

WHEN HOLLYWOOD CALLS

BY DEBRA L. ECKERLING

Dan Halperin, director/producer, Epiphany Pictures, Inc. (*Road Dogs*, *Picture Windows*); Sheila Hanahan Taylor, producer, Practical Pictures (formerly Zide/Perry Entertainment, *Final Destination 3*); Stephanie Palmer, founder, Good in a Room (Goodinaroom.com) and former director of creative affairs at MGM; and Jeanne Thompson, creative executive, Sunrise Entertainment (*Starsky & Hutch*, *The Family Man*) share their tips for helping writers prepare for the development call that can change their lives.

A good meeting with a development executive can make the difference between a writer who has a successful career and one who will keep his screenplays in the bottom file drawer. Even a not-so-successful meeting can help a writer get ready for future prospects.

"You have someone who actually wants to sit down with you, and that's a good thing," says Jeanne Thompson, creative executive at Sunrise Entertainment.

"The truth is that if someone is having a meeting with you, he is hoping that you have his next career-making project," explains Stephanie Palmer, who founded Good in a Room to help writers, directors and other entertainment professionals become more comfortable in these types of situations. "[Development people] want nothing more than for you to succeed.

"When I was an executive at MGM, I was dying for that next person to come in the door and have a piece of material that I could use or purchase. Finding a quality piece is actually really hard."

Sheila Hanahan Taylor, producer at Practical Pictures, agrees that getting the call is a huge step in the right direction.

"Even a phone call from us means we're very interested in them in some capacity. We don't take the time out of our day to do that kind of phone call unless there is a real reason," she says. "Even if it's just

"The truth is that if someone is having a meeting with you, he is hoping that you have his next career-making project ..."

Stephanie Palmer



a 10-minute conversation, that's a big thing and something worth celebrating as a writer."

So, celebrate! Then get working—there's a lot to do between the time a call is set up and the call itself.

The best way for a writer to make the most of a meeting with a development executive is to be prepared. This sounds obvious. Definitely. But it cannot be emphasized enough. The trick is to

“Even if it’s just a 10-minute conversation, that’s a big thing and something worth celebrating as a writer.”

Sheila Hanahan Taylor



know the different elements that need attention prior to the meeting.

Even though many or most of the people with whom you are meeting will have either read the screenplay or seen coverage on the project, the writer still needs to know the logline backward, forward and inside out.

“You should be familiar with your basic, one-sentence logline or three-sentence pitch of what your story is about and be able to rephrase that for anybody who isn’t familiar and doesn’t have it in front of him,” says Dan Halperin, director/producer Epiphany Pictures, Inc.

“Some people call it a logline or a concept statement,” explains Palmer. “For me, it should include who the main character is—the protagonist; what he’s up against; the genre. Those are the essentials. Then, it’s ideal if they can include either what is ironic or unexpected or original about their idea.”

Hanahan Taylor believes the 30-second version of the story has less to do with what the project is about and more about the sell.

“The project has to have your excitement and it has to be something that shows promise, so that somebody could see the potential in it. That’s key: excitement, potential and promise. Because, after that, it is going to be the writing that gets the real door open.

“Even though none of us really wants to

admit it, [the entertainment industry] is a corporate-run industry. You can’t sell a widget without a great one-liner.”

Writers need to develop the ideas they are going to present, and they also need to be comfortable enough to present those ideas in the brightest light.

“Make the pitch more of a conversation,” Palmer recommends. “Most executives, and certainly studio executives, have heard so many pitches that the idea of being sold to is not fun. People just want to hear a good story delivered in a conversational manner, not as in an infomercial or a sales pitch.”

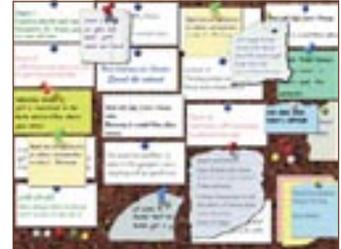
What it all boils down to is this: practice, practice, practice. Don’t just practice in a mirror—writers tend to spend a lot of time alone, and this is the time to start telling the project to people who will give honest and constructive feedback. Talking to others comes with the additional advantage of honing the idea or pitch.

“[The writer will] end up learning which three lines best tell his story,” Halperin states. “As [you tell your story] more and more, the words will fall together and be the most concise and best presentation of the story,” he continues. “The more verbal you’ve been about it, the more comfortable you’ll be in talking to people. The more easily you’ll come to the answers of the questions they’ll ask.”

