

section one

the creatives

In search of The Next Big Thing
Daisy Goodwin



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Daisy Goodwin | CEO,
Silver River

I recently took part in a panel at the Edinburgh TV Festival called 'Hit after Hit: how to guarantee continuing success'. I agreed to take part reluctantly as like most creative people I don't take good ideas for granted. I live in dread of the morning when I wake up and nothing sparks. The idea that I could tell other people how to have hits seems horribly presumptuous. When I admitted to the audience that I had no magic formula for success they wilted visibly. Today, most independent production companies see themselves as ideas factories. The production line is relentless, built to serve what we imagine to be the voracious appetite of the audience for more television, more choice, more of what is successful, more of what is new. It never stops. As soon as one commissioning round is over, heads of development are already lining up lunch dates with the next set of broadcasters. And every one of them is hoping this time they will have exactly what every commissioning editor is looking for: The Next Big Thing.

I have been lucky enough to have had more success than most, having and producing ideas that seem to catch the zeitgeist, but I am afraid I have no magic formula. In fact I am quite wary of development departments, but I can see that if you want to run a creative business you have to ensure a steady stream of good ideas. But how easy is it to come up with the next big thing in a room with a whiteboard?

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I would argue that we do not always get the best out of our creative people. The Next Big Thing, after all, is just an idea in somebody's head. It is our job to get it out of that head and into the mainstream of television. To do that, we need to structure our businesses so that we encourage creativity in as diverse a way as possible. My grand design is to build a company that produces a high-class selection of everything from comedy and drama through to features, documentaries, and factual entertainment; an indie that is a boutique, rather than a factory. I know I will only succeed if I can attract talented people and give them the kind of environment where they can do their best work.

Where do good ideas come from?

One of the most frustrating things for anyone in the media is that creativity is not failsafe. There is simply no way to guarantee that the good ideas keep on rolling out. If only you could bottle creativity - though I have been at any number of conferences where people seem to think they can do just that!

Having ideas is a mysterious, unpredictable process. My own seem to arrive quite randomly, triggered by almost anything. I may read a short story, or a magazine article; I may see a group of photographs that spark a connection in my brain. Other ideas have leapt out at me simply by listening to other people talking. One thing I can say, though, which is that brilliant ideas rarely arrive in the middle of a brainstorming session.

This is heresy to most production companies, who happily spend a fortune sending their staff on away-days learning how to brainstorm. But in the end creativity is immensely personal. Some people simply overflow with ideas; others grind away and come up with one or two gems only after a long, painful gestation.

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How the idea arrives though is far less important than what happens to turn it from the nugget of a notion into a fully fledged concept: from a raw egg to a soufflé, if you like. I have never had a problem coming up with ideas or spotting the subject area I will be interested in next, but the real trick is to catch that fleeting idea as it runs past you, grow it and groom it in such a way that it becomes compelling, unmissable. This does not always happen before the idea has been commissioned. Patience - a rare quality among television people - is sometimes necessary to tweak a format until it is exactly right. Or you may have to wait for the audience to catch up with you. A show like *Grand Designs* took a while to achieve its full potential. It was not until series three or four that we started regularly getting ratings of four to five million. I believe that was because the viewers had finally caught up with the concept; suddenly the idea of building your own house seemed possible, even desirable.

The knack is to be able to tap into the desires and passions of your audience, perhaps even before they themselves have recognised them. The Daisy Goodwin brand, as someone once rather flatteringly called it, has stamped itself on anything and everything from current affairs through out-and-out entertainment to poetry. That is because I am capable of being passionately interested in all of those things. I believe that at least part of my own success has been down to understanding I am part of a cohort - The Princess Generation - which is the largest demographic among our audiences. There are a lot of women out there like me, and while we still have spending power, we are the viewers that advertisers and broadcasters are keen to woo. Look at *Desperate Housewives*, a show about middle-aged women. They may not look or act middle-aged, but they are all in their forties - unthinkable for a

successful drama series 10 or 20 years ago. In approaching an idea, therefore, I simply have to remind myself to find what I am interested in, what I would want to watch. As long as I recognise that, I hope that I will be able to come up with formats that appeal.

