

Filmmaking



Creating a Web Series

And it may just lead
to bigger things...

by Michael Barmish



Introduction

Breaking into and building a successful writing and producing career is filled with many pitfalls and obstacles. It takes a lot of money, time and patience. Creating a web series bypasses many of these obstacles.

Web series have become more popular, productions have become slick, professional and often profitable. Create the right series and it may just lead to bigger things. Some creators have turned their web series into network series; others have used them as a calling card and parlayed their success into making other films and series.

In this guide, we'll explain how to write and create a web series and look at ways they can take you to the next level in your writing and producing careers.

7 key advantages to creating a web series

Cost. This is arguably the greatest advantage. Video can be shot in locations for free, with minimal equipment, actors and crew, and with several open source video editing programs like Shotcut and Blender or more advanced programs like Davinci Resolve, post-production costs are at a minimum.

Digital Equipment. It can be as minimal as a mobile phone and microphone or as elaborate as a full equipment package. The key is that nowadays, we all have access to digital equipment that, while may not be of cinema quality, is perfectly designed for the web. A good checklist is:

- Camera with stabilizer
- Tripod

- Video storage and hard drive
- Lighting Package - at the minimum, a reflector; Camera light and/or 3-point lighting
- Shotgun microphone and mount with optional boom pole
- Headphones
- Cables
- Gaffer tape
- Editing/Production software

Minimal Crew. Less equipment means less crew. The fewer people involved in the production, the easier it is to coordinate schedules. While you may find people willing to do this for free, most technical crew is going to get paid something, as often they come with their own equipment. Having a director, director of photography (DP), a sound person and an Assistant Director (AD) should suffice for most productions.

Tell it your way. Creating a web series allows you to stick to your vision without input coming from so many different sources (producers, studio executive notes). You can break any rule you want and tell it the way you want. You're creating your own brand.

Time. Developing a TV series or film can take years. When you create a web series, the timing is all up to you. You determine the schedule, writing and shooting an episode at a time, or completing an entire season all at once. You decide the schedule. And you decide when it's ready for release.

Parlay the success. Creating a successful web series can lead to greater success. Think of it as a calling-card that shows potential producers you can not only write and create a winning project, but you can also take it to completion.

Kickstart your TV pilot. So you have an idea for a TV series but the barriers are high to get it off the ground. That's if you can even get the idea to the right producer or network. Rewrite your pilot by breaking it into mini-episodes. You're more likely to get a producer or studio to click on a link than to read a pilot script.

Types of web series

Turn on Netflix or go through your cable television channels and there's a format for everyone. Web series are no different. Here are some of the more popular types of web series formats:

- 1. The Narrative Original.** Whether it's comedy, drama, science fiction, horror or other genres, creating an original series for the web is the

most popular, especially in terms of building a successful resume for future projects.

“Subway: The Series” and “The Guild” are two very popular series.

2. **Literary Adaptations.** With many classics in the public domain, literary adaptations are fodder for reimagining these stories in a web format. Examples are “In Earnest” and “Emma Approved”.
3. **Reality.** Reality ranges from documentary, vlogs, cooking and other special interest series. An example is “1000 Londoners” and “Lessons From A Middle Class Artist”.
4. **Sketch and Satirical.** These series are usually topical and political. Web series like “Between Two Ferns” and “Fake News at Night” are two examples.
5. **Animation.** Many writers and creators of animation break in with short web series. Examples are “People Watching” and “This is Desmondo Ray!”

Developing the web series

The biggest challenge in developing a web series is the format itself. You must be able to tell your story in bite size pieces, each with its own enticing ending to get people to watch the next episode.

The ideal is to keep an episode length to 4-6 minutes, at least in the early stages. Once you have an audience hooked, you can stretch it out.



Web audiences have particularly short attention spans and there is so much content out there. So keeping episodes short and concise is key, all the while maintaining your voice in the writing.

What does that mean for development? You need to craft compelling stories with

well-rounded characters. Focusing on fewer characters is best. Even if you have more than a few characters, highlighting one or two in each episode is a way to service the story and the world you've created.

