

## ZDF ENTERPRISES' FRED BURCKSEN

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*Fred Burcksen, president and CEO of ZDF Enterprises, explains to World Screen how he and his teams have been able to continue to meet clients' needs with library and new product, even during the pandemic.*

As a wholly owned subsidiary of ZDF, the German public broadcaster, ZDF Enterprises' many responsibilities include selling programs to linear and nonlinear platforms worldwide, initiating co-productions to finance high-end productions, and growing ZDF brands. The company can rely on a steady flow of quality content from the network and has ownership stakes in 20 production companies, which feed ZDF Enterprises' catalog.

**WS:** How have you seen buyers' needs evolve during the last 12 months?

**BURCKSEN:** They always evolve, so it's not something that shocked us. We've seen that especially the networks that got their shows postponed or whose production process got interrupted were looking for short-term solutions for certain time slots. That's what we anticipated, and we tried to benefit from.



**WS:** How have you been working with clients whose budgets were smaller because of decreased advertising revenues?

**BURCKSEN:** That also happens all the time. It's part of the industry; budgets go up, and budgets go down. In this case, the commercial channels were affected by the decrease in advertising sales, especially in the first half of the year. It got better by the end of the year. We consider ourselves to be fair partners, so we try to find solutions. It's not only about the license fee per hour; it's also about the size of the package, the duration of the license, so we try to find a solution and make things possible and build on the relationship, as well.

**WS:** Have you seen commissions or acquisitions postponed to 2022?

**BURCKSEN:** We've seen them postponed from 2020 to 2021. We haven't seen any cancellations, but we've seen interruptions and postponements. Some of our shows were interrupted in the middle of production. And some shows have been postponed by half a season or an entire season. That definitely affected us and everybody else.

**WS:** As the commercial arm of a public broadcaster, ZDF Enterprises has programming that other distributors don't have. Has this type of product been in demand?

**BURCKSEN:** It's a big advantage to be part of a media organization with its own production output. We profit from the fast output of excellent content from the network. Approximately 50 percent of what we have in our catalog comes from our shareholder, and it's a steady output, so it's very helpful. The other 50 percent of our content comes from our own investments in third-party content. We are investing globally in

good storytelling, be it Australian with live-action kids' series or U.S. factual content or Danish drama. It's a 50-50 split. The good thing about being part of the ZDF group is that it's a steady flow—you know it's coming; you know in advance. We feel that we have especially good content for access prime time—some lighter crime series from the network. We have some good output in the genre of love and romance. We have a significant number of TV movies going to Spain for late afternoon time slots. That is very solid. It's the basis of our distribution activities.

**WS:** Is there also demand for your extensive current affairs and factual output?

**BURCKSEN:** Yes, there is demand there—surprisingly strong. We felt that the unscripted business was going down a bit, but amazingly the SVOD platforms increasingly invest in high-quality documentaries. We benefited there because, in 2019, we invested in an archive-based series of more than 60 hours about great inventions. That series became available in 2020 and we were able to offer bigger packages of content. That that helped us a lot.

**WS:** The coronavirus forced productions to halt for a while. Have the companies you work with been able to restart shooting?

**BURCKSEN:** Yes, ZDF Enterprises is not only a large distribution company but also a shareholder in some 20 production companies, most of them German. We also have the subsidiaries Off the Fence in Amsterdam and World Media Rights in London. Fortunately, we didn't have to cancel any commissioned productions. It's just that some of them needed to be interrupted and picked up again or postponed by a season or two. Of course, the Covid-19 protocols were very strict, and we've learned to deal with them as well as the testing; that's something that we have been very busy with. We had cases of Covid-19 in our Mainz offices as well as on the production sets, but we've done pretty well with our protocols and have been as careful as we possibly could.

**WS:** What new titles will you be offering buyers in the next months?

**BURCKSEN:** We have an Australian series from our long-standing partners Jonathan M. Shiff Productions, *The Bureau of Magical Things*, now 40 half-hours. It's a live-action kids' series that was shot last year. We had to stop production of the latest season for three months, but we finished it before the end of the year, and it is now in post-production. That series is in the lineup of our Junior catalog now.

