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How to Get Ahead in Television

Written by Sophie Cousens

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How to
GET
AHEAD in
Television

SOPHIE COUSENS



CORVUS

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STEP 1 - WRITE TO EVERYONE, AND I MEAN EVERYONE

(date)

Dear (*someone who works at a TV company*)

I am a hardworking, enthusiastic individual, and feel I could contribute a great deal to (*insert name of TV company*). I have been an avid follower of (*some programme this TV company make*) for many years now, and would love the chance to join such a winning team! (*Find out something they make, and insert witty and relevant comment about how much I appreciate their genius*).

I am available to help in **any** capacity, and would relish the opportunity to exhibit my flair and enthusiasm in person.

I enclose my CV.

Yours expectantly

Poppy Penfold

‘POPPY, DEAR,’ my mum’s voice rang up the stairs, ‘I’ve been talking to Lorraine next door. You know her son Ian works at Lloyds?’

‘Oh yes,’ I called down from my bedroom.

Even though I barely knew the man, Lorraine’s-son-Ian-who-works-at-Lloyds dispensed a ridiculous amount of advice to me via my mother. Last week it was something about my

student loan repayments. I was watching *Cash in the Attic* at the time, so wasn't sure if the advice was to increase or decrease my repayments for optimal financial efficiency.

'Anyway,' my mother went on, 'Lorraine was telling me that Ian says it's dreadfully difficult to get into television.'

Ah, the old 'why do you want to work in TV?' debate, I should have guessed.

'Oh yes?' I shouted again.

'Very tricky career. No security apparently, very little chance of a decent pension scheme ...'

I could tell this wasn't going to be a conversation where I could get away with intermittently shouting 'Oh yes?' in Mum's general direction.

I put down the book I was reading, *How to Get a Job You Love*, and looked up at the hand-made motivational wall chart I'd placed above my bed. At the top it said: 'Poppy's Steps Towards Becoming A Proper Grown-Up', then beneath was a list:

- 1 Find job you love (preferably in TV).
- 2 Move out of parents' house.
- 3 Start wearing proper 'outfits' (not just jeans and T-shirts).
- 4 Earn enough money to own more than three items of footwear. (*Not including running trainers ... flip flops ... or those uncomfortable clogs you bought.*)
- 5 Be able to watch what *YOU* want to watch on TV in evenings. (No more of Mum's house makeover shows/ Dad's railway documentaries.)
- 6 Stop writing childish lists instead of sending out your CV ...

This was as far as I'd got. Numbers seven to ten lay blank. I'd started the summer with such enthusiasm, but after two months of job-hunting, my eagerness about the world that awaited post university was beginning to wane.

'Poppy, you hear what I said about the pensions?' my mother called again.

I plodded downstairs to the kitchen.

Mum was putting the finishing touches to one of her famous Bombe Alaskas.

‘Ah, there you are, dear. Did you hear what I said about the pensions?’

‘Yes, Mum, but I haven’t even got my first job yet, so I’m not sure pensions are my biggest priority.’

‘Well it’s not only the financial insecurity. Ian said his main concern about TV is the amount of “media types”.’

‘Well TV is a media, Mum, I’m not surprised it’s full of “media types”.’

‘Yes, but you know, *meeedia* types,’ Mum hissed, raising a concerned eyebrow.

‘What does that even mean?’ I asked, loosening the dog’s lead. She’d been tied to the radiator and couldn’t reach her water bowl.

‘*Drugs*,’ said Mum in a dramatic stage whisper.

This was an argument I hadn’t heard before. We’d been through the ‘But it’s not putting your history degree to good use, Poppy’ from my father, but ‘drugs’; this was an entirely new approach.

‘Lorraine-next-door’s-son-Ian really said that everyone in TV is on drugs, did he?’ I asked sceptically.

‘Not exactly, dear, but you know it’s full of those types of people. Boys wearing jeans designed for girls, girls with pink hair; “Hopsters” I think the *Telegraph* called them.’

‘I think you mean hipsters.’

