

# Interview Leslie Jones

## Carsey-Wolf Center at UC Santa Barbara

14-17 minutes

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In July 2011, Leslie Jones, former Head of International Sales and Format Production for NBCUniversal TV Distribution, sat down with MIP for an interview. In the excerpts below, Jones reflects on the different institutional, cultural, and political contexts she had to navigate when selling format rights to international partners and the origins and global distribution of the format for *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*.

Leslie Jones is the former Head of International Sales and Format Production for NBCUniversal TV Distribution. In that position, she helped leverage NBCUniversal's existing library assets, and developed and produced new local content outside the U.S. for all forms of electronic media. Jones was instrumental in cutting groundbreaking deals in France, Russia, and the UK for locally adapted and produced versions of *Law & Order: Criminal Intent*, *Law & Order: SVU*, and *Law & Order*. Previously, Jones handled non-scripted format sales and international program sales for NBC News, NBC Sports, and NBC late night programming, as well as for reality series and documentaries. Currently, Jones provides management and

strategic consulting for companies ranging from international distributors to foreign broadcasters to independent production companies.

## **International Partners**

Thursday, July 7, 2011

### **MIP: Can you talk a little bit about working in different territories?**

**LESLIE JONES:** I was very fortunate to have a worldwide mandate, and I think it was because NBC and Universal didn't totally believe that format sales could *be* a business. First, I started out with just an assistant and myself, and then I built a little team. It was really great working all around the world because it's very challenging. Different issues would arise in France versus Russia versus Japan. Many things that you would not expect to be problems became problems.

In France, for example, it was easy to convince the broadcaster to buy the format. Yet, the hardest thing was dealing with the labor unions. And then it was hoping the viewers didn't become jaded. There were a lot of negative articles in the papers saying, "Oh, this is taking jobs away from French directors and French writers," even though it wasn't. We were employing the same amount.

In Russia, the hardest thing was convincing the broadcaster. It was easy to get—well, relatively easy—to get approval from the Kremlin. And yet there were other issues in Russia where we actually did have to go visit on a number of occasions with the

Kremlin and their communications office and various cardinals and so forth to convince them that no, we weren't just Americans coming in there to comment about Russian policing and how corrupt it was. I literally had to sit there and say, "Let's talk about *Law & Order* as a Western. You have your good guys and your bad guys, in essence the cowboys and Indians. Ninety-nine percent of the time, the cowboys are going to win. We don't really deal with corruption that much. Obviously part of your culture is such that we're going to have to work corruption in there, but is it going to be a major theme of the show? No."

So there were those issues that we had to face. It was a different thing in each country; you never knew what to expect or what was going to come out of their mouths.

### **What are the steps for taking a format into a new territory?**

That's a very good question. First, I read a lot. With China, for example, I'm reading about the State Administration for Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT). I read comments representatives from the organization have been making, decisions they have made over certain periods, and so on. I also follow public policy debates. It's easy to find government documents online since it's so common to post positions there. Of course, whether those policy positions are going to hold is a whole other story, but at least I can get generally familiar. Then, I work really hard to know the broadcasters and programming schedules in particular territories. You have to know which broadcaster, for instance, is airing more liberal shows. When I was selling *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, the last thing I'd wanted to do was go to the Catholic broadcaster in Chile and say, "Hey, I have got this great

format for you. It's called *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy!*" Talk about ruining business for years and years.

You really have to study their schedules. It's an often overlooked necessity. Studying schedules has helped secure a deal so many times because it makes the broadcasters feel important. I actually looked at their schedules and knew what was performing and what wasn't, what their strongest nights were, what their competition was, all of that. It's especially important when they are dealing with major studios—broadcasters are shocked that a studio employee actually had enough interest to learn about them instead of saying, "Hey, I have got this thing to sell you and I'm going shove it down your throat." It's a much more personal approach. I do a lot of traveling too. You can go and sit on your rump at MIPCOM and all of those trade shows and talk to a different person every 30 minutes but there is nothing like having your boots on the ground and having coffee with them and sitting in their office, looking at the environment, seeing what they have to do, and looking at schedules and policies.

Product placement rules are another big thing. Depending on the formats, there are certain regulations around the world. One of the hardest countries to do product placement in is the U.K. You would think they would totally get it. They have loosened up in the last couple of years but when we did the British version of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, the brilliance of that show was that you could cover a lot of the production costs with product placements. You know, so-and-so gave the couch and such-and-such company gave the paint, and so on. But that was

nearly impossible to navigate in the UK.

**How much are you involved in the adaptation process? Are there different tiers to how much you participate?**

It's really contract-by-contract, and it's situational as well. When you get pretty far in a deal you figure out whether the broadcaster and the production company you are dealing with have your complete and total confidence. It becomes apparent pretty early on and you quickly realize, "Okay, this is something I'm going to have to get involved in," or you say, "Okay, I have 26 deals out there, 26 productions that are getting ready to start. I really can only get involved in six or eight of them extensively. Which ones are they going to be, which ones are those six or eight?" You have to figure that out. Unfortunately, sometimes what happens is the smaller territory falls by the wayside. But then again, the smaller territories tend to have their acts together more than a lot of the larger ones.

**So what are the criteria? What determines which deals become priorities?**

Obviously territory size is part of it because of the financial returns. Also, another criterion is the prospect of selling the rights to the show in other markets. Future deals with either that broadcaster or production company is another factor. Is this a region that might be a small territory but a very influential one, so if a show does well here, could it spur sales elsewhere? That is something else to consider.

