

## Production Strategies Seminar at Discovery Campus, Germany

### Gorica Productions, Felice Gorica

*Felice Gorica is founder of Gorica Productions, a television production company dedicated to making quality factual entertainment and documentary programmes for a broad spectrum of cable networks in Canada, the U.S., Europe, and Asia. At the 2nd Open Training Session of the Discovery Campus Masterschool held in Munich, Germany, Felice revealed secrets for production success.*

**Felice Gorica:** I am an independent producer, I mostly make documentary series, generally for American networks. I am going to speak a little bit about my company but what I really want to do is give you information, especially on how you can get money for documentaries. I think there is a lot of garbage on television, and if people who have good ideas for programming know how to raise the money, probably we will have better television. So, that is my own mission.

You probably heard that in Canada we have a lot of subsidies. Canada is a great place for documentary makers, we have a strong community. If you are looking at one-hour documentaries, about 60 % of the funding comes from the Canadian government. So, it is pretty high. 30 % comes from broadcasters, usually Canadian broadcasters, and 10 % will come from the producer or the investors. To get that 60 %, you must have a highly Canadian production: your entire production team should be Canadian, and it has to be on a very Canadian subject, which means you cannot sell it anywhere outside Canada. That is a drawback. It is a sort of a vicious cycle because most producers just keep getting subsidies and they are not encouraged to sell their productions outside Canada.

When I started, I got subsidies for one-hour documentaries on very Canadian topics. Then I realised that there was no money in one-hour documentaries. You could get the money to actually make the programme, mostly through these subsidies. But there was no backend profit. I started looking around and I recognised that people who were making documentary series seemed to be making good profits. North American broadcasters, unlike in Europe, normally want documentary series. So I started making documentary series on various topics. The first series I made was a travel adventure series. We made that with practically no money and then we ended up selling it all around the world. So I realised that if I make documentary series, I will lower costs but I will sell it all around the world. That is what I do now. I work in any genre from history, science, travel, women's programming, in fact I have done very well with women's programming. Mostly because now there are women's networks opening up all around the world.

Whereas I started by working with Canadian broadcasters and Canadian subsidy money, I then moved to make documentary series for American networks. Usually I have to get only one American network and they pay for the entire budget. So, any sales after that are profit. Now, it really clearly works very well for me. There is always a Canadian broadcaster as well, because the other part of Canadian subsidies is: as long as you hire a Canadian crew, you get about 20 % of your budget, and in order to do that I do have to have a Canadian broadcaster. Canadian producers own all rights, which is I know very different from the U.S. and previously the UK. To get any type of Canadian government money, the Canadian producer has got to own the show. So, I own everything I make, which has really suited me well, because I work mostly for Americans. American producers do not own their shows. The TV networks own them. Whereas with the American producers the broadcaster insists on

owning the rights, they do not insist on getting the rights with me because I am Canadian and they know that otherwise I cannot get Canadian funds.

**Felice Gorica:** I can actually make a one-hour programme for very little money, for about €50,000. My model is, I make programming very cheaply and I sell it at a high price. So, if I know the broadcasters give €100,000 per episode, I ask for €100,000. Even though I know I can make it for much less. So, even in making it, I am already realising a profit.

I use distributors. Distributors go to MIP and all the markets, they know all these buyers. I get calls all the times from distributors, so it is very easy to find you a good distributor who has American contacts. So, you can certainly do it through that way. Now, that I am beginning to know the Americans, I am starting to do this a little bit myself. I want to be clear that most of my sales to Canadian or American networks are to cable and satellite networks; they are not to the terrestrial or public channels, because they are very tough to sell to. We have one public broadcaster in Canada, CBC, and it is very difficult to sell to them. So, I go after the cable and satellite networks, which certainly is easier and they have lots of money.

All the American cable networks go to a conference in Washington every year called Real Screen. They are all there and they are all very easy to talk to. And Americans want to deal with other producers because I find they are one of the best at recognising talent. They like it when the producer is from another country because they know we get subsidies, especially in Canada. Plus their money goes a lot further in Canada because our Canadian dollar is less than the American and the euro. That is why I do no coproductions. I do not need to go around the world searching for money. Although in Canada, we are very well known for coproductions, and I hopefully have encouraged you to deal with Canadians because they can get a lot of government funding. The reason why I have not done that is that it is very complicated to deal with multiple partners, regulations, and funding proposals.

If you are interested in my model – which is a very commercial model of course because of dealing with Americans – it is not really that difficult. But it depends on what you are making. You have to have a good marketable product that can travel around the world. For me it starts with seeing who the buyers are and what they want. I do not start with an idea for a documentary. I start with asking myself: Who are the buyers? What do they buy? What do they want? Can I give them that?

