

The name game - Deconstructing the fine art of kids show titling

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With so many shows competing for a finite number of kid eyeballs, it takes more than just good content to get them hooked these days. And one element that can help forge an instant connection - or not - is the title. It's often the first opportunity you have to convert potential viewers into actual viewers (think TV guides and on-screen listings), but ending up with a good one isn't as simple as it used to be. In the good old days, producers typically only concerned themselves with clearing titles in the entertainment category because it wasn't naturally assumed that toys and merch would follow. But in the brave new world of brand-building, trademark issues are much more complex. A title has to be cleared for usage in every consumer products category it may potentially live in, and as Decode Entertainment partner Beth Stevenson puts it, "pretty much every word has been used in some context or another."

Because usage roadblocks crop up so frequently and legal services don't come cheap, most producers have adopted a tiered approach to the clearance process. Decode, for example, will start off by slapping a prospective title onto a script that's about to go through legal script clearance at a contracted law firm. Stevenson says this service costs about US\$400 and will yield a list of movie and TV series titles that are similar to the one floated, as well as ID'ing the ones that are most likely to prove contentious. The next step is an actual title search, which is also handled by out-of-house legals and can cost around US\$1100.

This is the phase that effectively put the kybosh on the original title of Radio Free Roscoe a few years ago. The show's creator had named the live-actioner Radio Free Nutley after the town where she grew up. But there's only one Nutley in the world, and the New Jersey burg happens to be both Martha Stewart's hometown and the shooting location of The Sopranos. Besides the taint of its association with the renowned mob drama, Nutley was also the setting of an unflattering TV movie about Martha's life that had just aired to coincide with the investigation into the infamous stock sale that landed her in jail.

Needless to say, the town was a little leery of media attention, and the local high school principal (who had to sign off because Decode's show was set in Nutley High) absolutely refused to waive his right to sue if he felt the project painted his institution in an unsavory light. Numerous phone calls were placed, but he wouldn't budge, so Decode cut its losses and went with Roscoe instead.

Assuming a title doesn't fall prey to a similar fate, the final gauntlet it has to run is a trademark search, which is at least double

the cost of a title search and looks for similarly named consumer products in the international marketplace. This is where Little Airplane Productions' original title concept for Oobi was grounded for good; Pipo, as it turns out, is a well-known Italian brand of jeans.

Sometimes, hitting a hurdle in clearance can be the catalyst that leads to a much stronger title. In Little Airplane's case, for example, the double O's in Oobi happen to mirror the eyeball accessories that are such a big part of the handpuppet show. "I find it can be a blessing to have to dig deeper for the name of a show," says the studio's founder and president Josh Selig.

Co-productions are notorious breeding grounds for titling problems; as each partner brings different territory-specific issues and sensibilities to the table, disagreements often abound. "All our shows are co-productions with at least three partners," says Marathon Media GM David Michel. "And the title is so key to every single one that you end up on a middle ground that kind of works, but isn't great." When the company was developing boys action toon Team Galaxy, for example, Marathon presented about five or six much stronger title options, but the partners couldn't agree on them and had to move on to the B-list.

International sensibilities have just as much influence on indie projects as they do on co-productions, and it's wise to do a survey of close contacts in all the major sales regions to suss out potential "lost in translation" issues before a show and its title get too far down the pipeline. Decode preschool toon Franny's Feet was called Fanny's Feet when it was first introduced to buyers outside of Canada, but the sales team hadn't counted on the pitch generating as much laughter as it did in the UK, where the word "fanny" is slang for vagina.

Speaking of translation, foreign languages must also be taken into consideration by any producer looking to do business internationally. Most broadcasters will try their best to stay true to the essence of a show when they translate it for airing in their territories, but titles need to be so short that it's often difficult to meet that goal effectively.

Marathon got around the issue with Totally Spies! by keeping the title intact in English and then tacking on a tagline that broadcasters could translate to localize the show. (So in France, it was Totally Spies! Espion de choque.) One territory that isn't open to this kind of compromise is Italy, where all shows are given brand-new titles in Italian, at the sole discretion of the broadcaster.

Another way around the translation issue is to choose a title that doesn't really mean anything in any language, like Aardman/Decode co-pro Chop Socky Chooks. It's just silly and fun to say, but there's another element that comes into play, says Cartoon Network Europe's VP

of original series and development, Daniel Lennard. "Adults never say it right the first few times, but kids get it immediately, and there's valuable cachet in them feeling like they own it." For its part, Cartoon almost never changes creators' titles because, as Lennard puts it, "creative originality will always transcend a title when it comes to connecting with viewers." (He points to The Simpsons and South Park as two prime examples.) But he is careful to make sure the title is pronounced the way it looks because kids are still learning to read.

In terms of other general titling guidelines, gobbledy-gook words, wordplay and alliteration, and simple, literal treatments tend to work best for younger kids, but it's important to keep in mind that these titles also need to appeal to parents by sounding safe and beneficial. Boys action seems to stick to straight-forward and dynamic wording, and some players feel that there's a little room for irony with tween fare. Decode's Stevenson notes that titles with "robot" or "alien" in them are really difficult to clear legally, and Marathon's Michel adds any words to do with space concepts to that list.

It's best to steer clear of words with double meanings, as well as hip language and references to current trends, especially with concepts targeting younger viewers. "Preschool is an evergreen area," says Little Airplane's Selig, "so you want something that will resonate with kids who are in the same age group five or 10 years down the road."

And at the end of the day, it's important to keep in mind that a show's title is part of the overall content package, and great core content can overcome a lot. "The truth is that I think you could have a show with an awful title, but if it's a great show, kids will find it," says Little Airplane's Selig. "A title is like a promo or billboard - it may bring them in, but it's not going to keep them watching."

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