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Virtual Pitch Fest - a Review

by Aaron Pope

We assigned Coverage Ink senior story analyst Aaron Pope to get the nitty-gritty on query service Virtual Pitch Fest. None of us expected this would turn into a life-altering experience.

One week later,
I'd signed with a top management company.

The times, they are a-changin'. Gone are the days when a writer in search of an agent, manager, or producer had to type a query letter, lick a stamp, drop it in the mail, and then wait weeks, even months, before finally realizing no response was forthcoming. It's an electronic world these days, and so it's no surprise that someone has created a way to streamline that process, combining the widespread access offered at in-person pitchfests with the ease and simplicity of sending an e-mail.

virtual pitchfest
bringing Hollywood to you

It's called Virtual Pitch Fest. VPF is the brainchild of producer and script coach David Kohner Zuckerman, who designed the website to give writers a level of access they wouldn't otherwise have. And writers have

taken notice, using the site to gain entry into companies they previously couldn't reach. "Normally you'd have to have one of the major agencies backing you up to submit to them," says horror scribe and VPF user Pete Cafaro. "This gives an unproduced writer, possibly sitting on the next big thing, access he wouldn't usually have."

Here's how it works. You go to the website, subscribe for free, then buy a pitch package. The Standard Package offers five pitches for \$50 and the VIP Package gets you ten for 90 bucks. "It's definitely worth the money," according to Cafaro. "I've been to pitchfests that charge over twice as much per pitch."

Once you've bought your package, you're ready to pitch...

This isn't a chance to pitch. It's a chance to *query*.

Er, well, not pitch exactly. You're ready to query. That's what Virtual Pitch Fest is really. It's not the same as the in-person or online pitchfests, in which you get to sit down across from some low-level exec and sweat through your overly polished pitch as fast as you can before the bell rings. What you're doing here is writing a query letter.

Is that worth the money? For something you could already do? With a little bit of Googling, you could track down most of these email addresses and send these same query letters. Sound like I'm bagging on Virtual Pitch Fest? Not in the least. I love it.

Why? Because what you get by submitting through VFP that you don't get otherwise is a guaranteed response. Anybody who's sent out multiple query letters in the past knows that this is, well, priceless. Most queries go straight to the recycle bin. But with VFP, the producers, agents, and managers who've signed on have agreed to not just always give a response but to do so within five days. VFP pays them a gratuity for each letter they respond to, but according to Zuckerman, that's not the real reason they do it. "Their incentive is mostly to try to find a new writer or project," he says, "because most of them are making about 25 dollars extra a month."



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Would you like to read this script?

Yes No thanks

Please indicate any reasons for your "no thanks" response by clicking on the boxes to the right. Please indicate all boxes that might apply. Thank you!

I/we have something similar
 Not interested in subject matter at this time
 Budget too high
 Budget too low
 Nothing personal, just didn't grab me

Only if you have time, please list any comments on the query letter you might have. (optional)

Thanks for your pitch, John, however we currently have something very similar in development. Please try us again if you have more projects to pitch. Thanks!

Sample "No Thanks" reply. Pope scored an astonishing 50% success rate.

So how can you rise to the top and prove yourself and your script to be that new writer or project worth the industry pro's while? It all starts with a strong query letter, the first glimpse that producer, agent, or manager has at your writing chops. But query letters are a different animal than screenplays; it's important to make sure yours kicks butt. Fortunately, VFP offers sample letters on their site to help you hone your approach. It's a very helpful tool.

Time to give VFP a whirl. I signed up and sent out ten submissions. The first response came within hours. By the end of the first day, I'd gotten replies from four companies. The next day, three more filtered in. By the fourth day, all ten companies had responded. Five companies asked me to send my script; five passed. Five out of ten, according to Zuckerman, is "a very successful rate." I guess those last six months developing my actioner and tightening my logline through Coverage, Ink paid off! The replies ranged from the generic "No thanks, but thank you for submitting" to a minimalist "Yes" to one very enthusiastic "Thank God! Finally something I want to read!" I followed up on those five positive responses and within another day, one high-powered agency contacted me asking to schedule a meeting.

One week later, I'd signed with a top management company and am currently hip-pocketed by the agency in question, pending officially getting signed.

Okay, one might say these results are fairly exceptional. In truth, I may have had a bit of an unfair advantage, in that I had the full resources of Coverage Ink behind me in developing the script through 14 drafts, not to mention produced credits. Regardless, VFP is affordable, offers real access and a guaranteed response... a nice little resource.

Still, there are downsides. As I mentioned earlier, their name is a little misleading. This isn't a chance to pitch; it's a chance to *query*. If you're planning to use your infectious personality to win them over in the room, you're out of luck. You have to write a dynamic query letter. Virtual Query Fest? Sure, it doesn't sound quite as nice, but it would be more accurate.

What you get by submitting through VFP that you don't get otherwise is a guaranteed response.

Another drawback is the way the responses come to you. You receive an email telling you an industry pro has replied, but the email doesn't have the reply or the name of the industry pro in it. Now you have to go to the website, log in, and look at your list of submissions. Next to the names of the industry contacts, you will see a status which will either say "submitted," meaning you haven't gotten a response yet, or "responded," meaning you have. Once you click on "responded," you get their response. For me, this wasn't a difficult process because I only queried ten companies. But what if I'd queried 50? Or more? I'd have to scroll through, try to remember which ones I'd already checked, and try to find which industry pro had replied to my query. Simply giving us the name of the responder in that notification e-mail would make the process considerably more user-friendly.

But these minor annoyances aside, the fact is that I found VFP to be a very impressive, inexpensive and user-friendly way to reach out to industry pros and get a prompt and guaranteed response. So take the time necessary to develop your screenplay until it is bulletproof, hone your query skills and start digging change from the couch cushions. You'll be invading inboxes in no time.

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