I do a lot of research in advance. One of the best places for research are internet websites like email newsletters. One of the best ones is something called “C21” which is based in the UK, but which is international. Their website is: [www.c21media.net](http://www.c21media.net). It helps me to see what people are buying. And they have profiles of commissioning editors, what they are looking for, who to contact, how much they pay. This is exactly the information that you need. There are a lot of other really good websites. One of the best ways for me to find Europeans beside that is the EDN guide and website: [www.edn.dk](http://www.edn.dk). Canadians and Americans – a good website that lists broadcasters from around the world is something called “TV Radio World”: [www.tvradioworld.com](http://www.tvradioworld.com).

I have an ideas file, someone once told me to have that. I thought it was a great idea. When I read about something in a newspaper or magazine or I think about an idea, I just put it in that file. When I hear that some network is looking for this or that topic, I just look through that file and see if I have something that matches this. And if I do, I simply find out the name of the commissioning editor. By the way, in North America they are not called commissioning editors but directors of programming.

There are two types of people in programming in North America: The director of programming does the pre-sales or coproductions. So, they give you money when it is just on

paper. And the second person, the director of acquisition, buys programmes that are already made and finished. So, I find out the name of the director of programming and I simply send them an email saying: "I heard that you are looking for a show on this, I have a great programme on that subject, here is a one-paragraph synopsis, are you interested? Because, if so, I would like to pitch it to you, and send you a proposal." This works very well for me. I know what they are looking for. I am giving them what they want. 99 % of the time they write back saying they are interested. After I know the buyers, I know what they want, I have contacted them, then we start a dialogue. And also I find out, generally from other producers, how much these people pay. So, when I send them my proposal, I know what the budget should be.

The other way I do research is going to markets. Because they are all expensive – although a good tip is that you can get an export grant from your government – you still want to check which are the best for you. For me it is the Real Screen Conference in Washington because those are my main clients, American cable channels.

In Canada, it is HotDocs, if you want to get to know Canadian broadcasters and Canadian producers: [www.hotdocs.ca](http://www.hotdocs.ca). I am very familiar with that conference because in Canada we have a documentary producers' association called DOC. I know very well the problems of producers dealing with broadcasters. Even though in Canada, we all own our programmes because due to the Canadian law broadcasters are not allowed to own any rights, they do try in various ways to get other rights from you, such as the distribution rights, internet rights and all sorts of things. We call that forced-tied sales. We thought we had to do something about it because it was really affecting our members. So, we simply consulted a lawyer and we found out that under Canadian law, and it is probably similar in most countries, the broadcasters had to support independent production. So, we just wrote up a legal letter, and we started sending it to the government. And that worked, we won.

**Moderator:** How big is your company?

**Felice Gorica:** I have a very small company. When I started, what I did was rent space from a larger TV company, which was great because I paid very little rent and I could use all their equipment. So, this is a really good way to start. I now have my own office. Of course I have a number of people working for me, but they work on contracts or they are freelance people. This is another of my business strategies, I do not want employees. I have a very low overhead. And some of these people that I hired are through grants and subsidies, so the government pays them. I like not having overhead or lots of employees, I can go wherever I am going, I do not have to worry about getting back to the office, and about cash flow.

Another thing about cash flow and how you grow your company: The distribution revenues from previous series keep rolling in. But there is a golden rule if you are going for export: It has to be something that can travel, it has to be action based, not too much talking on screen because that would have to be subtitled and people do not like reading subtitles. So all my stuff is told by narration.

It has to be on international topics, or topics that people all around the world would be interested in. As well, when I make series now, it is plotted out from the beginning. When I think of the idea, first of all I have to be sure that I can get an American broadcaster or I do not make the series. Secondly, I like there to be offshoots of this series, what I would call a franchise. For example, the travel series I made was pro-women, so I sold it to all the women's channels, to all the travel channels. It crossed genres as well. It was travel, history, culture, a lot of different things. The more genres you can get in the better because you can sell it to more networks.

I look for things that I could sell on DVDs or books and certainly that can be repurposed for different markets. Often now, I have a series where it is the same exact footage but I edit it in different ways for different networks. For example the one I am working on right now, for Discovery Channel, is about the science behind the best known products and brands around the world, like the science behind Sony, Nike... Then I took another version of the show because I am also going to profile well-known food companies, Kraft, Danone, whatever. And I am selling that to the food networks. Then I can take well-known women's products and sell those to the women's networks. Eventually, all those episodes will be united under one large series but whereas the one for the Discovery Channel is called "Test Lab", the one for the food network is called "Taste Test", there are different titles, and they are edited in a different way. For Discovery, it has to be fast, MTV-type editing, hard rock music, whereas for the food network it is light and happy, everybody is having a good time, but it is the exact same footage. Remember: you own that footage. So, if you are lucky enough to have a series where you can repurpose the footage, you have a potential gold mine.

**Moderator:** How many hours of series do you produce per year, now?

**Felice Gorica:** As many as possible. I hope to have a series for three years, that is about as long you can last. Because then they start being concerned about getting higher ratings, and if the ratings slide... My last series was 39 episodes, that was three years. Half hour or one hour. I just cut it longer or shorter, as the networks prefer.

