How to please the crowd

"DO YOUR homework," says Christopher Skala, senior vice-president of programming and production for HIT Entertainment. "When I pitch, I work out what partners I need and when I need them. And then I find out what they need. I try to pitch only one show per meeting. But sometimes, if it's hard to get time with an exec, you don't have that luxury."

The frenetic pace of MIPTV means that, for many, the priority is selling completed shows rather than investing in new ones. But Skala says that development still plays a vital role in his co-production cycle: "I always take along one or two shows that I'm developing and show them to a commissioner from one of the smaller territories," he says. "It's a great way to see if the property has marketability. I'm honourable about it, though. If someone is interested, I always go back to them with it further down the line."

Homework is also critical to Sky One's Richard Woolfe. And last year's intelligence is old-hat this year. "The most important thing is that people know the channel," says the director of programming for Sky One, Two and Three. "So don't pitch us shows for downmarket men — we're not interested in Ibiza Uncovered any more. We are looking for more joint-viewing experiences, long-running formats for access prime and primetime, targeting both men and women."

Like all broadcasters, Woolfe wants cross-platform pitches. But unlike many, he has the resources to commission them. "Think 360-degree commissioning," he says. "HD is very important to us. Impress us with those x-platform ideas."

But not, Woolfe adds, yet another game show with a bit of texting bolted on. "We like to stand out," he says. As an example of how this cut-through can be achieved, she points to Robbie Williams Live: A Close Encounter. "It was the UK's first LIVE HD interactive concert, and it included a unique 'Robbie cam', as well as multiple screen options and exclusive mobile-phone content."

Sky negotiates deals on a project-by-project basis. If fully funds some in exchange for all rights but, with others, independent producers can get up to 85% of the back-end revenues from international sales and up to 50% for UK exploitation.

Maggie Zhou, assistant general manager of international business development at WingsMedia, feels the 2008 Olympics is an opportunity to tell more stories about China. "WingsMedia — part of the Shanghai Media Group — is seeking partners for Meeting In Shanghai (5 x 30 mins), a documentary about the 2007 Special Olympics, being co-produced with Canada's Symmetree Media. "The show will air on CTV in Canada, and we are seeking co-producers in the Middle East, Asia and Africa who want to collect their own footage locally," Zhou says. Two other co-productions are under way: A Dream Of Gold In The Mountains (1 x 90 mins), co-produced with CBC Canada, which tells the story of the 17,000 Chinese labourers who built Canada's railways; and The Nanking Massacre (1 x 90 mins), a co-pro with Canada's Real To Reel, which goes into production this April. Two more documentaries are in development: A Railway In The Clouds (1 x 90 mins) about the French railway that was built across the Chinese/Vietnam border in the early 1900s; and a film about the inhabitants of Tajikistan's Pamir mountains, one of the most inaccessible places on earth."

Fred Burcksen, vice-president of distribution, merchandising and investments at ZDF Enterprises (ZDFF), says he already has two Chinese titles: The Great Wall and The Forbidden City. Together with Update — The World In 50 Years (3 x 60 mins), recently completed for Discovery Channel, ARTE, ORF and SBS-TV (Australia), these high-end films have become signature pieces for the German distributor. Burcksen claims it is easier to find co-production partners for the big-budget docs than for the cheaper ones of yesteryear. "High-end programmes deliver higher value, they are state of the art, and the drama elements are as well produced as feature films," he says. "And all the partners understand why you need to co-produce — if you can't finance it alone, nor can they."

ZDF is also seeking European co-producers for a pre-school animation called Minifant — Forgotten Tales From Okavango (26 x 11 mins), and its new drama franchise based on the books of Ken Follett.
"Follett is a household name in the UK, and he is popular across Europe," Burcksen says. "We have optioned eight of his novels with a view to making them into two-part mini-series. We will be shooting in English, and the budgets will be between €7m-€11m."

Meanwhile, Burcksen says he is looking for the mobile angle on all of his shows, although he is still unsure where the revenue — if there is any — is going to come from.

Marek Drabik, content director, product development, at Poland's Polkomtel, is also trying out ideas. In February, Polkomtel mounted a €1.75m campaign to market a Polish romantic comedy called Dlaczego Nie! (Why Not?) on mobile. Polkomtel also trialled a 13 x 8 mins mobile drama spin-off from the TVP crime series Oficerowie (Officers), and will soon start developing original series exclusively for mobile.