With shorter episodes, this means you have to grab an audience right away. In a traditional feature script, for example, you have ten pages to do so. In a web series, you have about 10 seconds. That's how fast an audience might click away to find another video.



Most web series are watched on mobile phones, tablets and laptops.

You must design the story and the production so that they are visually suited for smaller screens. Likewise, episodes are more interactive as audiences will engage in commenting, posting to social media, etc. much faster than with traditional entertainment.



In terms of story, you need to consider the length of your series.

Do you want this to be an ongoing series with unlimited seasons? Or do you see this as a series of episodes that have a definitive conclusion, much like a mini-series? It's important to determine this in order to structure the individual episodes. The challenge is to keep each episode engaging while telling your overall story. And conflict needs to be maintained throughout but conveyed in just a few minutes at a time.



It's also important to remember that viewers often watch episodes out of order.

So, will the third episode watched first be enticing on its own and make the viewer want to go back to episode one? This, of course,

is more challenging with a serialized format. Episode four or five needs to make it clear what the story and character arcs are even if watched before episode one. It's preferable to have "closed-ended" episodes for this reason, with the characters and locations being the continuity between episodes. But there are many successful web series that are continuous stories. So, telling the best story possible is always most important.

Also, it is best to have your entire season, or entire series if it's a short one, planned out in advance. This means planning for 10 to 20 episodes, depending on your goal for the series. When you launch the series, it's ideal to have most of these already shot so you can plan a release schedule while gearing up for the next batch of episodes to be shot. There are exceptions to this.

For example, if you plan to launch a Kickstarter campaign, you may only want to produce a

pilot to see if it gains traction. The risk here, of course, is that if too much time passes between shooting the pilot and subsequent episodes, your talent may no longer be available.

Producing your web series

The important thing is to keep the production as simple as possible. This means using as few locations as possible and ones which are easy to shoot in and don't require a great deal of setups.

Daytime scenes are easier to shoot than nighttime, as lighting equipment should not be necessary. Exterior scenes that can be shot in a park are better than ones that are shot in public locations.

Public locations require more of a “guerilla-style” shooting as securing permits and locations are cost-prohibitive. And there are privacy issues when it comes to faces and names that are in a shot.



So, when developing your script, keep these constraints in mind. Can an exterior scene work as an interior? Can an outdoor scene be as effective in a park as it would be in a crowded mall, for example?

Be flexible when it comes to choosing your actors. Rarely will you find a “name” actor in a web series, at least at the start. A popular web series may attract a celebrity that has a great deal of followers, but this is not something to count on. Actors who want to build a resume may be willing to work for free to gain scenes for a reel and a social media following. Don’t underestimate social media as a way to attract talent.

Today, casting directors are looking at an unknown actor's Instagram following as much as their talent when casting for a production. There may be actors you know or ones that are students looking to gain valuable experience.

Marketing the web series

When we think about the number of new TV series that are added every year worldwide, they number in the hundreds. Now, when we look at web series, the number is countless. So what can you do to stand out from the pack? After all, most web series don't have the marketing muscle of a Netflix, HBO or the BBC behind it. In fact, many broadcasters are getting into the

web series game themselves, making it even harder to get seen. For example, ABC (U.S.) created Seattle Grace: On Call as a companion web series to Grey's Anatomy.



Marketing the web series starts before the first words of the script are written

You must think about who the series is for, (audience), and what is the message that will make them want to watch. Could a very mainstream-targeted series be better suited in terms of marketing if it were targeted to more underserved segments of the population? You may have better options to market to certain ethnic groups, LBGT+ communities, teenagers, single minority women, etc. Your message may be stronger when targeting a specific group. This helps with your marketing as you can focus on social media and other outlets that cater to these niche groups.



Before launching the series, you should do a test campaign with one or two episodes. Start with friends and family, who can offer constructive feedback that may help you fine tune the production.

Also, check with a local theater about renting a small screening room during off peak hours. You can invite larger groups of people to get valuable feedback.

