

Sophie Ferron

Founder & President, Media Ranch TV

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Welcome to Media Masters, a series of one-to-one interviews with people at the top of the media game. Today, I'm joined down the line by Sophie Ferron, chief executive of Media Ranch, the award-winning production company and distributor of unscripted TV formats headquartered in Canada with offices around the world. Media Ranch is globally renowned for producing television that entertains while addressing important social issues of the day, a leading executive of more than 30 years with experience at Endemol, Astral Media and Technicolor, Sophie founded Media Ranch in 2008. And under her leadership, the award-winning company is focused on the sale and creation of unscripted format, IP solidifying its worldwide status as experts in the field; an international Emmy Award juror, Sophie also served on the board of directors of Quebec's public funding agency for film and television. Sophie, thank you for joining me.

Well, Thank you for having me.

Congratulations on Media Ranch's success! A Canadian company competing globally in a world of TV and tech giants. Amazing!

Well, thank you. We're trying to compete, and I think we're actually getting a good share of the market, but it is an ongoing thing.

Let's start with the Media Ranch business model itself. Why does the company focus on non-scripted shows? How did that happen?

Well, I always say that we need to focus on what we know, and I'm a second-generation independent producer. My father was an independent producer, and we only did unscripted, and we only did unscripted because that's what we liked, and that's what I like. So, we focused on what we knew and that was unscripted. So I was a physical producer, I had my own independent production house and we were doing unscripted and so when I met with the shareholder of Endemol, a very long

time ago, and it was a chance meeting in con and that's how I realized that I really wanted to get in the global market of unscripted. So that's how we focus on unscripted even more because then we represented Endemol for over nine years. So obviously our focus was unscripted. So that's why we focused again today only on unscripted.

I mean, Endemol seems to be behind the explosion in reality TV. You only have to think of 'Big Brother' and everything that flowed from it.

Yes, it is. I mean, they started 'Big Brother' in 1999 and that was basically maybe the second reality show around, the first one was 'The Real World' on MTV, and that was in '92. But 'Big Brother' was a game changer because it was the first time that it was actually sold as a format. So the format business actually started with 'Big Brother' and then it went from there. So yes, Endemol is really behind a lot of the format industry.

What elements are you looking for then in a Media Ranch show?

Well, we only deal with unscripted formats, so we won't consider your show. If it's a factual entertainment show, meaning that it's not adaptable, it's not adaptable to other countries and it's not scalable. It needs to have specific format points and unique selling points. That's the only thing that we will consider, now once that we have considered this format and it's actually a format - because not all factual or all unscripted shows are formats. Once we've established that it's a format, then we will consider if it has a strong commercial appeal. We cannot, and we will not take on a show that we feel that we cannot sell. It has to respond to the market trend. We don't have that luxury of having shows that are prestigious, but not selling.

Yeah, you don't want a lovely high-brow show that no one watches, do you? Because it doesn't, as we say in England, it doesn't butter any parsnips, and I've always liked that phrase. You sell formats to TV partners from Asia to Europe. I did cross-cultural awareness when I was at school, do different nationalities, have their own tasting programs? Do you take a call product and then amend it slightly, kind of, localize it or is 'Big Brother', 'Big Brother', wherever it is around the world. I know you guys didn't create that, but, are they largely the same? Is it homogenous or are there local differences?

No, there are always local differences. That's why we need a format. That's the format business. Obviously, we could just take the US tape and everywhere, which we often do, but every country wants to see their own people doing this in that format. And yes, there are cultural differences and that's what I actually love about my job. It's because you need to learn about the local culture and what goes in one territory and what doesn't fly in the other one. So we need to adapt while respecting the integrity of the format. So obviously there are many differences like, in Russia and maybe perhaps that's not a timely or good example right now, but you cannot have cigars. That's not a format point, but that's a thing that we cannot do. But in other countries, even in my own territory, the French Canadian territory 'Big Brother' was a massive hit, but not as a 'Big Brother', but as 'Loft Story'. 'Loft Story' was the French 'Big Brother' adaptation. But then they tried 'Big Brother' and it didn't work because 'Loft Story' was more love driven than 'Big Brother' was.

One of your hit shows 'Big Love' is helping couples who've put on weight lose some timber, can we put it that way? That must have been quite popular after lockdown. I really could have done with going on that show myself, frankly.