The meeting can have one of two purposes: the executive likes the specific screenplay or the executive likes the writing and wants

IT’S ALL YOU NEED

Go from this...



to this...



to this...



all in one program.

writer's blocks³

The Smartest Way to Write

Try it yourself. Download the Writer’s Blocks trial version.

www.writersblocks.com

800-229-6737

©2004 Ashley Software



“You should be familiar with your basic, one-sentence logline ... and be able to rephrase that for anybody who isn’t familiar ... ”

Dan Halperin

Take
Your
Script
to the
Next
Level...



...Study with Marilyn Horowitz,
screenwriter, professor
and producer

Whether you're working on your first draft, trying to incorporate the producer's notes, or are preparing to direct your own material, Marilyn can help.

She'll not only help you work on your current screenplay, she'll teach you a creative method that will improve your writing process forever.

Call today and find out what these clients are talking about:

"She guides each writer toward the discovery of what they truly want to say in their work."

—Melinda Metz, *Roswell High*

"Rather than bringing yet another set of theoretical tools to the table, she leads the student to the living tools already within us."

—Brad Winters, *Oz*

60 West 71st St., #1B
New York, NY 10023
212-496-9631
artmarinc@aol.com

Visit our website for upcoming events and courses
www.artmarproductions.com

"Definitely know whom you're going in to see. Know the movies ... know what you're getting into."

Jeanne Thompson



to consider the person for a future project.

"I'd say 50 percent of the time the meeting's about that exact script—meaning there's something in the script that fits the business model of the company that's calling you, and they actually want to get into business on the script," Hanahan Taylor says. "The other 50 percent of those phone calls has nothing to do with your script specifically, but has to do with your writing. They liked your writing, they liked your action scenes, they liked the characters ... whatever it was."

Thompson adds, "The best way to prepare for the general meeting is to have some thoughts and ideas about what other scripts you might have, what other ideas you're toying with or thinking about.

"A lot of times what writers will find is when they go to various meetings with various producers and executives, they may only get offered projects that are along the same lines and in the same tone of what was sent as the sample. We obviously always like to talk to writers about any of our projects that might be right in that same tone, but [also] about what they might want to do outside of that tone."

To that end, a writer who is able to evaluate his skills is already a step ahead of the rest.

"The reality is there are very few writers out there who are fantastic at everything," Hanahan Taylor says. "Those are the top 25 [writers] in town. The rest of the people out there who are making a living—who are making inroads in their careers as writers—are good specifically at a few things. The ones who are making a living at it, [know] what they are good at, [whether it's comedy or dialogue or characters]. When they do get these phone calls, they're able to capitalize on [their strengths].

"We read a ton of scripts, so the real way a writer stands out to us is his voice and

then it's his personality."

Evaluating the pros and cons of the screenplay is a way writers can strut their stuff as well as a way to get free feedback from the executives.

"If we're interested in pursuing the project and want to talk to the writer about [his spec], we want to give him our notes and our thoughts on the script—what we liked about it, what we didn't like about it, and how we would like to change it," Thompson says.

"Having thoughts and ideas about your own strengths and weaknesses, or what you like and don't like about your script, is going to facilitate the discussion you have in the meeting," she continues. "If in the meeting no feedback is given about the script, it's okay to ask: 'What did you think about it?' 'What notes do you have?' 'How would you improve it?'"

The first meeting between a writer and the executives who could change his life could be likened to a blind date. The writer needs to have a brief bio ready and be prepared to answer questions.

"If you're an executive or a producer trying to decide if you want to spend the next three years with a person—which is the development life of a project—the energy is summed up by more than just what's on the page," Hanahan Taylor explains. "You look at the writing on the page as being 75 percent and the other stuff as being 25 percent."

Halperin suggests, "Certainly the script is the most important thing, but you want to stack as many cards as possible in your favor."

Palmer adds, "They've read the script ahead of time and they like it already, so now they want to meet you. It's much more about that personal connection, in the same way as if they were hiring an architect or an assistant."

With this information in mind, it's understandable that the meeting is more about getting to know the person and how he works, than about the material.

"In general, they will ask how you got the idea for the project because what they're trying to figure out is what kind of an idea machine you are," Hanahan Taylor says. "Some people have 50 fantastic ideas a week; some have one every year. They like to get a sense of what your creative process is."

Whether the meeting is on the phone or in person, the writer needs to be professional, courteous and on time.

"Be on time," Thompson says. "Don't be too early. Ten minutes is good."

And, if the meeting is on the phone ...

