

Reality-TV Casting Director Vinnie Potestivo on Finding Just the Right Amount of Crazy

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Vinnie Potestivo knows a thing or two about casting reality-TV shows. He got his start at the Tom Green show on MTV, and went on to cast all the MTV V.J.'s, as well as Fashionably Loud and the Road Rules shows. He now runs his own company, Vinnie Potestivo Entertainment, which cast and produced Sunset Daze, the new Real World-for-senior-citizens show on WE (a new episode premieres tonight). He's also currently casting for season four of Bravo's the Millionaire Matchmaker, which is set in New York. We spoke to Potestivo about the casting process, what to look for in a potential TV star, and the differences in casting for a show about older ladies and gents, as opposed to drunk twentysomethings.

What was the difference for you in casting a show about retirees, as opposed to something like the Real World?

When you're doing story-driven reality shows, a lot of times they're teenagers. I come from the MTV world; I understand why. The stakes are high; the emotions are high and volatile. You get a great story out of them because of the reactions. Here, for Sunset Daze, these people have stories. Even in the casting process, I was in Phoenix for a bit, and I watched the sixth game of the World Series with a guy who was rooting for the Yankees because as a 5-year-old, he saw Babe Ruth play on the Brooklyn Dodgers. One of the women we met was one of the original receptionists at Motown Records. There's just these amazing, amazing stories in there. It puts things in perspective. And they're still having fun. They're still jumping out of planes and going on first dates. They're just like us. It's weird.

So how did you actually find these people?

Sunset Daze was unique, because there was a location to choose talent from. And the production company chose Surprise, Arizona, because of its reputation of having young-at-heart seniors. I'm at a karaoke bar at 2 p.m., at happy hour, and someone gets up there and they catch your eye. I'll approach them and talk to them, explain what the opportunity is. And then I'll usually say, "So, what's going on in your life?" And they've gotta be interested and engaged at this point. Especially at this point in reality television, 'cause you can smell a setup. You can smell phony.

How so?

You can tell in their story. You can tell in how much they want to give, and how much they want to participate in a simple interview. You can tell by their attention to detail and focus on the actual opportunity.

Give me an example. Someone whose story is too perfect, or ...

Well, no. It's someone who's just like, "I'll do anything." Or we'll ask, "How would you feel about this situation?" And they'll say, "Oh, I love that situation."

They're answering what they would think that you want to hear.

Right. I've also been doing this for a while, too, so. You know, you get one bad apple in a series or in a production that you're working with, it could really ruin it for everybody. So, that's why casting is so subjective.

What are some trends in reality TV that you're seeing now?

Inner beauty is huge. Interestingly enough, you find inner-beauty contests on style networks. It's traditionally where you would think of it being an exterior motive. But you're really getting much deeper. And definitely finding: finding love, finding lost ones, finding family, finding friends — like rekindling.

Have you ever found a diamond in the rough, who went on to become a big star?

You know who was really tough to find? Vanessa Minnillo. I mean, look at the success of Jenny McCarthy, you know what I mean? You get this gorgeous girl who everyone wanted, as a girl you wanted to be her — and you don't get that a lot with females — and guys wanted to be with her, and yet she was just still cool, and grounded, and the girl next door. It took a while to find that type. Those V.J.'s that helmed TRL, to be honest, that was a really challenging show, because you needed to find young hosts. Preferably with not a lot of host experience, because you want them to have a vulnerable and sincere side to them, and not be too academic about it. So, it takes a lot of research. Someone like Damien was months of scouring every radio station, and Damien was interning at a local Boston station, and we met him in the basement while we were doing auditions.