

Root of the matter

A decade on from founding premium-factual-focused indie Nutopia, former Discovery and BBC2 controller Jane Root reflects on how the industry has changed and where it's going next. Clive Whittingham reports.



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Jane Root, Nutopia

It's 10 years since Jane Root left the world of controlling channels to go back into independent production with her shingle Nutopia.

After founding Wall to Wall in the UK, which was acquired by Shed Media and later became part of Warner Bros, she took over as controller of BBC2 in 1999 and was then president of Discovery Communications in the US from 2004 to 2007. There had been speculation linking her with the controller job at BBC1 post-Peter Fincham before it went to Jay Hunt, and at HBO Entertainment before it replaced Carolyn Strauss with Sue Naegle. But ultimately Root decided to go it alone once more with a US- and UK-based production outfit.

"We started Nutopia on a hunch," she says, adding that her observation from the BBC and Discovery was that "really big things which made a huge impact" weren't in adequate supply. "*Planet Earth* was a complete game-changer for us at Discovery because it was different, new and a big surprise that we could make that noise," she explains.

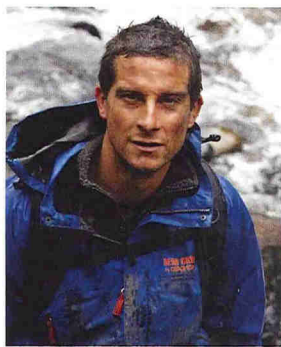
"The world of social media and streaming, which has only accelerated since then, has proved that hunch that going really big, standing out in a crowd and being what we used to call 'network defining' is a good place to be."

For a fledgling production company without the backing of one of the industry's behemoths, it's usually important to get a few commissions away early to let people know the company has arrived and to get some cash flowing through the business. But Root's hunch meant Nutopia started pitching big, ambitious, long-term projects immediately,

landing with *America: The Story of Us*, a 12-part series for A+E Networks' US cablenet History.

"The first thing we sold was enormously big and expensive. I'm not allowed to say how much but it was not a cheap show," Root says. "The taster tape was three-and-a-half minutes long and composed entirely of original CGI. Where you put your flag down is often where you go, so I was very happy that we started big and stayed big."

"A lot of the people who were working at History then had worked with me at Discovery. I knew a lot of them and they were talking about an issue



Bear Grylls – *Man vs Wild* had an eye-catching taster tape

they were having convincing their affiliates and advertisers that History still did history. I tried the theory of doing something really big to solve that in one go, rather than having lots of little goes at it. It worked and caught fire."

That trend for having glossy sizzle tapes, proof of concept and talent attached before a show even gets to pitch – paid for out of the producers' pockets at the development stage – has come to be the norm in factual. It's a tough ask for producers that have seen margins squeezed by declining cablenet budgets but it's something Root has been doing at Nutopia since day one.

"We always pitch with tape. Occasionally broadcasters will say they totally get it, know what we're talking about and don't think we need to make a tape, and it's always a mistake," she says. "That's happened a couple of times in the past couple of years and I've always regretted it."

"But then one of the things that's surprising about us is we don't pitch that much. We have a one in two success rate. Anything we pitch we really ►

News from C21Media.net

Off the Fence shuffles leadership

European producer and distributor Off the Fence (OTF) has rejigged its senior management following its takeover by Germany's ZDF Enterprises (ZDFE) in January. Ralf Rückauer, VP of ZDFE.unscripted, the distributor's factual arm, is now sharing the position of OTF CEO with company founder Ellen Windemuth. The change comes after the commercial arm of the German pubcaster acquired 100% of Netherlands-based OTF, which was founded in 1994 and specialises in factual content. Windemuth and Rückauer initially maintained their existing

roles with their respective companies but will now jointly oversee OTF's operations. Rückauer has been with ZDFE since 2003, focusing on factual programming. In 2012 he was appointed head of sales and later VP of ZDFE.factual. He has been VP of ZDFE.unscripted since the beginning of last year and will continue in this role alongside his new OTF duties. The news was announced by Fred Burcksen, president and CEO of ZDFE, who described Rückauer as "a proven expert in unscripted programming" who "has an excellent global network of long-standing industry contacts."

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