Yes, well it is. We are happy to report that we have a couple of adaptations of it, yes. But it is a very long production process. So it makes it a little difficult to produce, but it is an amazing format because it's not about the weight. It's also about how it affects the couple when you gain weight and when you lose weight, it does change the dynamic of the couple. So it's not only about the weight.

Yes. I agree. I've always known that couples seem to have a similar level of attractiveness. And the only couple that I see who doesn't have that sort of equality is my own marriage where my wife's incredibly beautiful and I'm hideous! But anyway, that's her fault for falling for a guy with a good personality, but a grotesque body. Anyway, you want your shows to have a social purpose and do good and not just purely for entertainment value. I mean, that, that's incredible. Isn't it? If you can get that message, because like you say, entertainment shows get watched and if you've got a social purpose as well, then all the better.

Yes. That's what we try to do obviously because there's a difference between not trying to do bad and trying to do good. You could say, "I don't want to contribute to something that is bad. So I'll just be neutral." We're not trying to be neutral. We're trying to do good. So we try with our creators and also with the theme of the shows,

we try to do some good all the while being entertaining, obviously. Because if nobody watches your show, your message can be good or bad, but nobody will listen, so you want your message to be heard, and not a lesson, obviously we're not there to teach anybody lessons. So for us, that's very important. That's one reason that we launched our format incubator called 'Horsepower' because we wanted to create local expertise in creating the art of the format. I felt not only me, but the whole team, and it's obvious, that there is no format expertise in Canada. So we wanted to create local expertise of format creators. So we started 'Horsepower' incubator, which teaches the art of the format and we've been really successful with it. So this is part of our mission as well, to do good, creating local expertise is pretty awesome.

How has reality TV evolved from the early days across the entire industry? It started with criticisms of voyeurism and almost cruelty. It shows what they put contestants through in the early days. Now there's an increasing, should we say awareness about the psychological damage that might be done and a lot of reality shows are really taking care of the mental health of their participants and their stars.

Yes. Well basically in your question, you're answering a bit of the question, because I think right now people are more aware of how TV can hurt people. And I'm saying TV, not airing a show or TV content because it's not on the TV anymore, but, I agree with you but it's not also the way we produce it. It's because the people at home realize it as well. So they don't want that trash show as much as they wanted it before. It's still around mind you, but there's another level to it. I mean, production-wise, yes, we are more careful. I, myself, as a producer, we had the right to air things that parents would say about their kids and we stopped it. We had legally all the rights to air that interview, but it would damage the child forever in our opinion, so we didn't air it. A lot of things like that I think all producers all over the world are doing, reality producers are getting a bad rap because a lot of times they say, how can they let these things go on air da, da, da, da, da. But you know what? They protect the people as well. What you see on-air sometimes is a bit raunchy or maybe it is a bit embarrassing, but most of the producers I know are also very careful of not airing other things that are way worse and could have an impact and damage people for a way longer time. So, it is a balance. We need to make it entertaining obviously, but respectfully as well. So as long as nobody gets hurt, that's the most important thing.

What fascinates me is, well it's interesting that the big streamers, they launch with the sort of big-budget dramas. They're now seriously getting into studio shows and unscripted content.

Yes, because it's just a quick turnaround format. That's exactly. We launched that category of formats during the pandemic because everybody wanted a quick turnaround format when all of this is going over, what can we do and get something in production really quickly so then it can air. So, that's why the streamers are getting there as well. They want that quick turnaround. A scripted show takes years to develop and takes years to produce it's a way longer process. So they need that high-concept idea that will get their subscriptions sold. So that's why they're getting into unscripted.

How's it going for them? Is that an opportunity for you guys?

Yes, it is. Obviously, it is.

Do tell.

Our business model is a bit different from the other distributors. We also are format creators through our format incubator, but also we have deals with high-end creators from all over the world for their paper format. Paper format is a format that has not been produced yet. So, obviously, streamers are competing for eyeballs for subscriptions, they want that high-concept idea that they can roll out all over the world. For that, they need a paper format that has not been already produced so it is available in all territories. So that's really an opportunity for paper formats, obviously, it is one for the streamers, but also the streamers are competing with networks. So the network also is looking for that high-concept idea to get eyeballs. So they need to be more generous with the producer if they want that format because they know they're competing with the streamers that are taking all the rights. Most of them are taking all the international rights. So the network is actually giving sometimes better deals to the producer to get that paper format on their network because they know that as a producer, you'd rather not give all your rights away. You want to keep them to exploit throughout the world. So it is an opportunity on both sides.

