If your ship doesn’t come in, swim out to meet it!”

-Jonathan Winters

4. ‘I’m afraid I’ll make the wrong choices’: What’s the best personal path to success?

The wrong choice is, “not doing anything”. I know this sounds like fortune cookie talk - but with the privilege of having a couple of years, or so, under my belt - patterns start to appear in the way things work. Life offers an array of paths - there really are no wrong choices. If you fully invest your truth, time and energy in where ever you are going it could lead to many different, but equally valuable outcomes.

I also recommend being your authentic self in any situation. Admit your knowledge where limited and mention your positives when appropriate. And please remember there is no way to be PERFECT, so stop trying - humans tolerate all kinds of imperfect people that share impassioned goals. We are interesting characters. So just being your self is good.

I teach an occasional course on creating TV and Film stories and selling them at USC Film School. I get my MFA students to develop their selling skills by reading books that emphasize long term work ethics and values, like *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, *The Power of Positive Thinking* and *Think and Grow Rich*. - Crazy old books, in an electronic era? These books still are in print because their information, although it may seem old world in the way it is stated, is timeless human advice. And they were recommended to me by fellow filmmakers!!! Embrace the concepts that feel right to you. You are going to spend a lifetime in this body trying to get to your goals - why not invest a few hours in developing tools to make your process more effective? When successful Hollywood-based guests come to my class, I always explore the number of times they failed before succeeding... usually many times, and with terrific emotional cost. As Einstein said, “It’s not that I am so smart, it’s just that I stay with problems longer.”

And, what career advice from the luminaries to the students? The most frequent answer is - “Be moral. Treat others with care and respect.” There are a lot of good people out there, counter-intuitive to the negative energy that some think runs our industry. Deception is a short-term ticket to oblivion. Being a bully or a cheat, sadly, can work in any business for a while - but the saying is: “Treat people badly on the way up and there is no one there to help when you fall.” Morality is part of selling yourself. People buy from people they like and can trust.

“Action is a great restorer and builder of confidence. Inaction is not only the result, but the cause, of fear. Perhaps the action you take will be successful; perhaps different action or adjustments will have to follow. But any action is better than no action at all.”

-Norman Vincent Peale

5. ‘Cold calling’: The term for finding buyers you don’t know - yet!

Information is golden. Out there could be someone who needs your creativity. To find them is a task of exploration and the best guide can be people who have already succeeded in areas that you seek. It is easier to learn from the methods of others, than try and invent everything in your path. You can read success stories from books or scanning the net... or even better. Most successful people are willing to give advice when they are approached with a well-stated understanding of their own careers and how you would value a chance to learn from their skills. Norman Jewison was one of my mentors, a Canadian filmmaker with a truly amazing career. He saw my first short drama and mentored me into Hollywood from Toronto.

Finding a market for your material means discovering who has a track record of involvement with projects similar to yours. In my business I look for financiers, actors, or directors who might see the creative energy of my material as an evolution of their own voyage of discovery.

There are specialized Feature and TV data bases that help you cross-reference Studios, production companies, Stars, Directors, Producer, etc. and their contact information. They give the history and plots of their projects, both finished and in development. Which lets one theorize whether your material fits in their mold. They also list all the credits of all movies and TV shows. Maybe you know somebody who knows somebody? The super-carrier in this field is Studio System, it is a wonderful resource for pros and is affiliated with Script Shark. (IMDB can be a cheaper source for some of this information.)

It is tempting to send out hundreds of the same query email about your project, but if they are written void of a personal approach to the recipient, they can feel like spam. It’s scary to reach out to strange buyers or advisors - so don’t make them strangers. Study their work. Look them up on search engines or data bases. Find information about their

lives that you can relate to. Maybe they come from your state, school - or maybe they flunked math, too? You might find that your family, friends, schoolmates, and fellow filmmakers have mutual friends with degrees of separation who might help. This is called NETWORKING and it works by sharing information and contacts - and you should do your best to help others too. It builds webs of trust. Humans are societal creatures and we respond to others who are like us. Finding a common ground makes it easier to create a personal approach to reach out for advice and support.

