

# Could You Be a Reality-TV Contestant?

(left to right, from top) RHM; ABC/Craig Sjodin; RHM; Nina Prommer/Globe Photos; Courtesy NBC.

From the firings and hiring to the most dramatic rose ceremonies ever, we got the dirt on what participants go through. Plus, we separate story-line fact from fiction.

By Jennifer Graham



No "showmance" here: Amy and Bill are on a mission.

■ If you've ever rearranged your social schedule to accommodate *American Idol*, *The Bachelor*, *The Apprentice*, or another addictive reality-TV show, you're not alone. More than 40 million people tuned in to hear The Donald say "You're hired!" to Bill Rancic.

And even if you've been outraged by a contestant acting like an absolute A-hole or scoffed at some desperate chick trying like hell to land a husband, you may still have wondered: "Could I be on that show?"

Well, we put together a panel of 12 industry insiders—both former contestants and television VIPs who call the shots behind the scenes—and asked them *everything* you want to know. Read on for the real scoop.

**Q How do you get on a show?**

**A** Depends, say insiders. Some rely on casting calls, others require a home video to be mailed in. The best way to find out is to go to the show's Web site.

**Q Do producers do scouting?**

**A** Yes! According to Lacey Pemberton, casting director for *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette*, "We scout all over the country in big cities and small towns. We go to gyms, restaurants, malls...anywhere we might meet new people."

Paul Wernick, executive producer of *The Joe Schmo Show* and a former producer of *Big Brother 2*, takes a more hands-on approach. "We grab random people by the elbow, stick a camera in their face, and say, 'How would you like to be on a reality-TV show?' We don't want the person who jumps at the chance and is looking to be a star. We want the person who's a little reluctant."

**Q If a million people apply, will everyone be seen?**

**A** "We can't see everyone," says Mark Burnett, creator and executive producer of *Survivor*, *The Casino*, *The Restaurant*, and *The Apprentice*. For a show like *Survivor*, producers weed through thousands of applications and video submissions and choose only about 800 people to be interviewed.

Shows that attract fewer applicants have open calls where anyone can be seen. "You might not get an interview, but the casting people will look at your application," says Ken Mok, executive producer of *America's Next Top Model*.

**Q What sort of questions do you ask in the preliminary interviews?**

**A** "General questions like 'If you have a problem with your boss, how do you handle it?'" says Danny Salles, executive producer of *Faking the*

## TAX RACKET

You won't be a millionaire if you win a million bucks. As much as one-third of your winnings (\$333,333) goes to taxes. Oh, and don't fall for the prize come-on either. A new car is considered earnings. Get ready to cough up 15 to 25 percent of its value.

## WHAT YOU'RE DYING TO KNOW ABOUT

Video and a consulting producer for *My Big Fat Obnoxious Fiancé*. "If someone says 'I just put it on the table and speak my mind,' that's the kind of spitfire that you want."

The questions get personal at *Real World* auditions. "Nothing is off-limits—from alcohol and drug use to religious beliefs and dating history," says executive producer Jonathan Murray.

### **Q** What tactics have applicants used in order to stand out?

**A** "People want to get naked, but that won't get them on the show," says Rebecca Shumsky, supervising casting producer of *Fear Factor*. "Some guy popped his glass eye out. He didn't get a callback." But some off-the-wall high jinks do work. "One guy drank a shot of alcohol up his nose, and we cast him," says Rhett Reese, executive producer of *The Joe Schmo Show*.

### **Q** How much does a person's physical appearance count?

**A** Looks do matter. "This is television, not radio, so yeah, people have to be attractive," says Murray. However, it takes more than a pretty face to get the gig. "No matter how good-looking they are, we don't put them on if they're shy or boring," says Shumsky.

### **Q** Does *The Bachelor* give a rundown of his "type"?

**A** Yup. But "we don't take requests for a physical type, because it changes," says Pemberton. "Often, the guy will ask for a brunette and end up with a blond." One thing is consistent though: Most of the guys ask for someone who is not needy, has a sense of humor, is athletic, and loves the outdoors.

### **Q** Are there certain personality types that producers look for?

**A** Producers like to have a mix of types, but it's tough to typecast people in an open call, so producers never really know what they're getting. "When Camille [the house hellion in season two of *America's Next Top Model*] auditioned for us, she came across as self-confident



## CONFESSIONS OF A REALITY-TV PRODUCER

Are these people for real? A secret source takes you behind the scenes.

You're probably aware that some creative editing goes into "unscripted" TV. But these shows are actually much further from reality than you'd guess. As someone who's worked as a producer on three reality-TV shows, I can tell you much of the drama is concocted in an edit bay or coerced through strategically created environments.

Take, for example, the typical bitchy/mean contestant. With hundreds of hours of footage to choose from, editors can make a bitch look like a saint and a saint look like a bitch.

**"Editors can make a saint look like a bitch."**

They just find someone's 10 snarkest moments and typecast her.

Editors can also invent story lines. Do you really think Nick and Amy were having sex on *The Apprentice*? You see the darkened bedroom, the closed door... In my professional opinion, that was the work of a good editor who spliced the closing-door footage into the story at a certain moment to imply that something happened.