What are your ambitions for Media Ranch? Will you remain independent?

Well, it's a funny question, but Hey! I don't know what time will tell, but I think we are. We are trying to build an international independent network, if you will, all the indies coming together and working as a group to compete with the groups because the groups have a massive pipeline and they have a lot of production facilities. So all the indies do not have access to that same pipeline. So if we work together, then we create our own pipeline. So maybe that's what we'll do. Well, that's what we're doing now. And we'll see how that goes but it's pretty exciting.

Well, we've done the future. Let's do the past. Tell us, how did you get to where you are, I'd love for you to share with our listeners your journey. You were born and now you're here, tell us what came in between.

Well, I was born a very long time ago but, I'm the second generation my dad was an independent producer and a serial entrepreneur and he was ahead of his time. He was doing shows big, massive high ratings show before it was the thing to do. So that's how I got into the business, but I think I got into business even earlier. I was watching TV all the time and not doing my homework or doing my homework in front of the TV. And my parents were always upset with me, always upset with me, but I had good marks, so they couldn't say much. And then when I worked for my dad in development, he was always asking me stuff about shows and because I watched everything, I sometimes even pretended to be sick just to watch the daytime shows. So, it was very practical for him when I worked for him because I knew all the shows. So that's how I got my start. So, then I left my dad and then I went into the corporate world. I was the only woman vice president in operations, in Technicolor worldwide. And I did all of these things. And then I came back to my roots in 2008, represented Endemol and launched Media Ranch. So I was always involved in content somehow. And when I was too far away from the content, I came back to it. I missed it.

Does Quebec punch above its weight on the global TV stage? I mean, you're an ambassador for the TV business there in many ways.

Well, thank you for saying that it's a role that I've taken because I see that Quebec is not present enough on the international level. That's why we created the incubator because we wanted to be part of that international global market. I think that Quebec and Canada are not present enough. So that's what we're trying to also accomplish is to bring Quebec and Canada to the table because we're as good, or better than other territories and smaller territories have a bigger, massive place in the marketplace. So, we should have our own place as well. So that's why I've been at it

for a very long time, and now I'm happy to see that a lot of other companies are following suit and also our government is helping these companies export their content.

What do you choose to watch for pleasure? You have a hard day at work. You kick your shoes off, you sit down on the couch, we'd call it a sofa here, and you turn the TV on what are you watching?

I don't know if I want to say this out loud because what I watch is sometimes really stupid and it's just for fun. One show that I always like to watch is 'Say Yes to the Dress', because for me, it's like, I'm always wanting to see the dress and, the drama around the dress. But, you know what's important, and what I always tell people is that you need to watch shows as a fan. And when you stop thinking about the production value and as you stop thinking about how they produce this and that they got you - that's great storytelling. So what I tend to watch is a lot of, things that I only watch as a fan. I don't watch it as a business. All day I watch shows for business reasons.

You switch off your TV head, if you don't mind me interrupting, so you can watch it, like, I was going to say as a human being, but do you know what I mean? Like, a non-technical person, you're not thinking, well, I wouldn't have framed this shot that way, or that pickup's not right. Or you can just sort of sit back and just eat some popcorn and watch TV in a normal way.

Totally. When I say as a fan, that's what I mean. It's like when they get me and when I'm saying, "oh my God, I didn't see that coming!" Now I know that's great storytelling, whatever it is, that's what I care about. So yes, I do that, but when it happens I'm happy when it doesn't happen it's because the show's not up to par, there's something wrong with it.

I'm trying to think of a polite way of saying, what do you do? Like, what does your job involve? What does a typical week look like? Could you paint a picture for our listeners of what a typical week is?

