

## CROSSING BORDERS WITH TIM CRESCENTI: UNRAVELING THE WORLD OF INTERNATIONAL TV FORMATS

Once upon a time, Tim Crescenti was a puzzle board operator for the hit US game show *Wheel of Fortune* – not Vanna White, but the guy behind the scenes plugging one cord into another to make sure the letters lit up.

Fast forward a bit and Tim was selling the television rights for that same TV show to countries such as Turkey. He had become the Vice President for International Formats for Sony Pictures Television International.

And now? Tim spends his days connecting with TV stations that are looking to either sell content or buy content they can adapt to their particular cultures and countries. He does it through Small World IFT, the company he and his wife Colleen founded in 2005.

And he does it well. So well, that *Broadcast Magazine* has called him a “Top Dealmaker” in international television. He’s consulted on more than 210 shows produced in 76 countries – ranging from adaptations of *Wheel of Fortune* to *Joe Millionaire*.

“I was in Istanbul, and I asked them how to make *Wheel of Fortune* culturally relevant,” Tim reminisced. “And they said they wanted it three hours long, broadcast live, daily.”

Tim and the Turkish producers put their heads together and came up with a variety/game show – basically *Wheel of Fortune* with belly dancers and musicians. It was a huge success.

Tim seems to have a knack for recognizing shows that can be smashed hits internationally. He was networking in Japan in 2001 when he saw a show called *Dragons’ Den*.

“It was shot in a conference room with just a conference table, a pot of coffee, and a pitcher of water,” he said. “And these “dragons” would come in with these briefcases full of yen. They’d set them on the table, pull out stacks of yen, and then do these intense close-ups with people trying to pitch their business ideas. ‘What do you have?’ they’d ask. And that was it!”

That show became the international hit “*Shark Tank*.” Tim spent three years trying to convince the powers that be at Sony that *Shark Tank* would be a success. From there, he brought world hits such as *I Survived a Japanese Game Show*, *Silent Library*, *Miss Country Girl*, *The Fan*, and most recently, *Grandpas Over Flowers* aka *Better Late Than Never* which made history as the first South Korean format to be adapted in the US, where it launched to #1 ratings on NBC.

“This is a big business,” he said, “and it’s absolutely growing. There are so many places to sell a show to these days.”

Tim sometimes lectures at UCLA, Cal State, and television schools around the world, giving students a glimpse into “format” TV.

He says to ask yourself: Is it original? Is it a format structure?

The format structure should be well developed to prevent people from stealing your ideas, he said. It needs to be as specific as possible, such as with *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?* which has set “safety nets,” “phone a friend” and other aspects unique to the program.

“You need to develop your format enough that it’s protected,” he said.

Tim’s company has been sponsoring a format contest in Ukraine for nine years (on hold right now during the war). He said winners have included a journalist and a housewife, neither with experience in the television industry, but with well-developed, great ideas.

He also noted that getting your format show distributed internationally is a marathon, not a sprint. Convincing producers that a show could be an international hit can sometimes take years. After lengthy negotiations, his company will soon introduce “a massive monster show that’s been running for 47 seasons.”

Tim attributes his success to several things: First, he believes in developing relationships face-to-face. Online meetings became the norm during Covid, but Tim was soon back to visiting foreign countries, making connections, and seeing what shows were popular locally.

And finally, he believes success comes from what he laughingly calls the four Ps:

“Passion, patience, and persistence, without pissing anyone off.”

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