

Advice from Kit Williamson

Here are UCLA alum Kit's five major takeaways on creating a successful web series. He first wrote his stellar guidance on IndieWire.com:¹

1. Have a flexible format

"While many people have strong opinions on the subject, there is no single series format that works. Don't crunch your content down unnecessarily just because you're premiering on YouTube. Ask yourself what will serve the story, and then ask yourself if you can structure that story for multiple distribution possibilities at once.

The first season of *EastSiders* was written to function as both 9 episodes of 10 to 20 minutes in length and as a feature length film, and it has been distributed both ways. I didn't have a distributor in place while creating the second season, so I wanted the format to be as flexible as possible and wrote it as both 6 half-hour episodes or 12 episodes of 10 to 15 minutes in length. I also made sure to keep binge-watching viewers in mind, with B and C storylines bleeding over and building from episode to episode,

and had a feature cut planned if we weren't able to sell the show on SVOD as a series.

With Season 2, I have observed that most SVOD partners tend to prefer longer form content, such as movies and half-hour episodes, but that may not be true of every platform, with more and more platforms like Fullscreen and YouTube Red programming content of varying lengths.

2. Appeal to a niche market

There is no question that a great deal of *EastSiders'* success can be attributed to the fact that the series appeals to an LGBT audience, in large part because there is a real lack of quality content that follows LGBT characters. The very thing that would make our series difficult to sell as a TV show has caused audiences to embrace it as a digital series.

Many of our first viewers discovered the show because of our star Van Hansis, who has a large and loyal following from his time playing Luke Snyder on *As the World Turns*. Our show has seen

mainstream success thanks to press coverage of our success, as well as word of mouth from viewers, and the fact that many women also seek out LGBT stories. We also made sure to cast other prominent LGBT figures in the second season, like comedian Stephen Guarino, drag sensations Willam Belli and Manila Luzon and *Queer Eye* star Jai Rodriguez.

3. Build a following/press/acclaim

This is, without a doubt, the most important element of launching a successful series. I advise all content creators to write their press release before they go into production. If you can't come up with a newsworthy angle, either through a topical approach or by focusing on the talent you are working with, you may want to go back to the drawing board. A YouTube series can succeed without press, and "going viral" can certainly become a press angle, but most of the digital series I have seen get picked up for distribution or get developed into TV shows received significant press attention when they were first released.

This is possibly because acquisitions and development executives find content creators through press coverage. I know for a fact we were approached by Logo because of the press attention we were receiving from LGBT outlets during our Kickstarter. We also pursued awards and festival prestige, which can be expensive but definitely helps set a series apart from the crowd. We were nominated for two Daytime Emmy Awards, nominated for a Satellite Award by the International Press Academy, and won awards from festivals, The Indie Series Awards and the LA Weekly Awards.

4. Withhold the content so it can be sold

This part is hard. People may be angry with you, especially international fans. Logo Online was geoblocked outside of the United States, and it took longer for us to find an international streaming partner than we anticipated. We also would not have been able to sustain making the show if we didn't have the revenue from DVD and VOD sales. When our licensing agreement ended and we moved the show to a year long SVOD exclusive deal, people had trouble understanding why we didn't put it back

on YouTube. The truth is, many SVOD platforms require their content to be exclusive, or at least partially unavailable for free online. If we had made the entire season available on YouTube we would've never been able to sell it to Netflix.

5. Keep pivoting and reinventing the show

With Season 2 of the show I wanted to expand the world and include a larger ensemble, in part because I wanted to stretch myself as a filmmaker and in part because I had noticed a lot of intimate, relationship-driven LGBT series emerging. To help our show to stand out from the crowd, I doubled the length of our episodes and structured them with an A, B and C story. I also leaned into the comedic elements in the story; the series has always been a dark comedy, but Season 2 includes storylines featuring STDs, constantly changing drag names and a sex toy bridal shower.

...It's important to remember that the digital space is changing constantly. With more and more companies pouring money into SVOD platforms and apps, it's important to constantly stay on top

of what opportunities are out there. There are also more and more web series festivals being founded every year, and a few are starting to attract industry attention.

Traditional festivals are also starting to feature web series—this year the Tribeca Film Festival even unveiled a digital marketplace. If you can strike the right chord with your audience and the industry, there are more opportunities, and marketplaces, to sell your project than ever before.

The biggest piece of advice I can offer is to think of the launch of your series as more than a one-time event—get your show out there in as many ways as possible and more and more opportunities will come to you.”

Note

¹ Kit Williamson, "How I Sold My Web Series to Netflix: The Director of *EastSiders* Explains His Secret," *Indiewire.com*, July 1, 2016. <http://www.indiewire.com/2016/07/eastsiders-lgbt-web-series-sold-netflix-kit-williamson-1201701822>.