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Small World, big opportunity**

Leveraging his strong relationships in the global television community and his experience in production and international sales, Tim Crescenti has jumped into the global format pool with both feet, writes Kris Sofley.

Crescenti (pictured), formerly of Fox World and Sony Pictures International Television, set up his own international entertainment format consulting company, Small World IFT (International Format Television), with wife Colleen. He offset the risks of growing a start-up by launching with two sizable clients: Japan's commercial broadcaster NTV and Scandinavia's Viasat Broadcasting, which has outlets in 19 European countries. He said the two companies provided him with the firm foundation he needed to enter the independent sector.

Less than one month after announcing Small World, Crescenti was jetting from his Los Angeles base for a week of meetings with NTV in Tokyo. Conducting various workshops for the sales staff at NTV - on everything from how to identify a show's format potential to which trades provide the best coverage of the formats business - Crescenti was also combing through the station's 50 years of programming, looking for those potential killer formats.

The first thing on Crescenti's checklist is to determine whether or not a show is a format. "The way the format business works and the degree of copycat business that goes on out there, you really have to have something pretty solid, where all the elements add up. Any weakness in any one area and you're in trouble," he says.

Secondly, Crescenti looks for a show that he can feel good about, preferably with some type of aspirational aspect. "Without trying to be Mother Teresa here," he jokes, "it has to be something that you believe in and doesn't embarrass you. Thankfully, NTV has quite a bit of that type of aspirational, feelgood programming."

When asked to identify the type of shows he was hoping to find, Crescenti said he was definitely looking for a daily quiz show, perhaps celebrity driven, with an aspirational value. "I'd really love to find a scripted or non-scripted hybrid show in The Kumars vein. I love the Kumars show," he says. "I think we have a couple that are close here.

"One of the tremendous things about formats is that you can really tailor product integration around it," adds Crescenti. "And people have been asking for product-integrated shows, product placement and product sponsorship opportunities. Not many have been able to deliver a strong worldwide format for that."

Citing the various legal limitations that exist in different markets around the world as one possible hindrance, Crescenti optimistically points out that many of the world's television markets are in the process of changing on-air restrictions regarding product placement.

Another advantage found in NTV's cache of programming is the depth of its reality programming. Crescenti explains: "Japan was very much ahead of the curve on reality programming. Many of the concepts being done in the US and around the world now were done in Japan 10 years ago or more. To the Japanese, Fear Factor is like a Disney movie."

While it is still too early to discuss all of the formats mined during this visit to NTV, Crescenti has identified a few that will be taken to Mipcom in October. At the top of NTV's list is the celebrity panel quiz show, Show by Shobai, that has already been licensed to and produced by Mediaset in Italy and was introduced in China last year.

Crescenti says: "It's a fun celebrity panel quiz show, and there's always a market for that. But I think it needs a few little fresh twists, and if we can get NTV to do that, perhaps by producing a segment for the station's late-night experimental hour, we can take fresh tape and an eight-year track record on NTV and talk about that."

NTV will also be introducing Mischief TV, the first wheel of a multi-story reality show that is described as three diverse reality shows in one programme, and is based on the long-running Japanese show Dempa

Shonen. There's also The Uninvited Dinner Guest, a format that has been running in Japan for many years; and the quiz show Party of Six, reminiscent of the simple fun of a Pyramid-type game show that could be stripped.

"There's always a market for a solid quiz show," says Crescenti. "One of the things that I tell my clients is that if they can create that daily strip quiz show, that's where you want to be. You don't necessarily have to have the blockbuster weekly or blockbuster event show like Survivor or Big Brother, which are terrific, but if you can do something consistently on a smaller scale - using my baseball analogy, if you can hit solid doubles all day rather than waiting for that grand slam that comes once a year, you'll do pretty well.

"Everyone wants to create the next Pop Idol or Wheel of Fortune or Millionaire, but those shows were all developed by a team of people who just wanted to develop a really good show. Now, those really good shows developed into worldwide franchises, but that wasn't the original intention of the developers. It doesn't happen that way."

Balancing on the high wire as both format developer/seller and format buyer, Crescenti does a 180-degree turn for his work with Viasat Broadcasting in Scandinavia, where he advises on acquiring new formats as well as consulting on local format and original productions.

"I wear a different set of pants for Viasat," jokes Crescenti. "It really is the opposite of NTV, in that I'm representing them as a broadcaster with all of the stations and with the goal of knowing which new formats to get and how to get our hands on them before the competition does."

Crescenti is also charged with advising on developing programming for the various Viasat markets, particularly those in Sweden, Denmark, Lithuania and Russia. "We develop programming, and not necessarily a format, working with the individual stations' development teams in determining what they need."

In a true Small World tale, Crescenti met producer John Feist, who also produced the first few seasons of Survivor for CBS and now executive produces Meet Mr Mom for NBC, in Los Angeles, only to hear his voice on a pilot for a programme called Mind Jack at a comedy festival in Canada the following week.

Taking the 'what a small world' coincident to heart, Crescenti is now looking to represent Mind Jack, which he describes as "a unique combo of Punk'd meets Candid Camera meets Late Night with David Letterman," internationally. Crescenti will be 'soft launching' the project - created by a man Crescenti refers to as "The Incredible Boris" and produced by Feist - at Mipcom.