I know one college student from outside of California, who wrote personal, hand written notes to major Hollywood figures he wanted to intern with. He acknowledged their accomplishments and gave them a brief glimpse of his own life story and goals. A surprising number organized meetings with him and made offers of work! Because so few people make that effort, he seemed impressive and caring. After a few years of learning the game, he now runs his own production company. It helps to give a social lubricant to asking the difficult question, “Is it possible that you could guide me about my work and whether it might be useful to you or someone you know?” And one big secret to the power of this personal communication is that so amazingly few people ever make the effort, you will stand out.

Be aware all creative people get bored doing receptive tasks - so don't send out a replica of the buyers last big hit because you think that's what they like. Spielberg is not running down the halls of his company yelling “I am so bored, I want to re-make War Horse and E.T.”. The magnetism of those challenges has been long used up. Most of his career has been hitting for the bleachers with new ideas and dazzlingly innovative films.

Approach your prospects (or their support teams), when you believe your material is similar in scope, vitality and human meaning to what they seem excited and challenged by. Be able to define why your material could mine stimulating new emotional and profitable veins for their creativity.

And very importantly, when you call - treat their assistants with respect. Ask if there is a good time to chat with them too for their advice? Share your heart with the assistants – they are in the daily front lines, observe all – and are often not given the respect they deserve. Treating them as a valuable source of insight might give you a informational ally and a friend.

“If you can dream it, you can do it.”
- *Walt Disney*

6. Rejected? Rejection is a path to success.

I hate it when people say stuff like that, it sounds so freaking cornball. But it isn't. I have turned rejections into successes. Not all that often - but often enough to make the efforts worth it. In my documentary days I wrote to get permission to suspend a magician, the “Amazing” Randi, upside-down over Niagara Falls to simulate a Houdini escape for our

magic special. It was a wild stunt to make our show stand out on the international TV sales map. The Niagara council did not want anything “wild” anywhere near their Falls and rejected me out of hand. After recovering from the shock of rejection. I figured out where I went wrong. I had learned from requesting film grants in Canada that I seemed to get more success when I met in person with the adjudicators than when I just sent in my application - no matter how eloquent. But just sending in something in writing was always seductively less stressful. I went back to the Niagara Council and apologized for failing to make a personal presentation and asked for a second chance. I was invited to a council meeting. John Watson and I showed one of our documentaries. We became human beings with goals, a sense of humor - and ambitions they could relate to. We got our permission. And the photo of the stunt went up on front pages of newspapers around the world.



When I get a rejection, instead of cursing my bad luck or the stupidity of the buyer (which can be deliciously tempting), I thank the buyer - they did make the effort to invest time and put me up at bat - even if I struck out. I try and find why my material failed. Sometimes, there is no given answer, other times my fear that my work is crap is disproven because the rejection came because the buyers already have another project too similar to mine. Or, their bosses don't make a certain style of film. Or - I did miss a few cogs in the gears of my script and it did not connect with the reader, which is valuable to know. I am passionate about my work and I don't give up - now I have a tool to sharpen my material so maybe it will stick in the next target.

Science says success works on the principals of randomness. Good things don't happen in a logical order. And may never happen. But if I let myself down by not overcoming

self doubt and don't make the effort to try what I call my 'errors of omission' - I know those failures will haunt me throughout me life. My omissions guaranteed that I would never be there when randomness hit and could give me success.

I went back to the head of one American network four times over three years trying to convince him to let me and my company revive a modern version of the Twilight Zone. A source of fantastic stories that I loved growing up. It became more painful to make the attempt each time. The very last approach was the most difficult as I was sure I would just anger the heck out of the man, Les Moonves. But, I had one piece of new information; he had just taken control of the UPN TV network and was looking for a companion show for Star Trek.

I was grossly uncomfortable until I hit on this sales approach. I wrote Les this note, "Les, so help me I swear I will never mention the words Twilight Zone to you ever again! After this... How about considering it as a companion series for Star Trek?" I was in his office the next day and was given ten days to write a pilot. We got green lit and ran for a year.

One never knows how close success might be.

"The reason actors, artists, writers have agents is because we'll do it for nothing. That's a basic fact - you gotta do it."

-Morgan Freeman

7. Ambassadors and foul weather friends: Getting an agent, or manager?

There are some people who chose careers sitting at the crossroads of a trade, learning its ecosystems, politics and paths to success. They make nothing themselves - but deals! They need people like us - but some are reticent to admit it. We are their food supply. And they are our safari guides into the jungle of the business.

