

# 10 TIPS for TALKING to HOLLYWOOD

Practicing savvy techniques can help ensure you're taken seriously by the film industry—even before you're a working professional.

INT. BIG-TIME PRODUCTION  
COMPANY — DAY

It's 9:30 on Monday morning, and the place is hectic. Phones are ringing, executives are discussing scripts they read over the weekend, and everyone's buzzing about the latest box-office figures.

Seated at her desk, a frenzied EXECUTIVE ASSISTANT, early 20s, groans when she realizes she's already behind on her morning call list, because the incoming calls haven't stopped. And here comes another one. She picks up:

EXECUTIVE  
ASSISTANT

Good morning, Big-Time Production Company.

CALLER (O.S.)

Hi, I'm calling about a script.

EXECUTIVE  
ASSISTANT

What script is that?

CALLER (O.S.)

It's called "Awesome Action Movie."

EXECUTIVE  
ASSISTANT

Who is this?

CALLER (O.S.)

I wrote it. My name's [indecipherable]. I'm in New Jersey. I want to send my script to one of your executives.

EXECUTIVE  
ASSISTANT

We don't accept unsolicited material.

Click.

The preceding scenario happens dozens of times every single day in Hollywood—and the irony is the caller in this scenario actually did a few things correctly, only to present himself so poorly that he blew a great opportunity. The caller did research to find the name of a particular production company, and he summoned the chutzpah to make a cold call. Unfortunately, he wasn't taken seriously because he sounded like an amateur.

Even if you're outside of the industry looking in, you don't have to make the same mistakes. The movie business is just like any other private club, and once you learn the secret handshake (metaphorically speaking), you can get in the door.

The following tips are applicable to every possible interaction you might have with Hollywood professionals. You can use this advice for a cold call to a production company, an in-person approach to an executive or producer at a film festival or pitch fest, or

even a Hollywood meeting.

Until you've got a produced movie or a hot spec script upon which to pin your reputation, it's best to assume nobody in Hollywood has heard of you yet; accordingly, every contact you make is an opportunity to create a wonderful first impression.

Remember that you're always one conversation away from a career, so treat every interaction with a Hollywood professional like it could change your life—even though, as you'll learn from the all-important Tip No. 10, the last thing you want Hollywood professionals to realize is how desperate you are to break into screenwriting.

## Tip No. 1: Timing is Everything

Know when to make your move. If you're placing a phone call from outside of Los Angeles, pay attention to time zones (don't call from New York at 9:00 a.m. on Monday, because that's 6:00 a.m. in California), and no matter where you're calling from, take the workday into consideration. For most film professionals, early morning is hectic, the middle of the day is chewed up by long lunches, and the afternoon is dedicated to meetings and desk time. Shoot for midday if you want to leave a message, or late in the day if you hope to get a person on the phone.

Whenever you have opportunities to speak with professionals in person, don't let eagerness derail courtesy. If an executive is involved

in a vigorous conversation at a cocktail party, wait politely across the room until, say, the exec goes to the bar for a refill. Never, never, never approach someone when he is on his way out of a room; that's like knocking on the door of a store right after the shopkeeper turned the sign in the window from "open" to "closed."

Generally speaking, think about when you would like to be approached, and offer the same consideration to others. Demonstrating good timing immediately separates you from those who pounce. And if you're in the habit of pouncing, stop—we're talking to you, Guy Who Stands up During Panel Discussions to Pitch His Script.

### Tip No. 2: Do Your Homework

In the Internet age, there's no excuse for contacting a company that A) doesn't take unsolicited submissions, and/or B) doesn't make movies like the one you're pitching. Read the trades, study movie credits, cross-reference data with IMDb.com or the *Hollywood Creative Directory*, and find people who might have a genuine interest in your idea. Knocking on the right door is the first step toward getting taken seriously, whether you have an agent or not. For instance, if you know a particular company is looking for campy horror movies like *Piranha*, and you've written a howler called *Killer Crabs: The Movie*, then identify the appropriate executive at that company and ask for that person by name. Even if you're not represented, the fact that you've got a product the executive wants might compel the executive to hear your pitch and, fingers crossed, ask for the script.

### Tip No. 3: Learn the Lingo

Speaking of pitches, those aren't the only verbal presentations you will need to practice. Work on your assistant interaction, too. If you call a company and can't succinctly articulate why you're calling them, you won't get far. Conversely, if you ring them and say, "Hi, I'm calling for Bob Smith because I've got a script for a low-budget campy horror movie like *Piranha* that I'd like him to consider," there's a chance your call will be transferred directly to Bob Smith's office since you sound like you know your stuff. The assistant might even mistake you for an agent,

allowing you to slip in under the no-cold-calls radar. Another thing to remember is that brevity is the buzzword.

### Tip No. 4: Fake it Until You Make it

Project confidence. Always.

### Tip No. 5: Understand Your Product

Know your story, its antecedents (similar movies that performed well at the box office) and its corollaries (similar projects in the current marketplace). Have several different versions of your logline and mini-pitch memorized so they come out naturally, unless you're exceptionally quick on your feet, and think ahead about nuances like how much your movie would cost to make, who the target audience is, what the rating should be, and why people will want to see the thing. Here's a favorite Hollywood phrase you should learn to use: "We haven't seen anything like this in a while." That's a nice way of saying, "My script is a spin on a movie that made a lot of money last year." If your pitch (and your script) can back up the claim, you're in good shape.

### Tip No. 6: Lead With Your Strengths

If something about you or your project is impressive, present that information in a straightforward fashion. "I'm calling about my script *Sensitive Youth Drama*, which recently won the Zoetrope Screenplay Contest," or "My name is Ted Jones, and I spoke with Ben Stiller after his talk on a panel at Sundance. He was interested in the script I wrote about my experiences as a humanitarian worker in Haiti, and he said it was okay for me to call the office." Since the Hollywood default position is "no," make your best case for "yes."