I could see my mother’s mind connecting the dots. First I’d dye my hair pink, then date a guy who wore skinny jeans and a bushy beard, and by this time next year I’d be a crack whore living under Hoxton arches.

‘You really don’t want to apply for a job at Lloyds? I’m sure they could get past the fact that you don’t have Maths?’

‘No, Mum, I don’t want to be a banker, thank you. I want to work in TV.’

‘Well it sounds like an awfully precarious career, and you don’t seem to be finding it easy, dear. How many applications have you sent off already?’

‘Well you can’t really “apply” for a job, Mum. You just have to send off emails asking companies if they need a runner or something and try to get your foot in the door.’

‘Seems a strange way to run a business, doesn’t it?’ said Mum, slapping my hand away from the bowl of raw meringue.

‘Yes, well, I don’t make the rules,’ I said, picking up my coat and untying the dog.

The only escape from my parents’ house in rural Dorset was taking the dog for a walk. As I pulled on my jacket, Maddy wasn’t looking too enthusiastic. When I’d first come home from university and started using her as an escape tool she’d been more than willing, but lately she’d become more reluctant. It might have something to do with the fact that I usually walked her to the top of the closest hill to get mobile reception, then left her to her own devices as I chatted to my friends. She’d cottoned on to my strategy and no longer deemed such walks worth leaving the sofa for.

‘Well, just promise your father and I that you’ll think about what else you might do, you know, if you don’t hear from the hopsters soon?’ said Mum, admiring her towering creation of cake and meringue.

‘That’s not going to fit in the Aga, Mum,’ I pointed out, ‘it’s too tall.’

‘Oh dash it, it is!’ said Mum, accidentally wiping a large blob of meringue into her greying blonde hair as she wiped her head in frustration.

‘‘Come on, Maddy,’ I said, tugging her lead gently. ‘You can give me some career advice while we’re out.’



STEP 2 - LEARN TO DEAL WITH REJECTION

TO: POPPY<Poppyp@employe.com>
FROM: ENQUIRIES <enquiries@planet29.co.uk>
SUBJECT: Re: Poppy's CV

Dear Poppy

Thank you for your interest in Planet 29. Unfortunately we do not have any suitable vacancies at the moment. However, we will keep your CV on file, and contact you if any suitable positions arise in the future.

Yours

Derek Myers

Human Resources

Planet 29 Television

‘**N**AT, I don't know how much longer I can hold my parents off. I got my twenty-first rejection email this morning, and that's just the companies who replied. Most of them don't even acknowledge I've sent them anything.’ I sat in my room twiddling the phone cord.

‘Nightmare,’ Nat sympathised.

‘Who knew getting a job after uni would be so difficult?’

‘I know, and you did all that work experience last summer, way more than the rest of us lazy gits got round to.’

‘How’s London? I might have to invent an interview next week, just so I can come and see you. Being stuck in the country with my parents is driving me crazy.’

‘Poor Penfold,’ said Nat. ‘I have to say, if I’m thankful to my parents for anything, it’s having a house in London. Why not come and stay for the weekend?’

‘Oh god I’d love to, but you know I’ve got to work everything around my chambermaid shifts.’

‘I can’t believe you’re still doing that! Hideous.’

‘It is – I had to change a bed with a used condom in it yesterday, it’s beyond disgusting.’

‘Eugh!’

‘Poppy, are you still on the phone? I need to call Peter about my climbing lesson,’ my mother’s voice chimed onto the line.

‘Hello, Mrs Penfold!’ Natalie chirped.

‘Oh hello, Natalie dear, how are you?’

My mum loves Natalie.

‘Mum, I’m having a private conversation! I’ve asked you not to just pick up the phone like that.’

‘Natalie doesn’t mind, do you, dear?’

Natalie disloyally mumbled something about not minding at all.

‘I mean, I don’t want to hurry you girls and your chinny-wagging, but I must catch Peter before he heads to the climbing wall. I can’t make the class tonight and I want to check I’m not missing something crucial.’

