

Lee Goldberg conducted this Q & A with Chris Abbott shortly after her book “Ten Minutes To The Pitch... “ was published in 2005.

ABOUT LEE GOLDBERG



Lee is a two-time Edgar & Shamus Award nominee who has written and produced scores of highly successful TV series and is the author of over forty novels and non-fiction books.

As an international television consultant, he has advised networks and studios in Canada, France, Germany, Spain, China, Sweden, and the Netherlands on the creation, writing, and production of episodic series.

Chris Abbott is one of the most successful writer-producers in television, with credits like *Magnum PI*, *BL Stryker*, *Dr. Quinn Medicine Woman* and *Diagnosis Murder*. She's just written a terrific book called "TEN MINUTES TO THE PITCH: Your Last Minute Guide and Check-List for Selling Your Story." And all proceeds from the book benefit the Writers Guild Foundation.

Why did you write this book?

Leonard Stern, from Tallfellow Press, came to me with the idea. He saw it as the second book in their “Ten Minutes To Success” series, which began with “Ten Minutes To The Audition.”

I liked the idea; it seemed to me I had seen dozens of books about writing, but none about pitching and I believe they are two distinctly different talents.

There are a thousand “How To” books for writers on pitching and selling scripts. What makes yours different from all the rest?

A thousand? Really? Honestly, I didn't think there was even one book out about pitching as I was writing it. I have noticed, since, one other book. Nevertheless, I'm sure you're right, hyperbole aside, there must be several books on pitching.

Mine is different inasmuch as my professional experience is different from the other authors. I think it would be valuable to read everyone else's book as well as mine. But the value of mine is that it is very practical.

It is very small so you can take it with you; it has stories from lots of successful writers to amuse or enlighten; it doesn't take long to read.

Before you even get into talking about pitching itself, you pay a lot of attention to the importance of seemingly irrelevant things... like double-checking the address, arriving very early, going to the bathroom before the meeting, bringing a pencil and paper, turning off your cell phone... but they aren't irrelevant things, are they?

When Leonard first talked to me about this idea, it was subtitled "A Parking Lot Primer For Writers." The idea was that you're in the parking lot, you're ready to go pitch your heart out, what are the things you want to remember before you get into the office?

So that accounts for some tips, like "going to the bathroom", that you might not see in other pitching books!

But there is something that I hope is a bit more profound behind the seemingly mundane ideas. For example: Are You In The Right Place? This isn't just about making sure you have the correct address (although without that, you are doomed to failure); it is also about making sure you've brought the right kind of pitch to the studio that is likely to consider buying your story.

Each of the ideas has its own Zen-shadow idea I think writers need to seriously consider before even showing up in the parking lot.

Is your book primarily aimed at people pitching for TV episodic assignments, pilots, and MOWs? Or does the same advice apply in the feature film and reality-show worlds?

I have no idea what applies in the world of reality programming. "Ten Minutes To The Pitch" was written primarily for people who will be pitching movie ideas or pilot ideas. I think pitching for MOWs and for episodic assignments is much like, if not exactly like, pitching for features and pilots... so I think the book can benefit anyone who's going in to pitch.

I think the book can even benefit someone going out to sell themselves in some other arena. It's mostly practical advice about interviewing for a job. The job in this case happens to be writing a feature film or a pilot.

I also think the book is aimed at those who have spent a fair amount of time pitching. There's something comforting about reading horror stories and success stories from your fellow writer. Writers, I think, mostly do what they do alone and it's good to find out that other people have gone through the same crucibles you've been through.

What is the biggest mistake a writer can make during a pitch?

I suppose it depends on the person to whom you're pitching. I'd have to go with: arguing with the person you're pitching to. Don't argue with them about anything! Not even the weather! It just annoys them and that's all they'll think about during your pitch. And if they tell you what's wrong with your story, and you know that they're complete idiots and missed the point altogether – still don't argue. You won't win.

What was the worst pitch you ever had to sit through as a show runner?

Honestly, Lee, I don't remember any particularly bad pitches. Usually, by the time people are pitching to the show runners, they have a sense of pitching. The stories may have been not right for us – or maybe we'd already done the story they were pitching – but for the most part, the writers were pretty good at what they were doing. Doesn't mean they couldn't improve by reading "Ten Minutes To The Pitch," however!

What was the worst pitch you ever made someone else sit through?

Well, okay, I'll tell you this. I was working with a writing partner and we had sold a story idea to an episodic TV mystery show. After we had gotten the approval to "go to story," which, for those of your readers who don't already know, means we could go home and write up the story we had just sold in more detail, my partner decided he hated the story and we should change it. I didn't know that was a really bad idea, so I agreed.

We came back in, not with the fleshed out story outline the producers had bought, but with an entirely different story which, incidentally, they hated. I could almost see the blood pressure rising on one of the producers as we pitched him our new "improved" idea. I never made that mistake again.

Can you survive in television if you're a good writer and storyteller... but uncomfortable selling yourself and your stories to others?

I'm curious as to why you would be uncomfortable telling your stories if you are, in fact, a good storyteller. But, for the sake of not arguing with the interviewer, I'd have to say, yes – and no. If you can sell that first script, people will be willing to trust your writing ability more than your enthusiasm for verbal pitching.

But as difficult as it is, these days, to sell a script, I'd advise any writer to try to learn to become comfortable telling stories.

Sometimes people ask me, "Can I make it without moving to Hollywood?" I say, "Sure. You can make it where ever you live. But you can't make it as a Hollywood writer unless you're willing to come to Hollywood. 'Cause they aren't going to come to you."

I think the same thing is true about not wanting to sell stories. If you can't sell a story, how are the buyers supposed to know you can write it?