Nevertheless, Drabik does not expect to see a return on investment just yet. "The market is still undeveloped," he says. "So what we are doing is raising our profile as a leading Polish telecom providing unique Polish content for Polish consumers, and building the demand for video services."

The relationships are complex, Drabik adds: "We work with Vodafone as a shareholder, but there's limited strategic business involvement between the two companies. We also work with Ericsson as a music platform aggregator. And we work with a range of content-owners, including TVP, MTL Maxfilm and Akson Studio. We are open to acquiring international content, but my main role is to get Polish music and video into the mobile space."

As such, Corinne Zema, head of licensing at ATM Grupa, may be a prospective partner. She is presenting two new formats at MIPTV: House Trap and Euphoria, the latter being a new quiz show that tests players' knowledge of the EU.

Another game show, the poker-based general-knowledge property Clueless, is one of ATM Grupa's biggest successes. "It's been on Polsat TV since April 2004 with good ratings," Zema says. "It has also been acquired by Italy and Greece, where it has been on air for a few months with ratings of around 20% on Mega channel." She adds that Clueless is now under option in around 15 countries.

In all these deals, the mobile rights loom large. But dealing with a very different type of mobile content is Tom Perlmutter, director general, English Program, at Canada's National Film Board (NFB).

The NFB is one of the backers of Content 360, MIPTV's cross-media initiative that invites pitches for innovative, next-generation television, mobile and interactive entertainment. The NFB is sponsoring the category for Innovative New Forms Of Socially Responsive Media, and will invest co-production money into the winning pitch.

Perlmutter sees the new platforms as a way to deepen and extend the NFB's passion for bringing committed film-making to an international audience. "What we are trying to do is figure out new ways of creating content for a range of media in order to give marginal communities a voice," he says. By way of example, he points to HomelessNation.org, which allows Canada's homeless to tell their stories using text, photos or video. Another project involves an embedded filmmaker in an inner-city hospital. "Having a filmmaker within such communities over a two or three year period can give people a voice," Perlmutter says. "And the work they generate has been stunning." The BBC is also a major sponsor of Content 360. But down on the floor of the Palais, it will be business as usual for Melissa Caron. As BBC Worldwide's director of developed markets, Caron's brief includes the Benelux, the German-speaking territories, Iberia, the northern Mediterranean countries and Scandinavia.

"The key US broadcasters have always been important to us as co-production partners for high-end projects," Caron says. "But Europe is definitely growing. Warriors was our first Greek co-production, with ERT coming in alongside Discovery and ProSieben. We are now discussing our first Span-
ish co-production — a natural-history series involving Wanda Films in Spain.

Russia’s Channel 1 has become a frequent visitor to BBC Worldwide’s stand. “We worked with Channel 1 on Space Race two years ago,” Caron says, adding that the Russian broadcaster is now a partner on Dangerous Productions’ The Death Of Diana (1 x 90 mins or 2 x 50 mins), co-produced with TF1, MediaSet and ProSieben.

Cheng Chunli, marketing executive at China International TV Corporation (CITVC), sees co-production as a learning process: “Competition is intense in the media industry, and it can be difficult to find a platform for our programmes. So for us, co-production is a way to reduce risk, and to give both sides an opportunity to learn from each other.”

“We prepare well for co-production,” Cheng adds. “We choose our partners carefully and, when we find a project with co-production potential, market analysis and evaluation are indispensable.”

CITVC is wholly owned by China Central Television (CCTV). To reach the international market, CITVC is working closely with the French producer-distributor ICTV, which is pre-selling a number of CCTV titles. CITVC is also developing a long-term relationship with Venezuela’s Venesvision International, beginning with a 10-part Spanish version of the CCTV series Rediscovering The Yangtze River, which will be available later this year.

But not all co-productions go according to plan. Two years ago, Marco Visalberghi, managing director of Rome’s DocLab Productions, signed up France’s Gedeon, National Geographic and Can+ to co-produce a film about the legendary Italian aviator and naturalist, Angelo d’Arrigo.

Born To Fly (1 x 90 mins) was to be the story of d’Arrigo’s passion for flight, and of his relationship with two Andean condors that he had raised from birth and was planning to return to their native land. The €600,000 film was to be shot in HD.