We also have a drama series we were shooting last year, *ANA. all in.*, a Spanish production. We also had to interrupt production and pick it up again later under strict precautions. The series is based on the novel *Ana* by Roberto Santiago and is produced by Tornasol and DeAPlaneta for RTVE. We are co-producers and handle the worldwide distribution excluding Spain. The series is now being finished and will be launched this spring by the drama team.

In unscripted, the 35-episode archive show we commissioned ourselves is called *Great Inventions*. It is produced by Off the Fence, doc.station, World Media Rights and k22 for ZDF Enterprises. We are also selling very well and bringing to market a ten-hour series called *The Greatest Events of World War II*. It is produced by World Media Rights in association with ZDF Enterprises, Discovery UK, Netflix and N-TV Germany with

the participation of PLANÈTE +. We have the second-window linear rights. This is the core lineup we are bringing in the spring, but of course, there is much more!

**WS:** You mentioned second-window rights. Do buyers continue to request exclusive rights, or is there more willingness to make co-exclusive deals or share rights?

**BURCKSEN:** There is still a tendency toward originals. With the rise of SVOD platforms, you need to be recognized by original content. Having said that, there is a greater trust for what I call true co-productions—dividing territories or finding solutions for working with SVOD platforms on a co-production basis. What remains difficult is sharing rights in a certain territory. If a broadcaster or platform steps in for a co-production, they want to defend their own territory. So that remains difficult. But around that, it's all about fair deals, creativity, finding solutions, finding financing models—it's very inspiring.

**WS:** How have you been working with SVOD platforms? What kind of product are they requesting?

**BURCKSEN:** We have seen a change of interest over the last three to five years. In the beginning, they were looking for bigger packages, local content. That has shifted towards commissioning their own originals. Happily, being a shareholder in 20 production companies, we see that many of them supply series and originals for each platform. A couple of examples: our production company Bavaria Fiction made a series on Sigmund Freud for Netflix. World Media Rights produced *The Greatest Events of World War II* for Netflix. Off the Fence produced the extremely successful and multi-award-winning Netflix original *My Octopus Teacher*. Our production companies produce a couple of shows per year for the SVOD platforms. As a distribution company, we feel they needed less and less product that becomes available to them on a sales level, so they try to be more and more selective. We work around that as well.

**WS:** I'm hearing that AVOD services are starting to have a more significant presence in the market.

**BURCKSEN:** Yes, that is a trend I've experienced, but only throughout the last six months. We're talking about the new commercial television. It's on-demand commercial television and it might, someday, be as strong as linear television.

From the perspective of the platforms, the advertising can be pinpointed toward the user through algorithms and software solutions. That is amazing. So you probably need two or three commercials per half-hour or hour, and they are targeted to your behavior, your age, your needs. That helps them a lot.

**WS:** Of course, you've faced challenges, but ZDF Enterprises seems to have done good business this past year.

**BURCKSEN:** We've done surprisingly well. It was tough, but we were in the lucky position that we were quite well prepared. Everyone could work from home within a week or so, so we hardly lost any time. We had content that we had commissioned in 2018, 2019 and coming in 2020.

If you had asked me a year ago, Can you go a year without markets and personal contact with clients? I would have said, No, that's impossible. But we did well. We've even exceeded our turnover goals for this year by a bit. Having said that, as we recently discussed with the various distribution teams, if we defeat this pandemic, we shouldn't try to go back to working the way we did before the pandemic. Nothing will be

as it was before. But we are very much looking forward to sitting down with clients again, having dinner with them, and some profound conversations in person. That is something that we really, really miss and are looking forward to doing again.

**WS:** How have your teams adjusted to selling without the in-person markets? And how much has tech helped you remain connected to your clients?

**BURCKSEN:** You need to be digital, not only by using the various video conference software solutions. With the help of our marketing department, we've had many online video sessions and screenings. We were present at all virtual markets with video presentations. There too, we adjusted to the situation very well and haven't lost time. Like everybody else, however, we were surviving. We all need to get together again in real life to a certain extent and discuss more thoroughly or on a different level, looking at one another with our real eyes, not just the virtual ones.