I think selling yourself is another matter altogether. If you have an agent or a manager and if you don't run with scissors and can play well with others, that's probably all you need. I don't think you have to be Willie Loman to write him.

You've written for, and worked with, stars like Burt Reynolds, Tom Selleck, Frank Sinatra, and Dick Van Dyke. Do you approach a script or a story differently when you're working with a "big star" than you would if working with a relative unknown?

The "Big Star" vs. "Relative Unknown" doesn't factor into how I pitch. What does, though, is this: am I pitching to an actor? Or to a director? Or to a studio executive? Or to other writers? You want to draw people into your story and you want them to see why they should put a whole lot of money and time into producing it. So you want to pitch it to each of the principals in ways they will best understand it.

It's been my experience that actors see stories from the point of view of their character and their character only. Even if their character isn't the protagonist, it's good if you can find a way to pitch the story from their character's point of view.

Remember Truffeaut's "Day For Night?" There was a literary conceit of a reporter interviewing each of the actors during the production of the film, and each actor began by saying that this movie was about his/her character. As funny as it was, I think it's a very good clue about how actors look at stories.

Line producers, on the other hand, are going to want to know how the heck you're going to make this movie for the money. And if you can give them some reassurance on that, your life will be a little easier.

Other writers (ie Showrunners) like to hear cool ideas they haven't thought of themselves. Obviously, they're the hardest people to pitch to!

You're an experienced showrunner...of shows created by others and shows you've created yourself. Can you talk about the differences between the two experiences? What's it like running "your own show" as opposed to taking over a show that's previously been run by others?

I have only created one show myself (so far!) but you're right, I have run a number of shows created by other people. They each have their own challenges.

The hardest thing about running a show you've created (at least in the one case I can look back on) is just trying to get it up on its feet in time for air dates.

The show I created, "Legacy" for UPN, shot on location, so in addition to getting scripts ready, we had to find – or actually create – a space we could use for sound stages.

"Legacy" was also a period show, so we had to gear up costumes and sets and props to get us through the shooting period that other shows, either non-period or even period shows that have been on the air for a while, don't have to worry about. So that was an incredibly stressful period.

I have found running someone else's show a bit less complicated because so much has already been decided. If you treat the stars and the studio and the creator (if he/she is still around) as partners and with a modicum of respect, it seems to go fairly smoothly.

I know this sounds like it's easy. It's not! As you know, yourself! It's running every day just to stay in place. But at least you're not running in place and digging a hole at the same time!

What can aspiring writers do to hone the skills needed to be "good pitchers?"

Practice, practice, practice. Ask others to listen to your pitch and give you feedback — not on the story — but on the pitch. Did they get lost? Were they pulled into the story? Are there any places that dragged or that went by too fast?

I think it'd be good to offer to do the same for your fellow writers. It's good to hear how someone else pitches and discover what works for them and what doesn't.

But, in the end, the pitch is your voice, your vision, your idea. So it has to sound like you.

There are so many approaches to pitching...and you have many examples in the book. Ultimately, doesn't it come down to trial and error, a writer discovering what works best for him or her? Is the way a writer pitches like the way they write, a reflection of his or her personality and unique point of view?

Yes.

Or are there some basic rules and accepted customs that all writers are expected to follow?

Well, I think there are some basic rules and accepted customs that all people are expected to follow. The same rules apply to writers. Don't show up nude, for example. Don't wipe your nose on your shirt. Don't insult the photos of their children on their desks.

I think you can expect a semi-standard 20-30 minutes in which to give your pitch. Don't feel you have to race through it and give some of your time to the next writer through the door.

I think you should basically give the people you're pitching to a beginning, middle and end to your story. And you should give them anything really, really cool and unexpected... but not because of custom but because that's how you'll sell it.

I guess that's all I know about that.

Is there really a freelance episodic market left? Is it harder for writers to break into television today than it was, say, ten years ago?

I don't know, although I suspect not. And I don't know, but I suspect yes. But that's no reason not to try. It's always hard. But somebody has to write the scripts. It might as well be you.

How well do the executives remember the pitch when they finally get the finished script? What happens if the script deviates from the pitch they loved?

I'd say if the script is working, deviations won't be minded. But if there are specific parts the executives loved and you take them out and you don't warn them in advance – start looking for a new day job.

It's been my experience that the executives like to participate in creating the script. If you change it substantially, you're insulting them. Now why would you want to do that?

On the other hand, if the spirit of the notes is in the script and you've given them essentially what they remembered buying, they're not going to haggle over a couple of minor changes.

How important is a leave-behind? Should it read like a rerun of the pitch in tone and energy? Or should it be a more detailed document? Or should it be less detailed?

I've never left a leave-behind. I think it's really hard to read treatments; they don't have the same energy and spirit that a verbal pitch has or that a script has, for that matter. So I think they're the deadliest selling tool.

If you're forced to leave something behind, then I would say, make it the best written version of the pitch, not just a copy of the verbal pitch. Make it advertising copy, somehow. Find the way to give the reader an idea of the conflict, the characters, the really cool scenes.... and then try to get them to let you come in to pitch it again yourself!

What is your take on the state of the episodic TV drama today? It's the dominant form in prime-time and, some suggest, we are experiencing a "golden age?" Do you think this is true? If the approach to story-telling in episodic drama has changed, how so... and is it for the better?

I'm just grateful to see that TV drama is coming back. It seems like we went for a long time without much in drama except "reality" programming.

I do think the approach to story telling has changed, but I haven't studied it enough to give you a cogent answer. I suspect whatever my answer would be, I wouldn't say it was for the better or for the worse. However people want to hear stories, that's the way

we should be telling them. So if the new approach is attracting viewers, great. That's what I want to hear!