Well, it all depends on where I'm based. I split my time between Los Angeles and Montreal, but let's say right now I'm in Los Angeles, or even in Montreal. The first thing I do is I wake up and I look at my emails and my text and my WhatsApp. Because we work in so many different time zones. So, I need to catch up on what

happened in Europe, because we have a lot of business in Europe and Asia, so I'm catching up. And we do a lot of deals, a lot of contracts are being in and out, sent in and out. And then we look at acquisitions that people send us of their formats to consider for us to carry. We discuss with the team, we have acquisitions meetings, and we have development meetings because we also create our own formats. So, a typical week is a little difficult to say typical, but it's a lot of team meetings - on teams! Because most of us are not in the same country. So we have specific meetings to discuss management, whatever happens in the company and then getting ready for markets, acquisitions, sales, and then legal stuff, a lot of legal contracts in and out and questions and comments. So, it doesn't sound very exciting, but it is in a way because that's how the business is working. At least you're looking at content from all over the world, and then obviously we sell rights and windows of rights. So that's a big part of the business as well.

What advice would you give to someone starting out in your industry that's keen to progress and succeed?

Well, that's a great question and I'm often asked that because I do a lot of mentorships, and I always say, first of all, you need to work hard. The harder you work, the luckier you get, and then you need to do your research and you need to be prepared. So, let's say that you want to do format creation, or you want to do content creation. Look at what's out there, look at what people are asking for and do your own homework. And then when you want to approach people, do your homework too. If you approach us, let's say you approach me. And I often say if you see me come and see and say hi, because, we're always looking for the next best thing. But if you do approach me or any other person in the industry, do your homework, and don't pitch me a scripted show. I don't do scripted, things like that. And I think that you need to follow your passion, whatever you choose to do, you need to follow your passion because you will never be paid enough in your life. If you don't like what you do in any industry, the entertainment industry seems very glamorous and fun, and it is, but I just described to you, that the job is also very businessy and legal and there are less glamorous things to do. So you need to follow your passion and love it and give it your all, because if you do something because it just is safe, well, maybe you won't be as happy as you should be.

Let's get to the juicy stuff then. What have been the mistakes along the way? In North America, they call them teaching moments, they put a sort of really good spin on it and say, it's an opportunity for personal growth. In England,

we'd just say they're mistakes. There must have been some sort of moments along your journey where you've realized some lessons. Could you share those with our listeners?

You know what? I took some jobs for the wrong reasons. I took them for the paycheck. I took them for any other reason, other than that's what I wanted to do. I wanted to advance my career and it was not something that I really liked to do. So my mistake was not listening to my gut enough and not taking the chances early enough to do what I wanted. I think a lot of times I was convinced to go on the safe way, but the leap that I took in 2008 to create my own business, I should have taken way earlier. But again, I don't believe in regrets. So it's a mistake, but also it brought me to where I am today. Another mistake is you need to make sure that you work with people you respect and they respect you. You need to make sure that somebody has your back and you have everybody's back. I mean, these are all typical mistakes I think that you do when you're young, you get impressed by things that are, not that great. So today I'm not impressed by money. I'm not impressed by parties when I was younger, I was. And sometimes it doesn't send you in the right direction. Right?

But parties and money are good.

Yeah, they are good, but don't be impressed by them! I saw huge, huge companies throwing huge parties at a con and they went bankrupt six months later, I'm saying, don't be impressed like, "wow. This company has it all. It's a massive company and they're rich and whatever", don't be impressed by caviar and champagne, be impressed by work ethics and people and leadership team and mission and content.

No, that's crazy talk! I'll be impressed by the caviar and champagne, thank you. I'm only kidding, I'm a vegan teetotaler. So I, or anyone who knows me would know that I'm obviously joking. I mean, what are the challenges now in front of you? What keeps you up at night?

Well, we've been through a pandemic and now a recession is looming. So for business owners, forget my line of work, for business owners, that's a real concern. Our clients are hurting so that's a lot of pressure on cash flow. Also competing with the bigger groups is a lot of pressure as well. So we're not competing with the bigger groups, we cannot compete. We're just part of that industry, but they do push us to follow them. So that's a lot of pressure. So that keeps me up at night. I want to

remain relevant and I want to be a good company for my team to be working in. And I want everybody to be healthy, and the last two years were extremely stressful for the team and for me as a business owner, and we're all a little bit tired of all this, and I want to make sure that my team is well rested because we've been working so hard on this, these difficult times, and the coming year looks extremely busy. So that really is a big concern of mine.

Who are your heroes, both in the industry and in life, and what qualities in them do you admire?