### Tip No. 7: Don't Ask for Advice

It's hard to pick the single most egregious offense that amateurs make, but asking for advice is high in the list—because the minute you ask for advice, you put yourself in a subordinate position. Obviously, there's a strata of information you must request (mundane details like how, when, and who to contact), but save questions along the lines of "How can I get a script read by your company?" or (shudder) "How can I get someone to buy

my script?" for screenwriting gurus. You want the Hollywood professionals with whom you're in contact to perceive you as a fellow professional, not a wannabe.

Having said that, remember Tip No. 4 about projecting confidence, yet remaining mindful of not tipping over into arrogance. If you end up next to Ron Howard during an Austin Film Festival cocktail party, don't delude yourself into thinking you're going to persuade him to read/purchase/produce your script. Even if you wrote something fabulous, he's probably got projects lined up from now until the end of time. So, when you get the ear of an A-lister, it's okay to ask for general advice (emphasis on general), and you never know—if you come across as humble and respectful and smart, the A-lister might consider opening a door for you.

### Tip No. 8: Skip the Biography

Please burn these words into your brain: Don't tell strangers your life story. In order to present yourself as credible and intriguing, think about the things that define you professionally, like the interesting job you do while you're waiting for Tinseltown success, the Oscar®-winning feature you worked on as an intern, or the famous screenwriter who mentored you during film school. If a couple of these facts fit into a tidy sentence, queue it up for the second thing you say.

The first thing you say should always be a clear introduction, including your first and last name, as well as some parameter for the interaction. Phone calls have been discussed, so if it's an in-person meeting, usually something like "Hi, I'm John Martin, and I just wanted to say that I really appreciated what you said on the panel about character being important in movies" will do the trick. This approach encourages the person with whom you're speaking to ask about you, which is a powerful step forward.

Once the ice is broken, however, stay focused, and avoid revealing too much personal information, for three good reasons: 1) Every personal thing you say takes the conversation off track; 2) every personal thing you say is a potential turnoff (you might unintentionally sound dorky/intense/needy/crazy/whatever!); and 3) every personal thing you say potentially reveals that you're a wannabe and not

a professional. Stick to general, positive stuff like your passion for movies or something wonderful you just saw.

If you're having that beer with Ron Howard, don't try to puff yourself up, because the gulf between his achievements and yours is probably monumental—but if you're chatting up a mid-level executive from a small studio

at a pitch fest, you want to be perceived as a fellow professional.

**Tip No. 9: Quit While You're Ahead**

Whenever you make a Hollywood call or strike up a conversation with a showbiz professional, think ahead about what you want: permission to send a script, the name

of someone at the individual's office, a date that's convenient to call back. If you get what you want 20 seconds into the interaction, say thank you and walk away. You're done. Past this point, all you can do is overstay your welcome and run the risk of saying something that spoils the good first impression you made. Hollywood people rarely give definitive answers on the spot, except in formal pitch meetings, so all you should expect to do during the getting-in-the-door stage is, well, get in the door. The more you push, the less you'll get in return, especially if you've already gotten a positive response.

**Tip No. 10: Desperation is Toxic**

"Yeah, my script has been optioned a bunch of times, and it's really frustrating because my brother-in-law, who used to be an agent, said it should sell for a million bucks easy, and this one time, I wrote to Bruce Willis but he never wrote back, which I didn't understand since it would've been the biggest movie he ever made, so it's been a hard road with this script for the last 15 years, even though everyone I know says it's the best script they've ever read, like the lady I just hired to retype it for me ..."

When you're in the introductory phase of a new Hollywood relationship, your overriding goal is not so much career advancement (that comes later) as making a good impression. That requires picking up on clues about what's getting a response and what isn't, plus adjusting your technique as needed: Some people want their interactions short and sweet, for instance, while others like banter. Therefore, the key is considering both ends of the conversation, not just yours. Achieving this level of sensitivity will pay off in the long run, because learning how to effectively communicate with Hollywood professionals is the first step toward building rapport and earning respect. 🏹



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Did YOU Really Just SAY? that

**Hollywood professionals recall jaw-dropping remarks from inexperienced writers:**

"I sent my script over this morning and have yet to receive a response. Frankly, I've changed my mind about doing business with your company if this unprofessionalism is going to continue."

— to a Development Executive

"I have a great script that's going to make your company millions, but the last script I wrote was stolen and turned into *Titanic*, so I will need you to sign a release before I send it to you."

— to a Development Executive

"You don't need permission to adapt novels. If you buy a book in a store, it's public domain."

— to a Script Consultant

"Nobody wants to buy my pitch for a TV show. If you can get someone to buy it, I'll give you a finder's fee."

— to a Working Screenwriter

"I'm writing a remake of *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* that I wish to produce and potentially direct. Can you send me the contact info for J.K. Rowling?"

— to a Development Executive

"I wrote the prequel to *Iron Man*. Can you send the script to the studio?"

— to a Manager

"I know Clint Eastwood has retired from acting, but I've got the perfect script for him. Where can I send it so he reads it right away?"

— to a Script Consultant

"I need the contact information for all of your magazine's writers. I have a great idea for a script and I want to know which one of them can write it for me. They can have half the money when I sell it."

— to the Editor of Script magazine

"I sent a really great script to a producer a few months ago, and he hasn't bought it yet. Why?"

— a question posed to the late, great movie producer Dino De Laurentiis at a book signing (whose answer was "Because it's a bad script!")

"I've got a really great idea, and I just need someone to write it. Is there someone who does that?"

— to a Receptionist at a Production Company