‘Not a problem, Mrs P.’ Natalie was doing her ‘parent voice’. I hated that voice. ‘Poppy, I’ll speak to you soon, bye!’

I put down the receiver. I wasn’t even going to let myself have another argument with Mum about picking up the phone to see if I was on it, or her use of the phrase ‘chinny-wagging’ with anyone other than Dad. I paced the room restlessly. Catching a glimpse of myself in the mirror, I stopped in front of it, not impressed by what I saw. My usually blonde wavy shoulder-length hair hung limply around my ears, and my

fair, lightly freckled skin looked uncharacteristically grey. Even my best features, my large brown eyes, were starting to look sunken and tired. I pulled my hair back into a ponytail, hoping it would improve matters. It didn't.

Living at home was not good for me, I needed to wash my hair, do some exercise and stop eating my mother's fattening 1970s puddings. I had been slim at university, and although I always seemed to retain a small waist, I was now definitely verging into 'curvy' territory everywhere else. I padded down to the kitchen restlessly; I had two hours before I had to leave for work at the pub. I could go for a run ... Well, a walk at least. I looked at Maddy hopefully, but she rolled over, begging me not to drag her out into the rain.



STEP 3 – SEIZE EVERY OPPORTUNITY, HOWEVER SMALL

TO: POPPY <Poppyp@employme.com>

FROM: DOMINIC GREEN <Dominic.Green@RealiTV.tv>

SUBJECT: RealiTV

Dear Poppy

Thank you for your CV. We do actually have an opportunity that we are currently interviewing for. We offer a three-month runner's placement, which allows people new to the industry to obtain experience on a whole range of productions. There's potential to gain a year-long contract at the end of the placement.

Please get back to me if you are interested in coming in for an interview.

Best wishes

Dominic Green

Office Manager

RealiTV

THIS WAS IT. I could tell this was it; my opening, my big chance, my foot in the door. Not only did it sound like just the opportunity I'd been waiting for, but it was with RealiTV – one of the biggest production companies out there. I quickly replied to Dominic and we arranged an interview for the fol-

lowing week. I wondered how many other people were being asked for interview? Who would be my competition?

‘Dress for the job you want, not the job you have,’ said my father over dinner.

‘Well she’s not going to go to the interview dressed for the job she has, is she, Dad?’ My younger sister, Clemmie, grinned. ‘Otherwise she’d be turning up in a chambermaid outfit.’

‘Thanks for reminding me, Clem,’ I said, picking at my plate of shepherd’s pie. Clemmie twiddled a chocolate-coloured curl between a thumb and forefinger. I don’t know how I was related to my sister; while I was five foot five with blonde hair, she was five foot eleven with the most amazing head of cascading brown curls. At school she’d been teased mercilessly about her height and her ‘electric shock hair’, but nowadays all I seemed to hear from people was: ‘Wow, your sister’s hair is amazing? How come you don’t have hair like that?’

‘I’m just saying, it never hurt anyone to dress smartly,’ said Dad. ‘Smartness is next to godliness.’

‘No, that’s cleanliness,’ I said. ‘Look, has someone bought you and Mum a bumper book of clichés or something?’

‘Poppy, your father is only trying to help,’ said Mum, handing me the peas to pass round. ‘Even if it is just a runner job, you might as well give it a hundred and ten per cent.’

‘Seriously, with the clichés?’ I said. ‘Where are they coming from? I have never once heard Mum use the phrase “give it a hundred and ten per cent” before?’

‘They’ve started getting into *X Factor*,’ Clemmie explained. ‘Mum’s got a crush on Louis Walsh.’

‘Now there’s a show it might be fun to work on, Poppy,’ Mum said. ‘Maybe you could try that, there’s an open audition in Exeter next week, you know?’

‘Mum, I don’t think that’s how it works. The audition is for people who want to be *on* the show, not people who want to *work* on it.’

‘No, but Louis Walsh would be there, you could give him your CV? I’ll come with you, if you like? He seems awfully nice, such a cheerful chap.’

‘I think I’ll just see how this interview goes first, thanks all the same, Mum.’