"It might be good to have yourself poised for the call and be in a quiet [environment], not on a cell phone," Halperin says. "I don't think [the writer] should ever take another call or have another conversation in the midst of the meeting."

At the beginning of the meeting, start out conversational and take time to establish a rapport. The best way to do that is to have inside information on the company, as well as on the people who will be in the meeting.

"If you can find something interesting about the people you are going to talk with, talk about that for five seconds—even if you just found out they were an alumni from some college that your mom went to. Whatever it is, find that connection because, in six months when you have another script and you want to send it to the executive, he'll have no idea who you are. But if you can reference and say, 'I'm that guy from Philadelphia whose mom went to Temple,' the executive clicks and says, 'Okay, I know who that is. He was a nice guy, so I'd love to read his stuff.'"

With The Internet Movie Database (Imdb.com), Yahoo, Google and other search engines on the Internet, there's no excuse for not having up-to-date information on the company. This information includes movies in pre-production as well as films previously released by the company.

"Definitely know whom you're going in to see," Thompson says. "Know the movies. Know what you're getting into. Show that you're not pitching a small, period piece character drama to someone who does action movies."

The last thing a writer wants to do is embarrass himself when having a meeting

of this caliber.

"Don't immediately insult the executive's latest movie," Palmer warns. "It's frightening how many times that has happened."

Know what projects the executives have done recently and get an idea of how the project the meeting is about fits into their grand plan. Most importantly, researching the trends in the industry will give the writer a leg up when discussing the marketplace and how the screenplay fits into it.

"If you're working a day job and you're writing at night, it's kind of hard to have your finger on the pulse of what's going on," Thompson explains. "It's a pretty good idea to know what's selling. Check the script sales. Know what's selling because about a year and a half ago, it was horror ... and they're on to comedies now. You don't want to be peddling a musical in a market that's looking for horror movies, and you certainly don't want to be peddling a big, broad high-concept comedy to someone who only does small character dramas."

The outcome of the meeting should be clear by the end, Hanahan Taylor says. "Whether it's going to be: 'I'd like to get to know you, we're going to talk internally here and we'll get back to you,' 'Hey, send us those two scripts we talked about; we'd love to read more of your stuff—you're a really interesting writer,' or 'Wow, we didn't realize you didn't have an agent. We actually have some people we know who are looking for clients right now. Would we be able to send your script to them?'"

If the conclusion isn't clear, it's okay to ask. "The writer is absolutely entitled to say 'What's next? Can we move forward in business on some level?'" she adds.

If the answer is not the life-changing "yes," keep in mind there's always next time. And there may be a lot of next times.

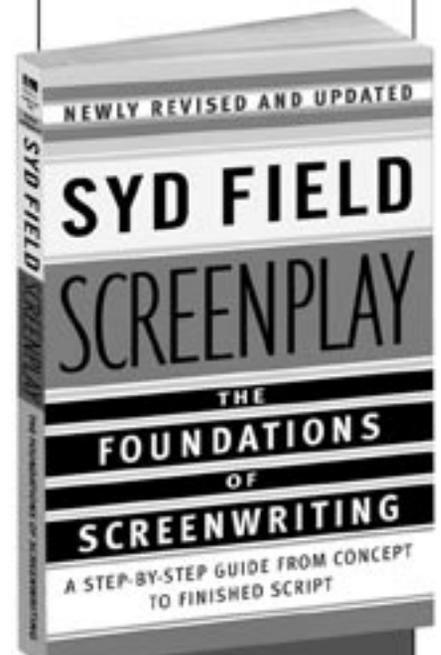
"I encourage anyone who has one call—and it doesn't pan out to be *the* one—realize that was practice for the next. Be equally aware after the call of how it went, and make notes of what worked and what didn't," Halperin suggests.

Rarely is the first call the only call. (i)

DEBRA L. ECKERLING is director of communications for a Los Angeles-based company, in addition to being a freelance writer. She is currently working on her third screenplay and leads a writers support group in Santa Monica.

SYD FIELD
is "the most sought-after screenwriting teacher in the world."

—*The Hollywood Reporter*



The must-have classic, updated with all new material.

SCREENPLAY is "quite simply the *only* manual to be taken seriously by aspiring screenwriters."

—TONY BILL, Academy Award-winning producer, director

Anyone serious about screenwriting should get to know "the preminent analyzer in the study of American screenplays."

—JAMES L. BROOKS, Academy Award-winning writer, director, producer



www.sydfield.com

Available wherever paperbacks are sold