Approach agents and managers the same way as any prospect. Research them and their clients. And apply your skills of human communication if you think you might fit in. Talk to their assistants, too. It would seem like a great idea to get an agent or manager and then retire from the scene to let them take on the brutal task of exposing your work - but do the math, the agent with 50 clients - and one you? Your sales effort will be divided by the number of clients that person already represents and you will turn up in their rotation in the order of power of those biggest and easiest to sell. Truthfully, going after a BIG agent or manager can be counter-productive. They may sign you - but drop you quickly when you fail to sell after a few attempts. A very demoralizing experience.

When you do get a representative - (remember creative entrepreneurism?) - do not abdicate your role in selling your work. You are still the one person who cares 100 percent of the time and may have the best way of defining your material and figuring out

who might be the best prospects to suggest. But be super diplomatic, sell your agent or manager on how to sell you - without pissing them off.

One way to be more involved, find a young agent with few clients - a small office, but a large need to prove themselves by selling you! Find a foul weather friend, an agent with the nature to stick with you, who will be patient - explain the business - and keep faith in you when the inevitable stumbles happen.

And make a genuine friendship with their assistants. They are on your team too, usually monitoring every call made by their boss, making notes - they know all the industry scuttlebutt and they may have time to read and advise, so you don't use up all your face time with your main supporter. Assistants often get promoted to agents and can take you with them.

Having representation is sign of industry approval -- it allows you to submit your work without the suspicion of being an amateur. If you do not have an agent most professionals will receive material submitted by a lawyer. Or by asking you to sign impressively verbose legal releases that seem to give away your first born along with the right to read your material without threat of lawsuit. Also there are a few really good services and consultants who will read and guide writers and submit the scripts that they find exceptional to possible buyers and representation. Scriptshark is one of them... From time to time I privately check with writers they are working with and they get a thumbs up.

“Art is making something out of nothing and selling it.”
- **Frank Zappa**

8. Pitching your project: The true purpose of a sales meeting is not what you think.

When you have an opportunity pitch a new project to a buyer or their development team, the real purpose of the event is to see what kind of person you are. What would you be like to work with? Are you compatible, do you have a sense of humor, do you listen well? Someone hiring you is investing a piece of their own job security, it is not a small decision to trust and ally with you through the months or years of the development process.

A pitch should be seen as a conversation with a potential buyer, and you want to engage them. Passion shows and your excitement for the project and your humanity is where it starts. It's okay to be nervous. In fact I like to have a cup of coffee when offered - I find the caffeine and my adrenalin sharpen my thinking.

Many green and some pro sellers start meetings with “what are you looking for?” That implies you have no commitment to what you have created. Instead – consider starting with “I hope I have something original and different that you may not yet know that your want”.

I never pitch by rote - like a train stuck on its tracks, I feel any pitch that is just a start-to-finish list of my story elements, leaves no room for those in the room to engage. I will often start with a humanistic sharing of why I developed my story. “My wife had a dream that was so scary that it kept her awake for three nights and when she shared it with me - I couldn’t sleep either. So I decided to explore it as a classy horror movie.

The smart way to sell your new idea before pitching it - is to define it in terms of other major break out successes. This gives a guiding image to the goal you are aiming at: “My story is like *The King’s Speech* meets *Jaws* - where a humble aging serf must train a frightened prince in the art of dragon slaying in order to save his nation.

I say there are no bad pitches - as long as you are authentic, interested in the buyers goals and selling something that you are profoundly passionate about. Your excitement alone may convince your buyers to give your project more than a cursory glance.

And the obvious rules? Arrive early so you can use the bathroom, have time to get your bearings meet the assistants, etc. This is an adventure if you think about it the right way. Have a couple of back up stories you can refer too if your primary project is negated early by the buyers. And be don’t be surprised if approached to re-write something the group may already have in the works. Frequently the buyer has read your script, likes your voice and sees you as a possible solution for an important project they are deeply invested in, and the whole meeting has been to see if they wanted to explore it with you.

