



SCREENING NOW: Beyond Human Boundaries

A documentary-reality program which tells the story of Arman Alizad

Jupiter rising

Stephen Land, founder and CEO of Knoxville-based Jupiter Entertainment, tells Clive Whittingham about the tricks of true crime, the challenges facing US cable, the effect of streamers on factual and the rights position of US indies.



Stephen Land

Your company is 22 years old but has recently become known for true crime programming such as Snapped on Oxygen and Atlanta Child Murders for ID. How have you seen that genre evolve in recent years?

We like to say we were doing true crime before true crime was cool. Like everybody else we've been stunned at the phenomenal growth and explosion in popularity of the genre but we've been in the business for more than a

decade and always found it fascinating. What's most interesting is these are true stories and if we can tell compelling, high-stakes mysteries then there's an audience that just seems to have an insatiable appetite for them.

While there's an ongoing market for closed-ended episodes of true crime, the public has shown a fascination in learning more and going deeper. We did a three-part special on the JonBenét Ramsey case for ID and while one could argue that story has been told, we took it deeper, explored alternate theories and really broke down the case in greater detail. It ended up being the highest rated show that ID had ever aired to that point. There is a market that wants to be super-served with more detailed and nuanced storytelling. The Atlanta Child Murders was a three-parter as well.

Has that change been driven by the streamers? Netflix has obviously had some big success stories in serialised true crime.

The streaming services proved, with Making a Murderer and other projects, that the audience wants more depth and we're now seeing the cablenets go deeper as well. The audience clearly demonstrates it likes it.

How do you cut through in such a crowded, buzzy genre?

What we look for, what we've had the most success in, are shows structured as real-life mysteries. We're looking for cases where the circumstances are not obvious first and foremost, and secondly that are relatable. A drug dealer getting shot isn't the kind of case we're looking for; we want relatable stories.

We like stories where the people involved will remind the viewer of somebody they dated in college, one of their neighbours, one of their friends. Relatable characters and people appeal the most; it gives a sense of 'Oh my gosh, that could happen to me.' For viewers there's also a degree of wanting to be the armchair detective and play along. Another criteria for selecting cases is red herrings in the story, so you can structure the story with twists without diverging from the truth.

Snapped has aired for more than 400 episodes on Oxygen. How do you keep a show like that fresh, season after season?

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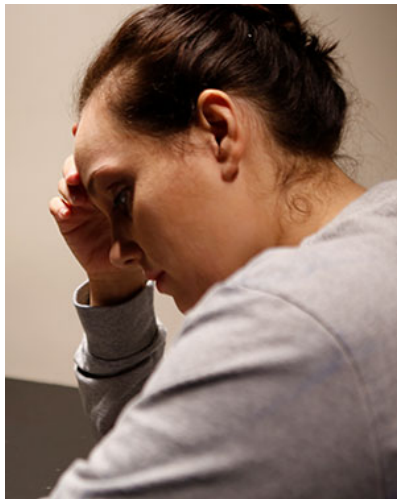
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For most production companies an ongoing series with high renewals is the key to stability. It's essential. I'm really proud we have 10 series that are in multiple seasons and we have three that are beyond their 10th season. For a prodco that is gold. It could be easy to kick back, take it easy and phone it in, but we think that's a huge mistake. For example, with Snapped, we've probably gone through four or five refreshes on that to keep it fresh.



Long-running Oxygen crime series Snapped

It's about bringing in new writers, fresh producers and changing the graphics, to keep the show growing and evolving. It has to move forwards or it dies. Keeping it fresh is essential and to keep staff as excited about making episode 394 as they were about episode one is a challenge but it's essential to growing the business.

The vast majority of your shows are with US cablenets, a business we hear is being squeezed by declining subscriptions, ad revenues, rising costs and increased competition. Do you fear for

its future?

I don't buy into the doomsday predictions for the US cable business. There is a lot of life left there. For a company like Jupiter, US cable networks are key to our growth. We are a company built for scale and while we appreciate and are engaged with some streaming services, at this point I haven't seen that they will provide the scale US cable has traditionally provided. While the business model is, to some degree, under assault, US cable is still a great place to be.

We hear stories of producers being given second-season renewals but for less money than the first. Have you experienced that bacon slicing of budgets for your renewals?

