

## THE MEET MARKET

**It's staffing season, when writers crank out their specs, bring their smiles and hope to get hired.**

**F**or aspiring TV writers, few dramas are as compelling as the frenetic two-month period from April through May known as staffing season, when writers compete for jobs on new and returning fall shows.

"Staffing season is a tension-filled, protracted game of musical chairs," says Matthew Federman, a producer on Fox's *Human Target*. "If you're not sitting down when the music stops, the silence is deafening."

Staffing season follows on the heels of pilot season in January, when the networks commission single episodes of the most promising new scripts. For writers, the real fun begins in April, when buzz picks up about which pilots may get a greenlight for series, and the jockeying for meetings begins. By late May, when the networks announce their fall line-ups, the race to be staffed reaches fever pitch.

How tough is it to make the grade? Last season, according to the TV department at ICM, more than 1,000 scribes (excluding those without representation) competed for some 120 writing slots on new and returning shows. Securing one of these coveted spots requires a mysterious alchemy of talent, a good agent and the right connections.

But even a writer with John Wells or Carlton Cuse on speed dial won't get far without a great writing sample, preferably two.

"No one is going to risk their own reputation if they don't believe you're talented and ultimately going to make them look good," says Jamie Rhonheimer, a coexecutive producer on CBS's *How I Met Your Mother*.

In previous years, samples were almost exclusively "spec" episodes of an existing series. Nowadays, showrunners are more open to original material, whether it be pilots, screenplays or stage plays.

Still, the killer spec remains a time-honored calling card.

"Writing a spec is much more akin to what being on staff is like," Federman says, "dealing with a world you didn't create with its own characters and rules. The idea is to show producers that you can capture the characters and tone of a specific show."

Adds Rhonheimer: "They reason that if you can do it for one show, you can do it for their show."

The strange logic of Hollywood dictates that you never spec an episode for the show you want to work on. If you want to write for a procedural like *CSI*, for example, you might write a *Law & Order* or *House*. That's partly because producers are protective of their own shows, but there's a legal component as well.

"People are afraid to be accused of stealing things," says Joanna Johnson, a coexecutive producer on ABC Family's *Make It or Break It*. "If someone writes a spec script of your show and you end up doing an idea similar to that story, it can be a problem."

After writing samples are approved, the next hurdle is meetings. Since writers are generally insulated creatures used to working in solitude, the pressure to make a good impression can be overwhelming.

For Rhonheimer, meetings mean "stepping outside my comfort zone. As writers, we're much more comfortable selling ourselves through our work, not some twenty-minute performance." And while meetings with network executives are important, only the showrunner hires writers directly, and those are the toughest meetings to get.

Showrunner meetings are like a carefully choreographed mating dance, with the writer and showrunner sizing each other up. Chemistry and other intangibles come into play, as both parties consider whether they could spend twelve-hour days together breaking stories in a windowless room.

Writers must walk a fine line: being respectful of the show without fawning. And while it's great to show initiative, Johnson advises, "You shouldn't volunteer ideas unless you're asked. Don't just dive in and tell producers what you think their character might be doing."

Comedy meetings can be particularly tricky, since the temptation may be to make the showrunner laugh. "Trying to be funny is a sure way not to be funny," Rhonheimer warns. "Have the same energy you would have in the writers' room."

Once the meetings are done, there's nothing to do but wait for the call that can make — or break — a career. "Anyone who was ever a teenager and liked someone and waited by a phone knows what the stress is like," Federman says. "But in this case, the boy or girl you like is necessary to help you pay your rent, so there's a little more riding on it."

Writers who get staffed for a standard thirteen-week network order enjoy steady employment from June through November, with an option to be picked up for a "back nine."

For writers who don't find a chair when the music stops, it could mean an anxious year on the sidelines.

"The highs and lows can be a bit much, so focus on the long term," Federman says. "Your dream job could turn into a nightmare. Your downtime might become the spec sale that makes your career. You never know. Also, never forget to validate."

—Graham Flashner