



Staten Island Advance

Casting agent Vinnie Potestivo is recruiting more reality TV stars from Staten Island

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STATEN ISLAND, NY -- Vinnie Potestivo is looking for Staten Island millionaires — because he knows we have potential.

“I’m from the South Shore,” says the tall, scruffy-chinned 32-year-old. “I’ve seen the houses. I know how big those fountains can be. My dad’s got one with dogs in it. It’s ridiculous.”

No, Potestivo — also known as “Vinnie P” or “YoitsVinnie” on Twitter and MySpace — is not soliciting investors for a Ponzi scheme. He’s just trying to do his job, which this week, happens to be casting the fourth season of Bravo’s reality TV hit, “Millionaire Matchmaker.”

The series — which is coming to New York City from Los Angeles — is a perfect combination of reality schadenfreude and hopeful possibility. Patti Stanger, a Jewish matchmaking powerhouse with severe bangs and even more severe rules for courtship, tries to create sparks between people with money looking for love and vice versa — sometimes getting surprisingly genuine results.

Why is Vinnie the guy for Bravo’s producers on the East Coast? With nearly a decade of casting experience for MTV, and thorough knowledge of reality TV production and brand development, the Tottenville High and Wagner College grad is far from a newcomer to the scene. But his new company, Vinnie Potestivo Entertainment, has gone from 2 to 15 employees in less than two years, proving with numbers that he is a rising talent in what he does.

“We like to think of ourselves as a New York company with LA contacts,” says Potestivo, who got into broadcasting as a teenage Great Kills resident learning the ropes at CTV. “I’m hopping from network to network, show to show. Talent is a universal language; what I try and do is take different forms and put them together.”

It’s this attitude that helped Potestivo stand out from the pack in the beginning.

“He’s very upbeat, optimistic, and life-affirming, and it makes you want to be around him,” says Gary Sullivan, director of Wagner’s arts administration department. “He’s constantly thinking about the other person’s future, and there’s a lot of people in the business who aren’t as altruistic. He’s always trying to open a door for someone.”

Look on the walls of Potestivo’s cramped-but-organized Midtown offices, housed with graphic designers and worker bee casting bookers, and you’ll get an idea of what Sullivan means. Framed posters of shows like South Beach modeling fiasco “8th & Ocean” hang next to Ashlee Simpson’s first gold record — which doubtless got a boost from “The Ashlee Simpson Show,” the MTV series Vinnie helped create.

“At MTV, what we were doing was beyond just in-house casting,” says Potestivo. “We were also managing to a certain degree. We were teaching word phrasing and pronunciation — funny for a guy from Staten Island of all places — and helping talent get good at reading TelePrompters, and to be conscious of their looks.”

With a resume that includes casting and even talent coaching for everything from MTV’s “Pimp My Ride” and “The Hills” to CNN’s “Hannity & Colmes,” as well as sniffing out MTV personalities like Gideon Yago and Vanessa Minnillo, Potestivo can speak with experience about a variety of programming.

Minnillo, who is currently working her “dream job” acting in a half-hour, multi-camera sitcom pilot titled “This Little Piggy” (about a family who loses all their money and has to move back in together), says Potestivo is the real deal.

“When I say Vinnie single-handedly got me my job at MTV and ‘TRL,’ I mean it — he made it his mission to sell me to the network,” Minnillo said, via cell phone from the West Coast. “When I came to New York from LA for my audition, and I was sick, he brought me tea and soup. My first day on the job I was literally thrown to the wolves — on the beach interviewing Chingy. But Vinnie took me under his wing. He’s very tangible, not the type of executive you can’t reach, and he was just a very good friend.”

Potestivo joined up with MTV in 1998, after being stopped by a casting director on the street who thought he might work on a show. Now, Potestivo and his street teams do the same, carrying informational fliers about audience or show casting events. As the network was moving definitively away from music-centric programming and toward the reality TV docu-series format, Potestivo and his young coworkers were learning the ropes together.

“It was an exciting time to be there — the network was literally creating pop culture,” says powerhouse Christine Cowan. “You’d be out to lunch and overhear somebody talking about something you’d done behind the scenes. Those water-cooler moments are what we live for.”

Now, Potestivo and Cowan are trying to create those moments with their new business while working with production companies, show producers and networks. But Potestivo says he's not all about making the next "Jersey Shore," the insanely popular show that many Staten Islanders saw as insult upon injury to the borough.

"Staten Island has great characters, we know that, right?," says Potestivo. "I embrace it 100 percent. I look at 'Jersey Shore' and I'm like, 'I went to school with those kids.' It's hard to find a person with integrity whose story is worth listening to, but that's the sort of stuff that attracts us."

Potestivo says there are two types of docu-series reality TV: Aspirational and inspirational. The former plays to our propensity for materialism and keeping up with the Joneses, the latter plays to our better instincts. Recent projects, like We TV's "Sunset Daze," which follows the adventures of retirees, reflect what Potestivo says is his company's goal to tell the real stories of a variety of people.

Up next: Along with searching for love-hungry millionaires, Vinnie Potestivo Entertainment is casting for a show that will follow first-time mothers as they experience their pregnancy. The compensation is minimal — people who get on reality shows are expected to use their newfound TV fame to make a living off-screen — but those who make it on air will supposedly gain access to some of the best doctors money can buy.

Is it worth it? It takes a certain kind of person to want that kind of exposure — but Potestivo and company seem confident some Staten Islanders out there are the right type for the job.

"If you are an outgoing woman early in your first pregnancy who can't wait to show off her baby bump and eager to share the details of their experience with an audience," says the application area of VinnieP.com, "We want to hear from you!"