With, rightly, much weight given to a director’s ideas and creative insight, does the employment of a ghostwriter for treatments dilute that vision? We put the pseudonymous Alf, from creative services company The Moon Unit, in email contact with Friend London director, Ian Pons Jewell, and asked: is a treatment personally written by a director preferable to one that’s been ghostwritten?

I think this answer depends on who you are. If I was a creative, I think I’d prefer to have one that’s been personally written. If I’m an EP at the production company, perhaps I’d prefer a ghostwritten one if it makes for a better chance of winning the job.

As a director, I try to write my own treatments as I feel it’s far more personal and authentic. Sometimes it’s not possible due to a heavy work schedule and there are certain projects that can be more suitable for a ghostwriter. It also really depends on who’s ghostwriting… good ones can add a lot of ideas to the piece and that’s only ever a good thing for everyone.

Yes, agree – it really does depend on who you are. Some directors are brilliant visually but aren’t great writers. Others don’t have English as a first language. Or are simply too busy. Should they be under-represented because of these situations?

Ad agency creatives might say they can always spot ghostwritten treatments but that’s just sloppy writing – good ghostwriters can adopt a range of voices, tones and styles depending on multiple remits. Authenticity should never be an issue.

The real question here is what will win the pitch?

I also agree with your point about good ghostwriters adding ideas to the piece. That’s where it gets interesting – when the writer becomes an extension of the director’s core team, just like DPs, editors, composers or the VFX.

Broadly, the more battle-hardened/senior the director, the more open to collaboration they are. Occasionally junior directors find it harder to share creative ideas freely as they may feel their position may be somehow undermined. It definitely isn’t, but comfort levels will fluctuate according to several parameters.
Absolutely. I think not being fluent in English, or lacking writing skills shouldn’t ever put a director at a disadvantage. After all, directors who are too busy to express their vision properly to a ghostwriter can (and should) be at a disadvantage for a reason. I’ve been there when a director has done a call with a ghostwriter giving them almost nothing creatively and leaving them to write the entire thing blind. This ghostwriter, on another occasion, has also done an entire treatment that had almost no creative input from the agency and nothing from the director. They spoke to the production company only, and were left to come up with it all.

Though I know this is certainly not common, there are cases of directors getting away with not doing much in the treatment stage. We’re paid high sums for the work, and this level of disengagement at the creative development stage shouldn’t be supported.

Winning the pitch is, of course, the end goal, but the treatment is a creative contract with an agency and needs to have the director concerned, basically, with ghostwriting if I was agency side – is the director truly behind these ideas?

That’s very true what you say about junior directors. I mean, the reason I was asked to take part in this was because I’ve done a fair few jobs in this early stage of my commercials career, and I’m already of a very different opinion. I really enjoy co-writing with a ghostwriter, even if I have the time to write it myself, though this tends to only be for American commercials.

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