

Harsh reality for Canadian producers

Despite the global success of locally-produced gameshows and competition-based reality TV, you'll find almost no such programming on English Canadian TV. It's a situation that is unlikely to be resolved any time soon, and one that greatly affects the country's potential for both the import and export of TV formats. Jenn Kuzmyk reports.

French Canada has a longstanding tradition of both importing and exporting gameshow formats, with Quebec-made programmes like Lingo, Star for a Night and La Fureur traveling well internationally, but English Canadian broadcasters air virtually no domestically-produced gameshows. There hasn't been a successful English Canadian gameshow for decades, and as things stand now, there aren't likely to be many in the future either.



"If you want to create your own Canadian show that's even similar to a primetime quiz you would run into all kinds of obstacles. As good or strong or attractive a proposition as it might be, there are too many fences and borders," warns Mike Geddes (left), ceo of Toronto indie Lone Eagle Entertainment, one of the only English Canadian companies meaningfully involved in the reality TV and international formats business.

It is not just studio-based quiz shows that are a problem to produce in Canada. Any show that has any form of competitive behaviour or that has prizes involved will run into difficulty both in finding funding and in convincing broadcasters to air it. Of course, that discounts a huge portion of the international formats business, making the possibility for Canadian versions of successful gameshows or even über-hot reality formats like Survivor, Big Brother and The Apprentice a huge challenge.

It's a complicated issue, but put simply, it breaks down to three main stumbling blocks. Firstly, the Canadian Television Fund (CTF) - the country's largest and most relied upon TV financing source - strictly prohibits any programme that comes near to being defined as a gameshow, or even reality television for that matter. CTF funding guidelines clearly state: "Most particularly, eligibility will be compromised if a programme contains aspects such as, but not limited to, prizes, awards, contestants, gameshow elements, or reality television elements."

This exclusion of reality and gameshow genres is not likely to change. The CTF is already so over-subscribed with demand for financing of traditional documentary and scripted shows that there is simply no room for

expanding the definition of programming that can qualify for funding.

The second issue concerns refundable tax credits against eligible Canadian labour. These production incentives can add up to a sizeable portion of the budget of a show, and without them financing a TV series or film is extremely difficult. While foreign formats can technically qualify for tax credits under the Canadian Audio-Visual Certification Office (CAVCO) regulations, if they are a reality programme or gameshow, again they are ineligible. The same goes the country's provincial tax credits on production labour.

Specifically, the CAVCO guidelines discount tax credit eligibility for any production that rewards any form of prize, monetary or not, and also denies eligibility to shows that consist of "one or more hosts and contestants who participate in various types of competitive activities, such as tests of knowledge, skill or wit." The exception is "Canadian amateur talent competitions in the field of artistic expression." In other words, CTV's Canadian Idol qualifies for tax credit refunds, while a Canadian Survivor would not.

Another roadblock prohibiting domestically produced gameshows from being on English Canadian television concerns the 1999 Television Policy from media watchdog CRTC. Under the controversial TV Policy guidelines, broadcasters must air at least eight hours of 'priority programming' - that is, drama, documentary, children's or variety shows. Non-scripted programming can count as 'priority', but a programme that has any sort of competitive component is, again, disqualified.

So even if a Canadian version of Survivor, The Apprentice or Big Brother could conceivably be funded outside of the CTF and tax credits, such as through broadcast licence fees and advertising sponsorship, a broadcaster would still be hesitant to commit to it because it wouldn't count as priority programming, and would therefore have to be scheduled in a slot that would be better filled by much cheaper imported American shows.

One might think that Canadian producers would be incensed by the restrictions surrounding gameshows and reality TV, but aside from Geddes' vocal opposition, there seems to be little drive to change the status quo. According to Canada's film and TV producers association, the CFTPA, there is no initiative underway by the body to address a need to help make the production and financing of gameshows and reality formats an easier process. "We haven't had any members interested in going after that. (Producers) are just used to gameshows and reality being excluded, and are concentrating on other types of productions," the CFTPA's spokesperson Jane Thompson told C21.

But for Geddes and others, there may be some light at the end of the tunnel. There is talk that the guidelines surrounding tax credits may be re-considered, and that Global Television, the home of US simulcasts like The Apprentice and Survivor, is reportedly keen on figuring out a way to produce local versions of these shows despite the challenges.

But as it stands now, until Canada's television industry can figure out a

solid way to overcome some of the issues that prohibit production of gameshows and reality programming, the country will continue to be only a marginal player in the international formats business.

Jenn Kuzmyk
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