

Lone Eagle vows to crack America

For a myriad of financing and regulatory reasons, it's extremely difficult to get a locally versioned format on to Canadian TV networks. As a result, Lone Eagle Entertainment is shifting its position from an importer of international formats to an exporter and creative force for original formats, with its sights set on breaking into the US primetime game, *writes Jenn Kuzmyk.*



"It just doesn't make sense to import formats into Canada," says Michael Geddes (left), president of Toronto-based reality TV and format house Lone Eagle Entertainment. Ironic words coming from the frontman of the outfit that broke barriers, importing and producing Canada's first international format back in 2000 when it picked up Screentime's Popstars and produced three seasons for the Global Television Network.

Since then however, aside from CTV's hit airing of Canadian Idol, which piggy-backed on Fox's ultra-successful American Idol, there have been virtually no international primetime formats versioned for Canada's network television broadcasters including CTV, Global, CBC and CHUM.

"This is an extremely complex market where US fare dominates the airwaves on network television, so there is less shelf-space for formats from the start," explains Geddes. Money is also an issue. "Budgets are lower for Canadian-made formats, and cable really can't support a big, big idea so it's just network you have to deal with. There are simply not enough places to take a show," he adds.

Formats are also up against a wall in Canada because many of them have a gameshow component or cash prize associated with them. That means they don't qualify for tax credits against labour or funding from domestic sources like the Canadian Television Fund (CTF), making financing extremely difficult. In addition they don't count as 'priority programming' in primetime, so broadcasters can't use them to fulfill a regulated quota for indigenous drama, docs or variety programming.

Of this, Geddes says: "It is unfortunate. It stifles creativity. TV wasn't created just for drama. It was created to entertain. The problem is there are some hard and fast definitions that have been laid out. What comes out at the other end of the pipeline is homogenized product and we wonder why nobody is watching Canadian television." He rightly points out that aside from anomalies like CTV's successful sitcom Corner Gas, there are no indigenous scripted programmes rating in the country's top

25 shows.

He says Lone Eagle's reality-type formats are "extremely well produced, and my money is the same colour as anyone else's in terms of employing Canadians. I think if a show is 10 out of 10 (ie. 100% Canadian labour and talent) there is no reason why it shouldn't be funded and count as priority programming," he argues. However, he knows that right now at least, the likelihood of changing the CTF and broadcast definitions is slim to none. If anything, most of the country's producers and creatives are lobbying to tighten the guidelines to result in more scripted programming in primetime.

For all these reasons, Geddes is switching his company's focus to becoming a creator and exporter, rather than importer of formats. However, this too will be a sizeable challenge. While French-language formats originating in Québec, such as Love Bugs and Star for a Night, have flown outside of Canadian borders to international success, there have been virtually no successfully exported formats coming from the English market here. Geddes aims to change that. Last year, he inked a rep deal with UK/Australian indie Screentime Partners involving certain territorial rights to Lone Eagle formats Hooked Up and The Call.

Hooked Up (6x60'), which aired in Canada on terrestrial station Toronto 1 in January 2004, is an outdoorsy reality dating show that sends 10 women and 10 men off into the Rocky Mountains on a journey to find their perfect mate. The Call, meanwhile, is a primetime format that takes a fly-on-the-wall look at the competitive world of casting. It premiered in primetime in February 2004 on Alliance Atlantis' Life Network.

Geddes is also intent on teaming up with US entertainment producers to build Lone Eagle's format coproduction efforts, and break into the stateside TV market. "Canada is the biggest television ally to the US and the biggest buyer of American product, so we are very well positioned to be a top of mind place for formats that work in the US. Up until now that hasn't been the case, but it is kind of my personal goal to change that," declares Geddes. He says Lone Eagle can produce in the same style and pace as the Americans, and notes that the company's ideal production slate will encompass about two or three series or limited series annually.

Lone Eagle is currently wrapping production on a comedy/reality hybrid series entitled The Office Temps (10x60'), which will air nationally in Canada in primetime on Global Television later this spring. Created by the LA-based writers/exec producers Darrell Vickers and Andrew Nicholls, and packaged by CAA along with Lone Eagle, the format is billed as a "workplace" reality, sort of Punk'd meets The Office, where pranks are played upon unsuspecting office workers.

The format and US coproduction rights were picked up by Fox TV Studios and Fox World, but both recently opted out of the deal. Geddes says it was simply a casualty of the Spring 2004 management re-structure that saw FtvS president David Grant replaced by former ABC Family president Angela Shapiro. "With the change in command a bunch of projects got nixed at Fox World and Fox Studios, and this is one of them," he says,

admitting disappointment, but still buoyed that the US reality/format leader bought into his concept as a paper format. "It was great to see them step up and buy into our vision on this. I think that means a lot in terms of its ability to fly as a format," says Geddes. Although the deal is not sealed, Geddes told C21 that he has an offer from "a prolific US producer/distributor" to make an Office Temps format into a Canada/US coproduction.

Several UK indies have launched a production pods in Hollywood, inking format deals with the US studios, and in time Geddes hopes to do the same. "I believe we will be able to do that shortly," he says. "I see it and feel it. I've been spending enough time down there with our agents (CAA), and the people that need to know us, know us. It is only a matter of time, and of course it depends on the right project," he adds.

Geddes is also pitching other formats stateside - ones that have not yet been produced for Canadian TV, in the hope of establishing North American hits. Alma Mater (10x60') pits two teams of college students in a cross-country face-off as they race against time to transform an off-campus house into the 'Ultimate Campus Party HQ'. It involves an interactive audience voting component, and a real working business is handed over to the winners.

Honeymoon In Paradox (6x60') whisks eight just-married couples off to a luxurious Caribbean location. Once there, the newlyweds are separated to test which of them can find their way back into each others' arms based solely on intimate personal knowledge. Meanwhile, RadioHigh (13x30') seeks out a group of outlandish teen personalities to run the rock, electronic and hip-hop channels of a newly-created internet radio station. In each episode the hopefuls must produce an hour-long programme to be broadcast online.

Despite the difficulties of bringing primetime formats onto the Canadian networks, Geddes feels there are still opportunities on cable - specifically within the lifestyle genre and when broadcasters can use finished episodes to shoehorn a concept into the market.

As a result, Lone Eagle set up a Canadian distribution division last year. Fronted by Tom Powers, the distribution division looks to acquire all rights for Canada, as it did with Screentime's New Zealand home improvement format The Ultimate Do Up. The finished 10-part series will air on HGTV Canada in April, with the Alliance Atlantis Communications-owned network with an option to adapt a localized version - which would be produced by Lone Eagle.

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