

RealscreenViewpoint: Is ghosting the new “no”?

By Michael Cascio

October 31, 2023



You know when you’ve been ghosted — and it’s got nothing to do with Halloween. The term can apply to the silent aftermath of a bad date, or — as per my argument here — a rude practice among professionals that has evolved into business as usual. And it seems to be getting worse.

Here’s how it works in that context. Let’s say you’re an experienced producer, and you pitch a one-off or series to a network, streamer, or funder. You hope for the best answer — yes. But if you don’t get a yes, the second-best answer is “no.” It’s not that you want rejection, but you crave a response, even a negative one, so you can move forward and maybe pitch someone else, change the content, or give up.

The third possible response — no answer — is the worst. In my experience, the longer you are forced to wait for a reply, it probably means they don’t want your pitch. But you’re never quite sure. Is it an outright rejection? Just a delay? Do you wait indefinitely? Pester the buyer until you get an answer? Or do you just shake your head and seethe?

It happens at all levels, not just with suppliers and distributors. Emails that get no response. Follow-ups never made. Promises not kept.

I’ve heard it often. The executive says: “We’re open for business. Send us your proposals.” The supplier replies: “OK, here they are — are you interested?” No answer. It’s now been three months, and you’re still waiting. Ghosted.

Or this: you get a positive response. The development process is about to begin. Calls, emails, Zooms. Then, nothing. Weeks turn into months. Ghosted.

Another case: the deal is almost done. The project is in development. But before it's finalized, the network has a few more notes and wants to review the budget. You adjust the proposal, resubmit, and get no answer when you check in by email. Then, the waiting game begins.

You guessed it — ghosted.

In many instances, your executive contact tries to move things along with a promise: "I've been busy, but I'll get back to you by the end of the week." It's now been three weeks. Oops — ghosted again.

With endless delays built into the process, uncertainty in the marketplace, and a media environment in turmoil, ghosting is apparently the new normal — and the new "no." It's a way of delivering bad news without having to deliver it.

Of course, there are exceptions. The best execs know how to keep in touch — and many do — with brief updates. And no supplier should expect a detailed response to every cold call or email. The volume of submissions is a never-ending challenge, and there are way more proposals than are needed.

Having worked on both sides of the equation, I can tell you with authority that the process of greenlighting is lengthy, with time-sucking budget, strategy and development meetings. The bosses weigh in on their own timetable. And even when it looks like a sure thing, something else comes up and your project gets pushed back. There is a limited pool of program slots and money, and in that kind of atmosphere it's almost impossible for executives to keep in touch with everyone all the time. And, frankly, suppliers are sometimes reluctant to take "no" for an answer. But it's not the fault of the creative professionals who spend their time and money to craft a potentially successful film or series only to have it sit, indefinitely, on the shelf of indecision.

In many cases, ghosting is just bureaucracy run amuck. In the last few years, turmoil at networks and streamers has resulted in hundreds of layoffs. From what I see, the by-product — ghosting — is the residue of fear among the decision-makers. No one can take a risk without support from above; the exec's job may be at stake. Not only is it an ordeal to get to "yes," but there is also a natural reluctance to say "no." And you don't want a project you once rejected to show up elsewhere and have the boss ask, "Why didn't we have that one?"

But enough excuses. Ghosting is a bad habit that turns optimistic professionals into weary cynics. We're fortunate that great shows still get made and that the viewing audience responds to new programming. As a business, though, we're not communicating enough, or with enough honesty.

Thus, at the risk of coming off like an advice column on proper social etiquette, here's a tip: do everyone a simple favor, and keep in touch!

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