



10 Things I Wish Someone Had Told Me in Film School

BY PHIL COOKE

Professors teach you knowledge about your field – and that’s a huge challenge, which is why they don’t often have time to teach about the relational issues of your field. Here are a handful of practical issues that I’ve learned over the years on TV and film sets around the world. Had I known them in college, it might have changed the direction of my career. Let me know what you think of this list:

1. Hollywood doesn’t care about you.

Silicon Valley doesn’t care about you. Nobody cares about you. You have to earn it. Don’t be the first in line at lunch. Give up your seat for a client. Don’t take the closest parking space. We all know you’re a genius and should actually be directing the movie, but right now, you need to pay your dues. Take charge of your career because nobody else will.

2. Resumes matter less than demo reels and portfolios.

It’s too easy to stretch the truth on a resume, plus, producers want to see your work. Make it compelling, and make it current.

Here are a few tips of making your demo reel memorable.

3. Write more.

It’s all about writing. Even if you won’t want to become a professional writer, study writing. After all, before you decide to spend the next year working on a film, you need to know if the script is worth it.

4. Know how television REALLY works.

When I started in my career, I had no idea what a “show runner” was. In fact, although the role existed, I don’t think that title was actually invented. But with my skill set, it would have been the perfect career path. But because I didn’t know the business, I spent too many years moving in the wrong direction.

5. Pursue YOUR vision, not someone else’s.

Certainly you can start your career doing projects for other people. But if you’re serious about changing the world, don’t live at someone else’s whim.

6. Learn the importance of the niche.

Be the best in the world at a really narrow brand. Read my book “One Big Thing.” It will transform your perception, focus, and identity in the industry.

7. Consider starting as an assistant.

When I left college, I wanted to direct, so it never occurred to me to get an office job, or work as an assistant. But recently, a former assistant of mine eventually moved to Disney, and now has taken a job as a financial manager for Marvel and is leaving this week to work on the next Spider-man movie. Another assistant of mine ended up taking the Director’s Guild assistant director’s test, and graduated to work on “The Office” and is now an A.D. on network TV dramas. Being an assistant allows you to develop relationships, and learn how the business is done from the inside. Being an assistant isn’t for everyone, but I’d encourage you to consider it.

8. Being a Christian isn’t the problem in Hollywood.

Being lousy is. In this post I talk about why Hollywood isn’t anti-Christian. What Hollywood happens to be is anti-lousy. Excellence matters.

9. C.S. Lewis’ stepson, Douglas Gresham had it right:

We don’t need more Christian movies, we need more Christians making good movies.

10. Learn the power of networking, because it’s far more than simply shameless self-promotion.

The truth is, people just like to work with people they know. Work is always better when you’re doing it with friends. In my experience, most people would turn down a better candidate to work with someone they know and respect.



Is Hollywood
Anti-Christian?

I get asked (usually from Christian media) if I believe Hollywood is anti-Christian. I understand the question, because it's pretty easy to see that Judeo-Christian values aren't exactly the hot button these days in the movie and television industries. And yet, to make a blanket statement that Hollywood is the enemy is a big mistake. Recently, I discussed the issue with a major Christian media site, and here's what I told them. I'd love to hear your comments about my answers:

1. What's your response when you hear Christians complain that Hollywood is anti-Christian?

It certainly hasn't been true in my experience. Obviously there are people in Hollywood who don't like religion, just like there are attorneys, school teachers, plumbers, and store clerks across the country who don't like religion. But in my experience the vast majority of producers, actors, filmmakers, and studio executives in Hollywood are very open. In most cases (again, like the general culture) these men and women weren't raised in a Christian home, so they're largely ignorant of any knowledge about the Christian faith. But that doesn't make them "anti-faith." In fact, I've had some remarkable conversations with industry leaders about Christianity, and you'd be amazed at the number of highly placed entertainment and media professionals who are believers.

2. But what about specific examples of Hollywood being anti-faith?

I think in most cases, the idea that Hollywood is "anti-faith" is a gimmick used by some Christian organizations to raise money. It's a well-used technique in fundraising to create an enemy so your followers will respond. I also believe that some Christians can be too quick to use terms like "mockery" when movies don't portray Bible stories accurately. Most filmmakers don't believe the Bible, but that doesn't mean they don't see the value in its great stories. However, since they're not believers, they don't feel the loyalty to the story that we do, so as creative artists, they don't see a problem deviating from the storyline. But it's not about "mockery" or being "anti-faith."