Channel 4, Five, BBC, ITV, the digital channels: the intelligent producer is not fussy about who she sells to. However, she is fussy, as I am, about what she makes. Throughout my career, I have never made anything I did not believe in, and my most successful programmes have always been those I have burned with a passion to make. Conviction is crucial in television, as it is in any form of creativity. In truth there is not much I would refuse to be associated with, because I do not make a distinction between high and low culture in the way most people do. I believe that television should be entertaining and it should be informative as well as inclusive; I feel you can do both and you should do both. There is no need to talk down. Viewers deserve content, and you only have to look at a show like *The Apprentice* to understand how content drives success. The series had immense drama, and of course audiences switched on to find out who would win. But it also taught people about business, and I believe audiences are hungry to learn from what they see on TV. I honed my own negotiation skills watching it, simply by cringing at the many ways the participants found during the series to make a complete mess of things!

The Next Big Thing is the Next Big Person

Business plans are like push-up bras: they show you to your best advantage. Mine contains all sorts of wonderful forecasts for growth and investment, but when it comes down to it the most important investment an independent production company can make is in its staff. The Next Big Thing is the Next Big Person, and it is important, I believe, to give everyone you work with a sense of creative investment, the incentive to be part of a winning team. Before you sack the head of development for failing to win you a commission for a prime-time series, you should ask yourself are we getting the best ideas out of our people? Have we created the kind of environment in this company where talented people can really flourish and do their most brilliant work?

I want Silver River, the indie I am launching this year, to be small enough so that I, and everyone else, knows everyone in the company: the way talkback was when I first joined it in 1998. Nowadays of course talkback has grown so huge that it is impossible to know everybody in the building by name. Although this has clearly worked for talkback, it is not the model I want to base my own company on. Looking at the number of television companies that are now being bought up and turned into super-indies, I question how successful they will be in the long run. Size isn't everything. What is the parent company buying: a successful brand, or a team that is only as great as the sum of its parts

- the creative people in it? When those people go - and creative people are always going somewhere since by nature they are restless - will the company go on scoring? When a business grows large and unwieldy, it becomes more difficult to keep alive the spark, the sense of commitment that people feel in a smaller enterprise. Perhaps the only way for a large production company to grow creatively is to spin off a set of different departments or brands.

In building the ideal creative environment, I believe it is important there should be no sense of a wall between myself and my staff, no 'me and them'. I have no interest in running a company that is based on deference and paranoia. Fear stifles creativity. How many meetings have you been to where people sit around a table offering throwaway ideas, afraid to share the really brilliant concept burning in their brain in case someone else steals it? People need to be given the confidence to speak up and know they won't be ripped off or laughed at.

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The one thing better than having a great idea of your own, selling it and making it a hit, is unleashing that potential in somebody else. We need to nurture the talent around us and bring on new people; we have to create opportunities for people, and that means taking creative risks.

One of the most inspiring managers I ever met was Helen Boaden, now Head of News at the BBC. I went to her with an idea for a current affairs programme, though at that point I had little experience in current affairs. I made my pitch: a pretty good one, I thought. She listened, then began asking the tough questions, exposing the fault-lines in the idea, making me work to justify my approach. I was beginning to think I had completely missed the point when she told me I had the commission. Great, I said, when do you want me to come and talk to you? Well, no, said Helen. I've given you the commission, I trust you. Now go off and do it. That taught me that you should trust your staff enough to let them get on with it, without breathing down their necks through every part of the process. Because you trust them and believe in them, they will rise to the challenge and not let you down. The flipside is that you carry the can if things go wrong.

Only when you foster that trust within your company do you give people the creative atmosphere in which they will produce for you, in return, their best ideas. Perhaps The Next Big Thing is already there right now, just the seed of a notion, a twinkle in somebody's eye. It could be in the head of a series producer with 30 years' experience of television; it could be in the head of the runner who has just joined your company fresh from a Media Studies degree. It is our job to create the right atmosphere so that tender shoot of an idea can be brought forth and nurtured.