**Moderator:** What is the approximate turnover of your company?

**Felice Gorica:** I am a small company, and I prefer to stay that way. I have no desire to grow into a large company. So, I make a series a year, something like 13 episodes per year. I want to sell my series internationally, have an international topic, so I have to travel around the world.

**Moderator:** What is your part in the production? Are you controlling all these programmes, are you finishing them?

**Felice Gorica:** Yes, I am the producer and I am a hands-on producer. Sometimes I direct, that is increasingly difficult for me. I do a lot of stuff myself. I even do the promotions, marketing...

**Moderator:** Are you writing, researching?

**Felice Gorica:** Yes. There is not a lot of writing in my shows because they are, again, action based. So, yes, I also write. I do everything except for the editing, though I know how to edit, I just do not have the patience.

**Moderator:** Do you own an editing suite?

**Felice Gorica:** Not yet. But I will because I found out that technology was changing too rapidly, and now it is pretty economical. I will own an edit suite because it is cheaper for me to own one than to rent. Same with the camera, I would own the camera in the price I spend in rental. But I am shooting all my stuff HD.

**Audience:** Can you tell us a little bit about how you are able to produce one episode for €50,000?

**Felice Gorica:** There are almost no crew members. My first series was shot by one guy who was also the director and the cameraman. I use no sound people. The cameraman monitors the

sound while he is shooting. I am there if I can as producer and / or director.

**Moderator:** All that done on HD?

**Felice Gorica:** Yes, the only crew people are the cameraman and me – maximum two people are filming, and then when I go back, I have an editor, but he is a freelance person only there for six weeks. I do a lot of the stuff myself. When I hear about these high budgets, most of it is going to administrative costs! That is not always necessarily going into the production. I keep very good control of costs.

**Felice Gorica:** If it is American broadcasters that you are going to work with, what I described to you is exactly how you can do it, whether you live in Italy, Canada, or wherever. Everybody can do this. I had no experience before, they did not know me, they did not know who I was. If you have a good idea and they want it, they will deal with you and you can do it because nobody knows where a good idea is going to come from. In fact, most ideas are bad ideas. I know this because when I worked for broadcasters, out of a hundred of projects that I would get a week, maybe one of them was good. And those usually came from experienced people. They had taken the time to know what I wanted, what I was looking for, what we bought, it was a well written proposal. There are very few good ideas and if you have a good idea, there are going to be buyers. Every time I talk, about half the audience totally agrees with me, and the other half does not necessarily agree with me because lots of people see TV as art. Not that there is anything wrong with it, but this called the entertainment business because it is a business.

**Audience:** I just wondered how you could make a programme for €50,000 that does not look like it has been made for €50,000. I think of the production values. I have done camera shooting myself, and I know the limitations of that type of one-person crew. You said that you do market research of programmes that broadcasters want could you explain this?

**Felice Gorica:** To your first question: the programmers like when you give them a reasonable budget. So, they do not question my budget. I am not making anything with CGI, nothing overly expensive. I prefer things that I can make really cheaply, places where I can go in and film in a week. So, I look for very specific material. I do very easy stuff. It does not look cheap, you would never know that I made it really cheap.

Your second question: That is a good question. When I started pitching, they often said: “We already have ten of those”, or: “We have just commissioned that.” Now, when I come up with an idea, it better be unique. It has to have a unique angle, a unique twist. There can be lots of documentaries on the same subject. How many documentaries are there on the Titanic? Well, that is just a popular topic. If it is about the Titanic, they are going to buy it. You just have to find that different angle that has not been done yet.

**Audience:** I remember you started your presentation by saying the reason you wanted to go into production was that there was too much garbage on TV. Obviously, you are very successful in terms of money. What about you and fulfilling this goal of not making garbage?

**Felice Gorica:** Yes, that is a fine line, I agree. They were willing to renew my travel adventure series again for a fourth year, but they wanted me to make it into a reality series. So I said no. I have always made the series I wanted to make. In my documentaries, there is always a fine line between entertainment and education. I work with American networks, I have to deliver products that are highly entertaining without a message or a moral. If there is a clear message at the end, the commissioning editor would say: “This was a nice episode, but I caught that little message at the end!” They are not stupid, they know that I put this message at the end. But because I integrate it so seamlessly with the entertainment they do not

necessarily mind. I get a little disturbed when I see Canadian companies that can really do good documentaries start to make really bad series for money. And I often challenge them because I do believe there are very few really good producers who know how to raise money and make things happen. But if you have that ability you should be making good documentaries. That is my opinion; a lot of people think that there is nothing wrong with reality series. Obviously if you are working for public broadcasters, it has to be very educational and a very good programme, but if you are working with American networks it has to be very different.

I hope I've given you something to think about. Thank-you.