

BROADCAST

Matisse: N&R indies face raft of pressures

By [Chris Curtis](#) | 20 November 2019

Consultancy warns of factors that can stymie out-of-London progress



PSB commissioners are genuinely determined to develop the nations and regions indie sector – but broadcasters and distributors are sometimes putting producers under undue pressure, according to recently-formed consultancy Matisse.

The consultancy business has had conversations with more than 100 indies as part of a push to [line up its first 11 clients](#) – which include Brighton-based Lambent, Monty Hall's Bristol indie Seadog and Henry Singer's Sandpaper Films - and has identified a number of trends and patterns during that process.

These include nations and regions indies struggling with cash flow as a result of late payments, unwittingly accepting unfavourable distribution deals, and suffering from lingering uncertainty whether they will be able to deliver large-scale programmes.

Director of new business Edwina Silver said: “I’m witnessing broadcasters trying to reach out to these companies, to help and support them. It’s authentic and genuine and commissioners are gagging to give bigger series to smaller companies, but they’re just looking for ways to make that sustainable.

“Commissioners can be tentative – a one-man-and-his-dog company is not going to get a six part-series. They may start by giving the indie a single or pairing them with another indie. That can work well, or not – sometimes the partnership just isn’t the right one, or the London indie doesn’t give the regional indie the love it deserves.”

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Matisse chair Nick Curwin called on commissioners to be “more imaginative” in the way they reassure themselves to commission N&R indies and said they should stop using measures such as partnering as soon as they feel confident in a company.

Silver urged broadcasters and N&R suppliers to be open to honest communication with each other.

“A small indie might get two separate single commissions from same broadcaster, with the same delivery date,” she said. “In some cases, that date can be quite arbitrary – small indies have to be confident to go back to the broadcaster and say ‘this is going to kill us’ and ask for one of them to be moved. Broadcasters are sensitive to that and realise there needs to be more joined-up thinking.”

Cash flow and planning

Curwin added that indie payments are not being delayed through any ill-will towards N&R indies, but commissioners and business affairs departments do not always appreciate the pressures producers are under.

He said: “Channels want creatives coming up with great ideas but an indie boss in Glasgow isn’t doing that if he can’t sleep because he doesn’t know if they have the cash for payroll.”

Matisse has also discovered that smaller or less experienced N&R producers sometimes miss a trick when it comes to making shows as efficiently as possible.

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Curwin said they occasionally jump straight from development to production “in a slightly chaotic way” and waste money through a lack of rigorous planning.

“The creative and business side of company aren’t always joined up, even in a small company,” Curwin said. “It might be that the company sometimes shoots a greater number of elements than are actually needed, or should start the edit earlier and shoot some elements later, or spend more time in casting.”

Aggressive distributor deals

Matisse flagged that it has come across distributors or co-financing partners striking “aggressive deals” with indies that effectively mean the later makes next to nothing producing a show.

It gave the example of an indie sometimes agreeing to a distributor’s advance being cross-collateralised across its entire slate, without realising the implications. Curwin added: “We’re finding that sophisticated, large-scale operations are often sneaking aggressive clauses into back-end deals with indies.”

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Separately, Silver said N&R indies can find it harder to cultivate a strong company brand as they often need to operate across a range of genres, but Curwin said their distinctiveness should ultimately prove of benefit.

“There’s three and a half indies in London for every one in the nations and regions, yet the UK is big compared to London and very varied,” he said.

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The lift and shift debate

There has been much debate in recent weeks about the extent to which broadcasters should lift and shift existing titles from London to outside of the capital, and the balance between commissioning indigenous N&R indies or off-shoots of established London-based suppliers.

Curwin said the transition from the status quo to the industry being reshaped and spread evenly across the UK is “complicated and difficult”.

He said: “There needs to be more encouraging of straight commissioning of indigenous indies, but you can’t just do that – it would mean too much risk for the broadcasters and would make the targets too unattainable.

“The indie sector in the nations and regions does need more creative firepower and to evolve over the medium term. In the meantime, it’s inevitable there’ll be some lift and shift, and some commissioning of London indies’ satellite offices. The trick is to make those things provide some benefits.”