We have not been asked to reduce any budgets but we are finding that it's tougher to negotiate increases. We have to be ever-vigilant on our costs because it's a challenging environment for the cablenets and they want more on screen than ever before. For producers, it's imperative that we find new efficiencies and ways to deliver quality on tight budgets. There is no appetite for mediocrity. Today, quality is the only thing that really matters.

But in this climate, does that not force you to commit more of your own money to the development process, and is that sustainable for indies?

For sure. There are three essential components for success in this business. One, you have to have a pipeline of timely ideas. Two, you have to have a buyers' marketplace that is confident in your ability to deliver. And three, you have to have the capital to fuel both development and the attachment of talent to execute.

Development has become a major investment. That's not going away. Further, I would argue that in the 90s there was a mentality of throwing everything at the wall and seeing what sticks. That doesn't work anymore, networks now want and expect producers to come in with a fully fleshed out idea and for producers you have to go deeper to develop that idea and it goes back to the quality of the show. Now it's more about quality than quantity.

It has been suggested that the situation will lead cablenets to soften their notoriously retentive position on programme rights, and maybe leave some back-end with the producer. Is your business suddenly awash with rights to its own shows?

I hear a lot of speculation that the business model may change. As

cablenets can't afford to fully fund projects at the level that they know their viewers want, they may have to leave rights on the table. I have not seen evidence of that. The hypothesis is challenged by the media companies that own these networks trying to roll out OTT plays that rely on global reach, so I'm sceptical. If the question is 'Would we like to hold on to rights?', then absolutely, we'd love it, but I haven't seen real evidence the networks are willing to give up those rights.



The Atlanta Child Murders ran to three episodes on ID

Sky bought a majority stake in your business and has now itself been bought out by Comcast, which obviously owns a clutch of cablenets as part of NBCUniversal (NBCU). How does that change the game for Jupiter?

It's interesting to observe the transition. The execs at Sky have been phenomenal partners. The Comcast acquisition at this point has not impacted us in any measurable way, we're already in business with a number of the Comcast/NBCU networks here in the US. As the industry further consolidates, for Jupiter, it brings more opportunities as a producer of substantial scale. Comcast/NBCU will soon have its own OTT player as well.

What's next for Jupiter?

We're delighted with our position in the true crime genre but we view development and our slate much like you would view an investment portfolio – we don't want to over-index any one area. As such, we have spent a good deal of the past year investing in and developing premium content – premium doc content. We have a new feature doc that we'll be announcing soon that we've sold to a US buyer. We have four development deals with various US networks for more lifestyle projects. We have a new series for Travel Channel. We want to diversify our portfolio so we're not over-indexed in any one area. We're actively developing lifestyle, docusoap and premium doc spaces.

That lifestyle space has evolved nearly as dramatically as true crime. How do you survey that opportunity?

In 2014, 40% of our revenue was in docusoaps. We had Sons of Guns for Discovery, Wild West Alaska for Animal Planet, Welcome to Myrtle Manor for TLC. We were a heavy producer of docusoaps. That market died a sudden death. Fortunately, we pivoted to another area we had proven strength in: true crime. That served us very well as our business has doubled in size since then.

Looking at docusoaps or 'occusoaps' today, no question the viewer now knows that a lot of those shows from a decade ago were contrived. Today there is much more authenticity in both the characters and the plotlines. But it's even harder for the producer because the viewer wants and expects explosive moments but you can't overly produce them today. You end up shooting more and to be there to capture them as and when they happen, as opposed to having them built into an outline and delivered on schedule.

And having worked with Will Packer on Atlanta Child Murders, Roc Nation and Kelly Ripa on other projects, does A-list talent remain a key part of the plan?

While I believe that packaging with talent can be helpful in selling a show, in our minds it really needs to be motivated by the content as well. Will Packer is based in Atlanta, he had a genuine relationship and knowledge

and interest in the story. He had a point of view to bring and actively promoted the show. Packaging for the sake of packaging I question. Does that deliver anything on screen? I'm not sure it does.

If we're fortunate enough to be in business with Jay Zee, Roc Nation, Kelly Ripa, Will Packer or any of these people, the first question to ask is 'Do they have a passion and expertise that can help elevate a project?' I would think if one is just attaching a name for the sake of attaching a name, at some point the buyer is going to know that and question why they're paying a premium.



Clive Whittingham
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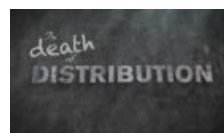
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