Then, in March last year, d’Arrigo was killed in a friend’s plane in Sicily at the age of 44. “It was one of the worst moments of my life,” Visalberghi says. “Can+ started talking about pulling out, taking with them their €75,000 investment and the €35,000 subsidy granted by the CNC. Given that there is very little investment available in Italy, it was disastrous.”

Visalberghi’s team struggled on with help from d’Arrigo’s family and friends. The result, he says, is a very moving film. “What started as a modern fairytale became something much more complex. And at the end, Angelo’s wife Laura managed to release the condors back into the wild.”

There may be a happy ending for Can+, too. “We hope that Can+ will confirm its commitment,” Visalberghi says. “In any case, two French broadcasters are currently interested, so we will see.”

Visalberghi is at MIPTV looking for partners for his next project, a film about Mussolini’s daughter. “At end of the Second World War, she was on the run from the Italian and German secret services,” he explains. “She fled to Switzerland, where she was put in a mental hospital. We have secured access to transcripts of her psychoanalyst’s reports, and this will give us a unique insight into one of the most high-ranking women of the Fascist era.”

Meanwhile, after years of chronic under-funding, Visalberghi believes that things may be about to improve for Italy’s documentary-makers. “Historically, it has been very difficult to get initial finance out of Italian broadcasters,” he says. “So we usually make our films with external financing and sell them back into Italy later. But we are lobbying to get the government to invest in independent production, especially in documentary, and this could change the whole scenario.”

Frederic Puech, CEO of the French animation house Planet Nemo Animation, has long since looked outside broadcasting for investment. The partners on his pre-school series Nelly & Caesar (52 x 7 mins), pitched at MIPCOM Junior last year, include Averbode Publishers (Belgium), ToonCan (Canada), Sofa (Taiwan), Wine Studios (Japan) and the European Broadcasting Union (EBU).

“We were able to raise finance through both the traditional broadcaster/co-producer route and private investors,” Puech says. “Averbode took advantage of the Belgian tax-shelter system, and we also brought in Serenity, a Taiwanese distributor and financier with a strong distribution network in Asia, IP4 in Japan and Porchlight Entertainment in the US. We are also finalising a partnership with a Japanese company for educational products.”

This approach has been so successful that Puech hopes to repeat it with his next two series, Groove High and Aloutah.

Whether factual programming can widen the funding net is another matter. Indeed, with co-production, it is hard enough to get a series commissioned, as the UK producer Wall to Wall has found. “There are not as many series being co-financed between the UK and the US as there were,” says the company’s deputy chief executive, Jonathan Hewes. “We are making a couple of specials...
that are co-financed, but no series.” A case in point is Chimp Man (1 x 60 mins), currently in development with National Geographic in the US and Five in the UK. Hewes reports that Wall to Wall does good sales business in Cannes, latterly through its bespoke sales arm. But though he sees MIPTV as primarily a sales market rather than a place to set up new co-productions, he points out that sales can be a necessary first step in the co-pro process.

Relationships are important, agrees Richard Bradley, co-managing director of Lion Television. And, he says, they have to start somewhere. Lion’s relationship with Reine Bensaid, commissioning editor of documentaries at TF1, started when Bradley found himself knee-to-knee with her in a small booth on the All3Media stand at MIPTV three years ago.

“We were setting up The First Emperor, which would be the first drama doc to be shot in China by a western film crew, and we didn’t have enough money,” Bradley recalls. “We had amazing access and we had Discovery and Channel 4 on board. But we needed a third broadcaster, and I wasn’t sure where we were going to find one.”

So Bradley took a deep breath and pitched Bensaid. “To my knowledge, TF1 had never done a drama doc before,” he says. “I explained that China was the new Egypt, and a mine of untold stories. I had just come back from location, and was very excited about it all.

Lion Television’s Richard Bradley: knee-to-knee with TF1

And although Reine was initially uneasy about the drama recreation aspect, she agreed to pre-buy it. There and then. That never usually happens at MIPTV, because one rarely has a story that’s unmissable. Broadcasters usually want to think it over.”

So what does it mean for the future? “Reine now knows what we do, so we start a rungs up the ladder,” Bradley replies. “But you still have to have a great idea. That’s fundamental.”

The First Emperor: the first drama doc to be shot in China by a western film crew