“When you reach the end of your rope, tie a knot in it and hang on.”
- **Thomas Jefferson**

9. Getting a “YES” – Eliminate the “NO’s”

In our early short film days my company partner John Watson and I used to receive regular visits from the Kodak salesmen, urging us to buy more film stock. I always felt like a village pauper, embarrassed at having to deny that I could afford any. On one visit, I told him that we could only give him an order for more film if we sold more productions - but, I confessed that I feared selling was a bit like being a con-man and asked if he could give me any tips to change my perspective.

Instead, he got Kodak to arrange a sales course for myself and filmmakers I knew. We discovered all kinds of tools and logics that made great sense and demystified a very human process of exchange. I was given defining terms for many of our current seat of the pants selling approaches, which helped in learning to explain our material so that others were more likely to buy them.

And one of the most useful points was the term, “eliminate the objections”. The idea was to maintain a friendly and interested approach in finding out why your prospect doesn’t want to buy your work. The course said, investigate deeply the doubts and rationale for a

rejection with the client, and see if you can explain or change your work so they can accept it. A simple but golden process. When a buyer has had all his reasons for saying NO, satisfied by reasonable answers - there is a strong possibility of a YES.

I applied this Kodak course - when I was confronted by the Chairman of a studio in a meeting, he had read a script of mine that I had written on spec and told me he wasn't going to buy it. I fought my fear and embarrassment, and decided to probe... What didn't work for you? What else - and...? The Kodak course had told me that people do not volunteer their deepest resistance first. Sometimes these rejections are emotional and not logical. The no's I heard - made sense. Some came from misreading the work. Some were accurate and logical and some were taste. I held on, dug deep and went away with a nervous game plan. I re-wrote my script - and re-presented it, half expecting this busy studio head, Frank Mancuso, to tell me to get lost. Instead, he read my changed script, agreed I had solved his problems and gave me a green-light if I could cast the movie with two stars. Thank you, Kodak!! - You did sell some more film stock when we shot Moll Flanders, which I directed for MGM and Spelling, starring Robin Wright and Morgan Freeman. Working with my partner John Watson's Producing skills and encouragement, it was one of the most challenging and greatest creative experiences of my life.

“Screw it, Let's do it!”
- Richard Branson

10. Ten final thoughts.

- 1) I am incredibly protective of other people's creativity and methods and organic process. Please ignore anything I say that goes against your instincts. You are right!
- 2) Not everything sells. But every attempt teaches you.
- 3) Success is random. But when it hits, it helps the prepared most.
- 4) Invest your heart in what you write or create even for the assignments that might seem slight or of lesser value. You are training your voice, so nothing is a waste.
- 5) When you run into problems involve your buyer in your problem solving... it helps them see how hard it is and gives them a better image of what you do.
- 6) Do not slavishly do every change or note that a buyer wants, but try and understand the logic behind the note. Sometimes I have not explained a point earlier in the story and that caused the disconnect.
- 7) Film and story telling are amazingly flexible and forgiving - there is usually a way that applied imagination can solve any problem.
- 8) Selling myself has meant I have often been coated in layers of stress. I pursued

methods to reduce this and learned. Physiologically, anxiety has the same organic and chemical response in the body as excitement! It is only our mental perception of these feelings that makes it seem one or the other. When you engage in what you value passionately, you immunize your anxiety a bit - you can perceive adversity as adventure!

9) Today there are many new ways to skin the sales cat. Thanks to technology, video costs are shrinking fantastically. Movies like Paranormal Activity are getting made for a few thousand dollars. The internet allows amazing viral ways to get to your goals like Kick-starter. You can put up trailers for your ideas on YouTube... Anything is possible, if you don't quit.

10) Studies say that alcohol, gambling, sex, etc all work on our brain's pleasure centers. But, surprisingly one more human trait is an equal stimulant. Generosity, helpfulness and acts of charity, also engage our pleasure centers! When you are a success, give something back. Encourage others of our creative tribe to find their futures - science says helping can be exciting and pleasurable!

Good hunting!

“When I look back on all the worries, I remember the story of the old man who said on his deathbed that he had a lot of trouble in his life, most of which never happened.”

- Winston Churchill

This is a companion to *Pen's 10 Secrets to Writing Success!*, available at Scriptshark on this link: <http://www.scriptshark.com/script-journal?detail/C17/pens-10-secrets-to-writing-success>

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