Reworking ideas

Is there any such thing as a genuinely new idea? Just as there are said to be only seven different plots in fiction, perhaps there are also only a finite number of basic ideas in television. Look at the big successes of recent years. *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* A reworking of *The \$64,000 Question*. *Supernanny?* The BBC ran a series called *Nanny Knows Best* well over a decade ago. *Strictly Come Dancing?* A brilliant new spin on a hoary old show.

Of course there is genuine innovation, and genuine new talent, but it is also possible to repackage existing ideas for a different audience. New subject areas come into prominence. Who would have thought property would become so big? Other topics, such as food, fall in and out of fashion. It dropped out of sight for a while, but now it is back - what has changed is the format, and shows like *Hell's Kitchen* and *Jamie's School Dinners* have brought new angles, new drama, to a tired old subject.

Every idea has its moment. Timing is everything. Usually an idea is either snapped up straight away or bombs, but you should never simply throw away ideas when they fail to make it. They can come back again and again and again. Yours may just be an idea that you had before its time.

Selling The Next Big Thing

Many great ideas fall by the wayside because they are not properly sold to the commissioner. My method is to go in with a germ of an idea to find out if the broadcaster is interested. I never launch into enormous detailed treatments or PowerPoint plans. If you cannot explain a programme in one or two sentences, then it is unlikely to be a hit. Of course you must have done your homework and thought it through, but it is pointless to waste time and money and energy developing an idea that no commissioner is ever going to buy. Most successful series are commissioned as a result of a meeting in which the programme-maker says 'Had you ever thought about...?' and the commissioner says 'Gosh, yes...'

You may believe passionately in the idea yourself, but you must make the commissioner believe in it just as strongly. The trick is to give them a stake in it, so that they feel they have a part to play in developing it. Unless they feel the show could not have happened without them, they are unlikely to commit to it the way you have. I never take more than one or two ideas at a time, and I never send ideas in advance. You have to pitch in person, to be able to look the commissioner in the eye and know immediately whether you are onto a winner or a loser.

Choice

Looking to the future, the buzzword for the digital generation seems to be choice. Programme-makers are desperately casting about, trying to find ways of expanding the range of choice for the viewer: more choice in what they watch, more choice in how they watch it.

But is this really what people want? In my opinion viewers do not want more choice; they have enough choice already. Choice actually confuses and bewilders people. Studies show, for instance, that if you go to the supermarket and there are 87 different brands of jam on sale, you are less likely to buy. People much prefer going to a store that has only seven varieties. So why should we imagine that having 600 channels will make anybody happier? It certainly will not make our lives any easier. The more choice, the higher the serendipity factor in what people alight on to watch. It becomes all the more impossible to predict what will become a hit. Of course I would never advocate returning to three channels, but viewers yearn to find television havens where the thinking and the trawling has been done for them, channels that are clear in their branding and know their target demographics. Effectively, what audiences will increasingly want is edited choice.

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Take the online retailer Amazon. One of its cleverest marketing ploys is to suggest if you like this, you might also like this. What people want is the televisual equivalent, to guide them through their programme choices and save them navigating an endless ocean of output. Perhaps new technology is already developing the means for that to happen. Personalised EPGs - Electronic Programme Guides - may be the next way of driving television forward. Your EPG could be programmed to learn your viewing tastes, so that eventually it will be able to help make the choices for you, and take you to shows you might never otherwise see.

And as for The Next Big Thing itself, the miracle format, the sure-fire success? Who knows? Besides, if I knew what it was, would I be likely to share it? I can only tell you that the ideas I am chewing over for the future are in the subject areas that interest me. I predict we will see a growth in programmes that are about personal fulfilment, even perhaps spiritual development: programmes for my cohort that explore ways to exercise flabby brains, or investigate how you become the person you always wanted to be; programmes that investigate the choices we have made, and the ways they have influenced our lives.

Watch this space.