3. Until 2013, Hollywood rarely touched faith. TV still keeps an arm's distance from religious topics. Why is this, especially in light of the success of shows like "7th Heaven?"

To be honest, that program was popular an entire generation ago, so it's not really relevant to the conversation. Tastes change, culture changes, trends change, people change – so you can't really compare what was popular 20+ years ago with what's popular today. Keep in mind that Hollywood is a business – not a religious organization, so their goal (like any other business) is to make a profit for their investors and shareholders. Creative people create based on what they know, and frankly, as I mentioned before, most Hollywood professionals simply didn't grow up in Christian families, so to produce faith-based programming simply isn't on their radar. One important inroad I've made is to point out to studios that Hollywood bends over backwards to reach special interest groups of all kinds – like feminists, environmentalists, the gay community, the military, gamers, etc. – but by the numbers, Christians are the largest "special interest" group there is. And yet many in Hollywood don't understand what makes us tick. There are a handful of us in town trying to turn that around, and after years working in the industry, I can say that for the vast majority of cases, it's simply a world they've never grown up in or encountered.

4. Is there anything Christians do to improve the lack of faith-related programming in Hollywood (rather than simply complain)?

- It's my position that boycotts, petition drives, etc. are very damaging to our cause. If that worked, then why don't missionaries do it? Why don't

missionaries surround a Third World village, hold up signs, call them names, and threaten to never do business with them? Boy, THAT would win them to Christ. Not!

What do missionaries do? They work from the inside, building relationships, earning trust, and becoming one of them. Once they've earned the right to speak, that's when change happens.

- Let's preview movies and tell Christians (especially families with kids) what's in them. I'm all for reviews and recommendations that let people know what's there so they can decide for themselves. Everyone has the right not to see a movie, but when it comes to major, orchestrated criticism, let's actually see the movie before we launch a national campaign. I'm a firm believer that to criticize a movie, book, TV program or other endeavour in the media without actually seeing it is intellectually dishonest. When Christian leaders mount massive campaigns against movies they haven't even seen it really hurts our credibility outside the Christian bubble.

- I'd like to see the Christian community criticize less and begin raising up our own filmmakers, writers, and producers to go into the industry. Let's focus less on making explicitly "Christian" films and more on getting Christian thinking into mainstream movies. Even with the success of a few movies like "God's Not Dead," they're largely seen by the choir. That's not influencing the culture. I'm talking about the same strategy the gay community used and it was brilliant. They helped find talented gay filmmakers, developed relationships with studios and TV networks, mentored them, and helped fund their projects. And just look at the results. We're actually in the early stages of that strategy with an organization we've launched called "The Influence Lab."

- Finally (and here's a novel idea) let's pray for Hollywood. If we really believe that God answers prayer, what if we started encouraging Christians to pray for the most influential industry on the planet? What if we started praying for the thousands of dedicated believers working inside the industry every day? I think that would have far greater results than boycotts, petition drives, and criticism. For help starting, check out The Hollywood Prayer Network.

5. What trends, if any, when it comes to film and TV content are troubling to you (sex, violence, etc.)?

A very big issue for me is how technology has made pornography so readily available to children. It's not just movies or TV, its video games, the Internet, and now mobile devices. I'm stunned at how few parents monitor their children's computer use or use anti-porn filters on computers. I also encourage parents to never allow young people to have computers in their bedroom. When our daughters were young, we kept all the computers out in the open where everyone could see what they were doing. The question is – what will a culture look like when boys have been raised with pornography so readily available? It will dramatically change their views and expectations of women, and we're already seeing that evidence.

6. What has been the biggest lesson you've learned about faith in Hollywood?

Never be afraid to be a Christian in Hollywood. Trust me – there are folks out here who hug trees and worship rocks, so being a Christian isn't as weird as some think. And if you want to make an impact, don't lead with your faith. Lead with your talent – your acting, writing, directing, or producing abilities. Once they notice and respect your talent, they're much more willing to listen to anything else you have to say.