Oh, there are all kinds of tricks like this. For one, you never want a big group of people sitting around and talking. With too many people looking for conversation, they're going to talk about the weather. So producers design ways to keep people in small groups. Or we assign them activities in

twos and threes. (And of course, we often control which people are put in a room together.)

But what's even more common is when reality producers plant seeds in contestants' heads by asking calculated questions. On *The Bachelor*, a producer might ask a contestant, "Do you think Jane is trying to steal Bob from you?" And then the contestant thinks, "No, I didn't, but now I'm starting to. After all, you just spoke to Jane five minutes ago. She must have said something." And so on.

Then there's the ultimate catalyst for drama: alcohol. I've never been on a set where there wasn't lots of liquor readily (and I do mean readily) available. It lowers inhibitions and encourages people to pull ratings-worthy stunts like having sex, fighting, and jumping into the pool naked. But if you're watching at home, you rarely see that they've actually had 14 beers.

Naturally, this bad or outrageous behavior often leads to tears. And for most reality producers, when they see tears, there's rejoicing in the control room. The fact is, it makes for some pretty compelling television. And at the end of the day, that's my job.

Fine, this might sound a little harsh. And yes, I've felt guilty at times. But you know what? Reality TV has been around for a few years now. These people know exactly what they're getting themselves into when they sign on for a show. Hell, sometimes you get clowns who purposely act like asses just to advance their own fame. Bottom line: Most of them just want to be on television. I get them there.

but well-mannered," says Mok. "We were shocked that, by day two, she was the character who she was."

### Q Do reality contestants have to pass a psychological exam?

**A** Although there's no one standardized test administered across the board, every show puts hopefuls through a battery of psych tests. "We have a psychologist meet with the final candidates," says Salles. "If we feel that a person is unstable, he or she is nixed."

### Q What do contracts require of contestants?

**A** Generally, contestants offer up their story rights, meaning they allow producers to air all footage of them. They also sign confidentiality agreements and waivers excusing the producers from liability. "Our contestants sign contracts saying they won't tell who the bachelor is, who the women are, and of course, who wins," says Pemberton. "Once the show airs, they can talk to the press."

## "When you hear 'Turn off the camera,' something good is coming."

But in some cases, contestants are restricted by contractual obligations afterward. *The Apprentice's* Erika Vetrini was forced to turn down a hosting gig on TLC. "*The Apprentice* put a talent hold on me, [which means] they have exclusive rights to me for nine months." Ultimately, Vetrini wrote a letter to the president of NBC, and he gave her the green light, but by then it was too late to take the job.

### Q Are contestants paid?

**A** Most of the shows provide food, lodging, and a small per diem (about \$125 daily). Plus, accommodations are usually pretty posh. *American Idol* contestants stayed in a mansion.

But the real money can be made after the cameras stop rolling. "I do speaking engagements for anywhere from three to five thousand dollars," says Vetrini.

### Q What if a contestant wants to leave in the middle of a show?

**A** Hungry, tired *Survivors* might feel like prisoners, but they're not. If a contestant wants to leave prematurely, "that would be fine," says Burnett. "It would be great television."

### Q Is it possible to get romantic with the cameras rolling?

**A** "The first time Trista and I kissed, I didn't mind the cameras," says *The Bachelorette's* Ryan Sutter. His attitude changed when he realized he was falling in love. "If the producers wanted a certain amount of kissing in a scene, they would stick around until they got it. Trista and I learned to give them what they needed, but during those times, it wasn't really romantic."

### Q How long does it take to forget the cameras are rolling?

**A** "One hour," says Burnett. "They are all trying to dominate their game, and they're also focusing on what the

other contestants are doing. So the cameras become little more than a minor annoyance."

### Q Have contestants asked for cameras to be shut off?

**A** "All the time," says Shumsky. And no, the cameras don't go away. "When you hear 'Turn off the camera,' something good is coming," she says.

### Q If two contestants are having sex, is that filmed... and aired?

**A** "I'd never show a penis or a vagina, but there is a way to show sex," says Burnett. "It's all camera angles."

### Q Do contestants often feel as if the editing misrepresents them?

**A** Yes—and that's no surprise to producers. "When was the last time you agreed with what someone else said

about you when they were being critical?" says Burnett. "Everyone has their own perceptions."

Including *The Apprentice's* Amy Henry. "The character they created was the result of editing," she says. "You just got a glimpse of the real Amy."

But the biggest shocker could come from seeing yourself on television. "People have no idea what they look like to others," says Andy Meyer, a former producer of *American Idol*, *Trading Spaces*, and *Blind Date*. "And no one's memory is as accurate as the video camera is." ■

## PRIZE PATROL

We found out how our favorite big-money winners spent their loot.

Life in the fast lane



**Survivor: Thailand**  
Winner: Brian Heidik

He bought a new Dodge Viper for himself and diamond earrings for his wife. He put the rest of his \$1 million in bonds, mutual funds, and a college fund for his 3-year-old son.

**Amazing Race 1**  
Winner: Rob Frisbee

Frisbee used his half of the \$1 million winnings to start Dark House Books, a small science-fiction publishing company, which recently published three of his own books.

**Survivor: Africa**  
Winner: Ethan Zohn

Zohn, a coach at Fairleigh Dickinson University, used some of his million to start Grassroots Soccer, which helps African soccer pros teach kids about the dangers of HIV/AIDS.

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