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- [music](#)
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BUILDING TO FEVER PITCHES

BY PETER BRAUNSTEIN
Worst-Case Scenarios

You've got the perfect screenplay idea, sort of *Doom Generation* meets *Runaway Bride*, but gave up on taking Hollywood by storm—until the Internet gave you access to key Hollywood insiders. Well, that was the noble idea behind ShowBIZ Data's online "Worldwide Pitch Festival," which ran concurrently with Sundance. Through an online auction, creative amateurs were given the opportunity to pitch story ideas to Hollywood moneymen searching for the next *Matrix*. The site streamed a handful of videotaped pitches from points as distant as India and Mexico City to a would-be audience of bidders and other interested parties. But, in this instance, e-commerce didn't seem to whet Hollywood's perhaps mythical thirst for new ideas.

Launched in 1997, ShowBIZ Data (www.showbizdata.com) conceived of the pitch festival as a promotional lure for their feature-film database, which covers everything from detailed box-office stats to development slates. Pitches were placed on the auction block, while a jury consisting of "Hollywood professionals and venture capitalists" promised one lucky seller "a chance to participate in a million-dollar production deal."

Unfortunately, things didn't work out as planned. As of press time, the online pitches hadn't attracted a single bidder—which may speak to the daredevil futility of counterprogramming Sundance. With most of the Hollywood crowd busy attending screenings for finished films, nursing hangovers, and discussing Minnie Driver's Golden Globes dress, few had time to log on, download the necessary plug-ins, and surf through video pitches from the heartland.

Add to this the fact that many sellers wanted tens of thousands of dollars for movie ideas that were, to put it mildly, opaque. The pitch videos featured static head shots of people sitting in darkened crevices of their apartments, sort of like the testimony of witness protection people on *Unsolved Mysteries*. One man, who proposed an occult thriller about Hitler and a psychic spy ring while swiveling around in his desk chair, wanted \$500,000 from prospective bidders. There were pitches about an ancient Egyptian serial killer, a town plagued by a '70s dance virus, and an Internet psychopath. Peter Ross, an aspiring screenwriter from Columbus, Ohio, wanted \$20,000 for a story about

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- [best of nyc](#)
- [page and top](#)
- [titles](#)
- [local theater](#)
- [about us](#)

a group of teens who bond with each other while trapped in a mall. "It's like *Breakfast Club* meets *Die Hard*—but not with Bruce Willis," Ross explained, adding, "I hate to reference other films like in *The Player* but it's the only way to get through."

ShowBIZ Data also gave Sundance attendees a chance to pitch away at the Interactive Lounge, located in the heart of Park City at the club Harry O's. There, people pitched on camera, karaoke style, in front of hundreds of cold, drunk people who could presumably rip off their ideas at will. This live event was MC'd by none other than "pitch king" producer Robert Kosberg, who also held a seminar on the finer details of plugging one's dream scenario.

Kosberg, who approaches pitching with the hyperkinetic zeal that the Tom Cruise character in *Magnolia* brings to cruising, has also staked out a presence online at moviepitch.com. There, he solicits e-mail pitches from anyone with a concept. "I'm very frustrated by the fact that our culture doesn't value ideas," says Kosberg. "You hear producers say that ideas come a dime a dozen. That's certainly true for bad ideas, but good ideas are one in a million." And they're worth \$15,000: That's what a woman from Ozark, Arkansas, earned after Kosberg sold her pitch about a man who lives in the Statue of Liberty to Polygram/Working Title Productions. (If the film actually gets made, she stands to make another \$100,000.)

ShowBIZ Data CEO Oliver Eberle never promised a fast track to the Hollywood elite. "The pitch festival won't change the fact that, once someone decides he likes your idea and puts it in development, you'll probably be involved in the same nightmare that everyone else is."

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