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Former Bachelor Producer Bennett Graebner on Hallmark's Reality TV Pivot

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Hallmark's overall ratings fell 24% in 2025 alongside the rest of cable. The network still produced and aired every one of the year's Top 50 most-watched cable movies among women 18 and older and among all households.

Its biggest title of the year wasn't a Christmas film. An Unexpected Valentine, a February romance starring Lacey Chabert and Robert Buckley, drew 1.8 million viewers to top the slate. Meanwhile, Finding Mr. Christmas, the network's reality competition that crowns a leading man for a future Hallmark movie, just wrapped its second season.

Hallmark is quietly running a hybrid model where reality television feeds scripted romance. **Producer and screenwriter Bennett Graebner** has worked both ends of that pipeline, across 17 years of dating television and a return to screenwriting, and he can explain why the handoff is harder than it looks.

How the Pipeline Actually Works

Finding Mr. Christmas runs ten contestants through holiday-themed acting challenges, and the winner lands the lead in a Hallmark movie. Last season's champion headlined Happy Howlidays. That reality arm sits inside a bigger expansion. Hallmark launched its own streamer, Hallmark Plus, moved into live events, and built a reality slate on top of its scripted catalog.

Each piece pushes viewers toward the same place, which is more Hallmark romance:

- A reality competition that auditions future leads in front of an audience that will watch their movies
- A streaming service, Hallmark Plus, that keeps the catalog and the new formats under one subscription
- Live events like the Hallmark Christmas Experience, where fans pay to meet the stars the pipeline produces

Hallmark's model rests on scale that cable rivals can't match. Among women 18 and older, the network has ranked as the **most-watched entertainment cable channel** for twelve straight fourth quarters. An Unexpected Valentine topped a year stacked with Christmas titles. That signals the appetite for Hallmark romance now runs year-round, which gives the pipeline more than one season to feed.

Cheap content explains part of the appetite. A reality season costs less to produce than a slate of movies, and it does double duty. It tests potential leads in front of the exact audience that will decide their careers, and it **turns casting into content** people pay to watch. A development executive usually guesses whether a new face will connect. Hallmark gets to watch the audience answer in real time, then hand the winner a movie the audience already wants to see.

Training the Audience's Eye

Creator Jonathan Bennett described the delicate part of the handoff. "We realized the audience isn't used to watching a stage," he told Slate. "So we set it in a house and made the living room look like a Hallmark movie." Producers built the reality show to look like the scripted product so longtime viewers would accept it.

Why the Hybrid Is Harder Than It Looks

A reality competition and a scripted romance ask for different instincts. Casting a charismatic contestant isn't the same as **building a character who can** carry 84 minutes of story. Graebner spent 400-plus episodes learning that the camera rewards genuine emotion and punishes performance.

On his Bachelor sets, the working motto was "embrace the cheese," shorthand for earnest emotion without irony. Hallmark lives on that same sincerity, which is why a contestant who can fake it rarely survives the jump to a scripted lead. The pipeline works only when the person it finds is the real thing.

Graebner's test applies cleanly here. He has **said** that everything starts with whether a moment will make him and the audience feel something, and a contestant coached into a performance can't fake that on a 90-minute scripted clock. Hallmark needs leads who land the earnest beat without a wink. That's the instinct that's hardest to screen for in a competition.

Casting a Person vs. Writing One

Reality casting starts with someone who already exists and finds the story in them. Scripted writing starts with a story and **builds a person to fill** it. A network attempting both has to master two crafts that pull in opposite directions, and most production teams train in only one.

Hallmark compounds the difficulty by manufacturing its own stars. It brings the same faces back across as many as five movies a year, the way old studios did. A reality winner has to slot into that repertory and carry a franchise, not just win a season. Finding the rare contestant who can do both is the whole bet.

What Hallmark Is Really Selling

Hallmark's audience isn't buying surprise. Roughly 36 million viewers come back for the guarantee that **the couple gets together** and the world stays kind. Hallmark's own market research found that the trait defining its most loyal viewers was a belief that the world is a good place.

That certainty is the product, and it raises the stakes on the reality pivot. A competition that produces a dull lead, or a movie that breaks the comfort formula, risks the one thing the audience pays for. Hallmark is gambling against a viewership that tunes in precisely for familiarity.

There’s a deeper tension the pivot has to manage. Competition is built on conflict and elimination, and Hallmark sells the absence of both. A reality show that leaned into backstabbing would poison the comfort the brand runs on. So the network sands off the cruelty and keeps the wholesomeness, which is a strange thing to ask of a genre invented to humiliate people on camera. Pulling that off is the real trick, and it’s why the format does not transplant cleanly to a network without Hallmark’s particular promise.

Where the Pipeline Leads

Hybrid models like this are spreading because they work, with reality formats feeding scripted slates across the wider romance market. Hallmark’s version is the most developed, and its 2025 numbers show the model holding even as cable shrinks. Other networks and streamers are watching, because a competition that doubles as a casting call costs less than a development deal and builds an audience before the movie exists.

Copying it is harder than it looks. Its pipeline only works on top of a star system and a base that already trusts the brand. A streamer with a deep catalog but no loyalty has nothing for the winner to step into. Hallmark spent decades building the repertory first. That competition is just the newest way to feed it.

Bennett Graebner moved back into original scripted material after his Bachelor tenure, including a mid-budget romcom. He has produced **romance on the reality side** and written it on the scripted side. He knows the pipeline Hallmark is building, and how hard it is to make both halves work at once. Most networks won’t.

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