Wow, it's difficult for me to name a person because I'm often impressed by so many people just by who they are. I've been lucky. I've been extremely lucky to have met many, many of the people I admire just because of their human aspect because they're so brilliant sometimes. I was in the brainstorming session and we were brainstorming and we had people from all over the globe and they were so good. I was saying, my God, this is a blessed moment for me. So I don't have heroes specifically. I tend to recognize talent in others and human qualities in others. And for me, that's what I like to do. And that's what I need. "Heroes" is a little heavy because I think even a hero does not want to be called a hero. It seems a little heavy of an outfit to wear.

I'm not sure. I would like to be described as a hero, but unfortunately, I'm not doing anything of any merit to deserve such an accolade.

Well, Paul, you are my hero.

Oh, now that's very nice.

Yes, you are.

That's what I was trying to build up to. I mean...

Yes, you are my hero.

I am susceptible to flattery, so thank you very much for that.

Me too.

What's the best part of your day in your job? Because like we all do, in the life of an entrepreneur, or a leader, I have 20 people on my staff. Some of it's mundane, if you look at my Instagram, there's some good stuff there, but it's only a partial bit of the truth because it ignores hours spent reading emails and staring at a screen.

Yeah.

What are the bits that you enjoy? I'll be honest. I love selling. I like beginning a relationship with a client and coming up with a strategy and I love the fact that I've got a really good team that helps me deliver that. But like, I said to my team, the analogy that I've laid bricks for so many years that I don't want to lay bricks. I want to stand over a team of bricklayers and I like supervising brick layers. I get to, sort of, help them without the physical effort of lifting the bricks.

Totally. I totally get that. I just love it when I read a pitch or when I see a sizzle that we just finished or did, I'm so happy. I love brainstorming with the team I love to see what they came up with and we challenge each other. That's the best part. Right now we're just putting the last touch on a pitch, it's been a very long pitch and we know we've cracked it. And so I was watching the sizzle, I think I watched the sizzle like 10 times and I said, wow, this is good. This is so good. So that's the best part of my journey to see also the creative people doing what we do. And I see our signature on the creative. I'm so proud of that. That's the best part.

Do you ever see a show or a format and you think, dang, I wish I had thought of that?

Yes. And you know what? I tend to reach out to that person and say, I wish I had thought of that, congratulations. I really, really like the people that are doing great stuff because we need to get that much better the next time. I'm a fan, I'm in TV content because I'm a fan. So, when I see something that I like, I just say it and I say, "I hope we can work together. Maybe we can't work together on this, but maybe we can let me know how, and if I can be of service."

How do you get creative? Like how do you engender that creativity as a leader and even personally, because, I don't know about you, but I'm so busy sometimes reacting to emails? Actually, my best ideas come to me when I'm in

the shower or like when I'm driving where I'm awake, but I'm not snoozing. But on the other hand, I don't have stuff to distract me. And, it also like fascinates me in terms of individually, but also collectively as a team. Do you have, like, I imagine these brainstorm sessions, does someone throw a football around the room and whoever captures it has to come up with an idea? How do you engender that culture of creativity within your firm?

Well, first of all, we've been brainstorming on zooms lately. So, the football doesn't work, but we make sure that everybody feels safe and fine and there's no dumb idea. I know that's a classic, but it's so true. And then the ideas, I agree with you, they come out of the blue and when I'm away from the office, especially when I'm on vacation, walking on the beach, it's crazy, all these ideas that come through, so you need to be open to them. And we just discuss them together and then it comes. We've got flashes like, Hey, how about this? And then let's sleep on it and come back to it because sometimes you can't figure it out. So I don't know. I don't think we have a specific creative way to our creative business. If you will, we tend to share videos and ideas and we just talk them out, talk them out, talk them out and take the time to do that. And it takes a lot of time, especially game shows, anything that has gameplay involved, you need to rest it and you need to take it in and then wait. But, as a business owner, it's not only the creative that we're brainstorming, I'm brainstorming my business all the time. And again, like you, it comes when I'm far away from my emails. It comes when I'm just doing my own stuff. And then you say, how come I didn't think about that before? It's so obvious.

All of those best ideas do seem obvious in hindsight, don't they?

Yes, yes, yes.

