

“So when do you tell someone that they should hang it up and get out of the screenwriting business?”

Oddly enough, this has been the most frequently asked question I’ve gotten in the last week and a half.

Before I tell you my answer, let me start at the beginning...

A couple of months ago, I was asked by an organization to speak at an event that took place this past weekend.

I basically had free reign over what I wanted to speak about. Given the fact that we’re in the middle of pitch season, I figured that I would do my “What NOT to do at a Pitchfest” rant. It would essentially be a live version of my column.

They were cool with it. Awesome.

A couple of emails flew back and forth about any needs I had (whiteboard, projector...etc) nothing more than that.

Then the morning before the event was to take place, I was asked two things: 1) I was told there was a slight change and if I could come later. I said yes. and 2) if I had some sort of outline as to what I was speaking about. I said no.

I received a confused email in response... they weren’t really sure what I was going to say and do. They wanted to know the content of my stories and what they mainly focused on.

They were afraid that it would send a bad message if I just went up there and “winged it.” I politely responded with a “don’t worry, I got this” email. I’ve spent three years in the classroom, have spoken at events before and my columns are really my sources. I’ve already written the material a shit ton of times.

I responded that it would be stories of a lot of the dumb things writers do and how we (the executives) talk about them behind their backs. A “don’t make these mistakes cause you’re going to get made fun of behind the scenes” chat. I promised that everyone would be entertained and filled with knowledge, but added that if they needed for me to actually put something down on paper, I could whip something up.

This is the response I got:

*Can you please whip something up for me?*

*Also, we would greatly appreciate it you don't speak down on the business or difficulty in the business. You can absolutely warn about things not to do as a writer and express how realistically difficult things can be. We just don't want our writers hearing: IT'S IMPOSSIBLE. Not that I think that's going to be your focus, just a disclaimer I'm required to make.*

*Also because I have perused your blog, I'd like to ask that you please limit the f-bombs and not call writers fucktards. These are writers we are trying to attract to the summit and want to err on the side of caution. I know that's part of your charm and style and we definitely dig it, but for these events we do need to be mindful of the conservative folks.*

Let me address the last part first.

Telling me not to use the “f-bomb” and to not call writers fucktards is like asking Woody Allen to be a little less “Jewy.” I mean come on. Plus, let’s face facts, you knew what you were gonna get if you ever read any of my columns. Frankly, I was a little shocked I hadn’t gotten this email sooner, not 24 hours before the event was supposed to take place.

As for the first part, it’s not what I do. More on this in a second.

My email response was pretty simple: You’re asking me to be something I’m not and that’s not going to happen. What I write each week to you guys isn’t some made up character that I created for shits and giggles, it’s who I am. I assumed that was the person that you were looking for cause you asked him to speak at your event.

Which, in the end, came down to this: either I come as me or I can’t come to the party. Which is perfectly okay...no harm, no foul. :)

And yes. I even put in the smiley face.

About 30 minutes later, the VP of the organization called me up and said that he had been forwarded my email and that there seems to be some sort of misunderstanding. We chatted it out, he said they were cool with the language and that I could call writers fucktards, but that I should be careful not to attack people in the room.

I get it, I have a big personality and I’m loud and I curse a lot...but I’m not fucking stupid! I’m not going to put myself in a situation where some pissed off writer is going to bum rush the stage and take me out.

Which I explained to the VP and he was cool with it. Then he told me their biggest concern and it all became clear. It became clear why they were asking for outlines and why they wanted to know what I was going to talk about and yadda yadda.

Their biggest concern was that I wouldn't go up on stage, say it's impossible to get in to the industry and that writers should just pack up their bags, give up and go home.

To which I said: That's not what I do.

Now the event went fine, everyone had a good time, I had a great time, the organization seemed pleased...BUT...

About 45 minutes in, I get asked this: "So at what point to you tell someone to just pack it up and get out?"

I thought...really dude? The one thing they didn't want me to talk about and you're going to ask it, almost verbatim? Thanks.

I also had that question asked via email from two different people this week.

Alright, so WHEN do you tell someone to pack it in and give up?

My answer? Never.

That's not my place.

The first day of every screenwriting class I've ever taught, I started with the line: I can teach you how to write, but I can't teach you how to be creative.

I've seen a LOT of great ideas that have been poorly executed. Bad writing can be fixed. Bad ideas can't. Writing is not something you can just do, you have to get better at it. The people in this industry that last are the people who grow throughout their careers.

Look people, the industry is hard as fucking hell to get into. But not impossible. What I'm trying to do is show you things that aggravate the people YOU are trying to get to help you.

Don't try so hard to shoot yourself in the foot when you're trying like hell to get it in the door!

Never in there do I say, pack it up. I'm saying if you want this so bad, put the fucking effort in. Rewrite your scripts and then rewrite them again. Act accordingly. Know the game. Be prepared.

This is how you succeed in anything in life, and this is something you claim you want! So why aren't you doing it?!

Having said all of that, there is an asterisk to that statement. If you've been fucking around at pitchfests for 10-20 years, and no ones picked up your shit, you should probably recognize that this MIGHT not be the business to be in.

But again, that's for you to decide, not for me to say.

Till next week...