Likewise, when the series is ready to launch, use your network of friends, families and colleagues to promote and spread the word about your web series. Creating a loyal community around the series is vital to its success. Which leads to...

Social Media, of course, is the best source to market a web series. Create a Facebook page, Instagram and Twitter accounts. For the latter two, come up with a simple hashtag to brand your concept and use it every time you post. And, encourage your fan base to post as well.



If you have a small budget for marketing, buying ads on social media that target specific segments you want to reach will boost your visibility.

It's also a good idea to create a website for more in-depth information on the cast, concept, merchandising, trailers, episode release schedule and links to the videos themselves. Trailers should also appear on your Facebook page. Also, create companion videos with interviews with the cast, yourself as the creator, behind-the-scenes shots, maybe some outtakes as well. Some people use the Facebook page as their website but remember, a lot of people don't use Facebook and might be reluctant to go to the page.

Creating a visual design around your series so it's easily recognized is important. This is especially true across all marketing platforms - social media, websites, targeted ads.

Consider hiring a graphic designer to create your visual brand.



It's also important to have the series project listed on IMDB. You just need to submit a form with all the pertinent information. Include this link on your website.

Of course, there's where to upload your series. **The two primary video streaming sources for web series are YouTube and Vimeo.** In terms of the number of users and the more widely marketed service, YouTube wins hands down. But Vimeo has a few advantages. It has a more professional “feel” and is known to have better support. And if you don't want ads or pre-roll ads, Vimeo is the better option. Their pro version adds more options but comes at a price.

You can even go the old-style way of submitting a press release to traditional media--radio, print,

blogs, podcasts, etc. But keep in mind that they receive hundreds of press releases so they might not get read.

Finally, **enter the series into festivals**. There are a growing number of festivals specifically targeted to web series. There's ITVFest, now known as Catalyst, HollyWeb Festival, Vancouver Webfest and the Streamy Awards. Major festivals with web series sidebars such as SXSW, Sundance and Tribeca are good options as well.

Success stories

And then there are the successes. Get enough buzz and recognition for your series and it can lead to bigger and better things.

One of the biggest successes is the comedy-drama High Maintenance. A simple premise

about a Brooklyn marijuana dealer who delivers weed to a new client each episode. It was turned into a HBO series that has been renewed for a fourth season.

Broad City, a comedy series about two women navigating life in New York was turned into a network comedy by Comedy Central in the U.S.

And Issa Rae's web series *Awkward Black Girl* was the inspiration behind her HBO comedy series, *Insecure*.

Keys things to remember

Location - Choose locations that are inexpensive and easily accessible over multiple episodes.

Lighting - It's best to shoot in the daytime when elaborate lighting setups are not needed.

Equipment - Whether you go minimal and use a mobile phone camera and microphone or a more comprehensive setup, there are many low-cost options available.

Crew - Keep to a minimum. Just make sure the dialogue can be seen and heard clearly.

Actors - Talented but unknown actors want exposure. They are often willing to work for free to add to their reel and CV.

Story - The sky's the limit in terms of genre, but the story must be effective in short videos that leaves the audience wanting to come back.

Time - Less is more when it comes to video length. 3-10 minutes is ideal. However, the faster you can hook them with shorter initial episodes, the better.

Pilot - Test viewing with friends and family will give you valuable feedback.

Episodes - make sure you have enough "in the can" for a regular release schedule while planning out the next set to be produced.

Marketing - Family, friends and social media are the keys to building a loyal audience.

Success - Make sure you remember to use your series as a calling card. Enter web festivals and let everyone you meet know about your series.

Conclusion

Developing a web series has many advantages. Whether you have a TV series, short film or feature film in mind, creating a web series is definitely a path to explore. Once noticed, the series can be expanded into these longform projects. But more so, creating a web series is also an important calling card for other projects and opportunities. It can show producers, directors and agents your writing and directing skills and set you apart from other aspiring professionals. The industry is always looking for new talent, and allowing them to watch what you can do in just a few minutes is a great way to grab their attention.



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