How much of it is your job where you're like a football team or a soccer team manager where you wear a big sheep skin coat. Basically, you are looking at talent in other teams who's up and coming, would your team be better if that striker from the other team or was, the analogy's running out, but do you know what I mean? You must have to keep an eye on some people. In some industries, there's a lot of movement between brands and teams and then in others, that's unthinkable, like the Queensbury rules that you would never poach someone else's staff. What's the culture within the industry and how do you go about fostering and frankly, recruiting new talent?

Well, in the industry, I'll often joke that we're only 10 in the format business and we just move around because it's basically, people are always moving around, especially in the big groups, but in our team actually, there has been no movement, from at least for the last six years, because we're so tight-knit and we're smaller than the big groups. But what we do is that we work a lot with third-party creators from all over the world. We are actually closing a deal with the massive format creator in Asia, and we have one with sweet pumpkin in Korea. We have many outside creators that work with us. So that's the way we keep things fresh. I don't poach people necessarily. And, it's not something that we've been doing at all. We've just been working with freelancers and with the format incubator that we are creating, our local expertise. A lot of these creators come to us when they have a format, they don't need to come to us, but they tend to come to us directly. We have that school if you want to go to as well. So that's how we keep everything fresh.

What's next in terms of, where you see things going over the next few years? Do you have any big unticked boxes on the old to-do list?

Well, we're looking forward to having some great big entertainment formats on air. We still have not had that big entertainment show on air in more than one territory. So, right now we're working on the Just Dance Ubisoft format that we are bringing to the market right now. So we're looking forward to having that show, obviously, being commissioned. And, what's next for Media Ranch is to work more with brands as we did with Ubisoft, we have another deal with Ubisoft for another one of their brands and we want to go more in that area, work with brands to TV create formats around their brands. So that's what's next. And also, being more involved in the global market and opening up new territories where we're not strong enough,

What is the international scene like? Does the Canadian government support you in terms of your Canadian success? Do they help you in terms of that outreach? Is it a truly international marketplace where essentially it doesn't matter where you are because you're competing in the globalized marketplace against firms from London, Los Angeles, Sydney, and Australia, how does it actually work globally?

Well, the Canadian government does help, but it does not help a lot, not enough. That's why we tend to work with the global market more than the Canadian government because IP is something they are starting to get. We know at Media Ranch, we took that root of the international market way earlier than the others,

because we were working with Endemol. So we saw the business model and we saw the money that was being traded. So we got there before the other Canadian companies got there, but the Canadian government is not really helping a lot or not enough. Even the Canadian investors are not in that area - not now, but I'm sure they will be there. But the global format industry is basically based in Europe, and Asia - these are the big players. And also right now, as I've mentioned, we are opening up Los Angeles in a way that we've gone for the last two years. We've come from one deal to over 20. I've never seen such a big appetite for formats in the states before. So we're hoping to solidify our position here and have even more deals here. But I don't see the market being very strong in Canada right now.

Overall, you strike me as an optimist.

Yes, or naive!

You just don't know, do you?

No, but you know what, it's your choice, right? You either are an optimist or not. I am and thank God I am. Because as a business owner, you need to be, and you have a team that, that is counting on you and your clients are counting on you. So yes, I do believe that things, the best is always yet to be - that's my motto.

It sounds to me like funding is the elephant in the room here. Is that what is keeping you up, in terms of, if you can solve that problem, that's going to be the springboard to huge growth?

Oh, for sure. For sure. Because, like, I referred to the 20 deals we have in the states. We could have 35 deals in the states. The reason that we don't is that we don't have the resources. I mean, as I referred to my team, we've been pushing, pushing, pushing so much. And when we see everything we have in the pipeline, people say, my God, how many are you? You're six? Like, yes, we are six! So, I wish we could have more funding. I wish we could have access to more resources to be able to push it through and do our growth strategy, and live our vision.

Sophie, you've got an absolutely fascinating business and you're doing amazing work. That was a hugely interesting conversation. I'm very grateful for your time, and I wish you the very, very best of luck.

Well, thank you, Paul. It's been a pleasure to speak to you and you know what, you are my hero.

Wow. I'm very grateful.

Well, wasn't that amazing? It was created and produced by Podcast Partners. They are really lovely people and rather good at all this podcasting guff. Find out more at podcastpartners.com.