**What would be an example of a small territory that was otherwise influential?**

The Czech Republic. That's not a huge territory by any stretch of the imagination, but if you can get in there and you can do a good production from there, then the rest of Central and Eastern Europe have it immediately on their radar. If it does well there, then all of a sudden you are selling to Czechoslovakia, Slovenia, Lithuania, Russia, Ukraine, and on and on. So you don't necessarily have to start off with the big mama territory of the region in order to get attention.

### **Do these smaller territories understand their value?**

Sometimes they do and sometimes they don't. My philosophy was always that I would rather have open and clear communication so they know they are really valuable. I would rather say, "Hey, you know what? This is a great opportunity for you to get yourself on the radar and get noticed in the region, and it's an opportunity for me if we do a great production here. I will be able to sell a whole lot more and this can be a real win-win for both of us so let's work together." That tended to be far more successful than kind of keeping them in the dark.

### **Queer Eye**

Thursday, July 7, 2011

**MIP: Can you put your role in format sales into historical context? Did your unit establish a blueprint for this kind of thing?**

**LESLIE JONES:** Scripted format sales have been done for a long time but not really as a main business unit. For instance, *All in the Family* was a scripted format bought from the U.K. So,

format sales weren't an entirely new phenomenon for the industry though Universal hadn't really entered the game until my unit was established.

In terms of dramas, *Law & Order* was the first one that was done. We first sold the format to France. I did *Law & Order* deals in other territories, too, but I can't think of another crime show that has been done since.

I started in format sales by selling tons of non-scripted content, like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. I sold that all over the world; we did tons and tons of those. I really cut my teeth in terms of learning the format business by selling *Queer Eye*.

**Tell us more about your experiences with that particular format. Obviously, it's a show that potentially has some hot button cultural overtones. How did you sell it? Let's start at the beginning.**

It's kind of funny. At the time, there were rumors around NBC that NBC was going to buy this little channel called Bravo. I used to watch it every once in a while and thought it was kind of cool. One day I got a call from my boss who said, "Hey, you know we keep asking about that Bravo thing. Well, the deal is going through and it's going to be announced next week." And I said, "Oh, great. Can I go down?" Their offices were in downtown Manhattan and my office was in 30 Rockefeller Plaza. I asked if I could go down and introduce myself and see what they had in development. He said, "Sure."

So, I went down and introduced myself to Frances Berwick and we hit it off right away. She happens to be British and has a

great sensibility in terms of television and programming. We started chatting and I asked, "What do you have in development?" She pulls out various things, then pulls out this VHS tape and says, "You know, I really think there is a lot of potential in this particular project, but some of your colleagues at NBC are really nervous about it because it's a 'gay' show." I was intrigued. She popped in the tape and I watched the very first pilot, which I don't think has been seen by more than ten people. It was slightly similar to the final product but not quite. It was far more camp and they did it like a *Charlie's Angel* thing, but I was watching it and I said, "You know, there is really something in here." It was new and it was different. I said, "This could make a hell of a format," and because she is from Britain, she totally got that right away.

She allowed me to take the tape with me. I showed it to four or five broadcasters. One was Channel 4 in the U.K. because they are very open and adventurous with their programming. I also show it to Sky Living (at the time, it was just called Living, and to RTL in Germany.

I got great reactions from everyone. They thought it was funny and cool. I said, "Listen, this is still in development." Well, I got a call from Frances the next week and she said, "You know the project that you really love? I think it's going to be dead because the guys at NBC are just way too afraid."

So I worked up a revenue sheet, a big forecast based upon what I thought we could do with format sales, and I gave it to her and said, "Take this and in the meeting where they are either going to decide to move forward or not, tell them there is some



actual real potential to put this show into the black relatively quickly.” She used it to secure the first order of 12 episodes, although with some significant changes to the format. I was involved with the show pretty early on. And as soon as the thing hit air, probably three episodes in, I was selling it like crazy.

**How would you compare the reaction of the various territories? You seem to indicate you went to some prospective partners in Europe and they got it immediately, and it sold really well in Australia. Meanwhile, in the United States, NBC is freaking out. Can you compare the various responses you got around the world?**

I would make sure not to push or even try to pitch the show to conservative broadcasters. I also would make sure I knew most of the buyers. So, depending on their personalities, I knew whether or not this was a show I could say, “Hey, you should really look at this.” The popularity of the show enabled me to sit back a little bit and see the responses. It really became more of a marketing strategy, rather than a push. I knew I couldn’t attempt certain regions, like the Middle East. A few buyers told me how much they enjoyed the show but they knew it wouldn’t be accepted on television.

I encountered no problems selling it to Turkey. It’s far more liberal than other Islamic countries. I didn’t pitch it to all channels, though. I approached one channel that I thought might be interested, and they bought it. It went on the air and it was perfectly fine.

In Asia, I couldn’t sell it to Vietnam but Thailand loved it. In

Korea, we got it on satellite and cable after a little finessing. We often heard, “We love it, but it’s not for us.”

Russia was interesting. They really wanted to do a Russian version, but I decided not to sell it to them. At the time, there was a series of gay bashing crimes happening, and I didn’t want to be responsible for someone from the cast or crew being targeted. They thought I was crazy, but I wouldn’t sell it. We laughed about it a few years later, and they conceded it was probably a good decision. Someone would have gotten into real trouble. But in general most people realized that it was a fun show and it wasn’t trying to push an agenda. They understood that it was the set-up that was funny: Gay guy is helping straight guy, who always is homophobic at first but by the end they are hugging and kissing.