

MM

WHAT'S A FESTIVAL WORTH?

IDENTIFYING THE BENEFITS OF FEST PARTICIPATION TO IMPROVE YOUR ROI

Plying the film festival circuit has become as much a part of the independent moviemaking process as crowd-funding, cinematography and editing. Unfortunately, the method of selecting, entering and participating in festivals is, more often than not, impromptu and non-strategic, leading to wasted money, missed opportunities, and disappointment. But this doesn't have to be the case, as a bit of goal-setting and planning can help make the festival experience a positive one for independent moviemakers and their films.

The primary goal of any festival strategy should be to match the particular benefits derived from participation in one—or many—festivals with the specific needs of a film and its creators. And to do that, the moviemaker and his team should take the time to weigh the perceived benefits against the costs (monetary and otherwise) involved.

CREATING AWARENESS AND DEVELOPING FANS

Scoring a festival screening slot will automatically raise the awareness of a film. The movie will be listed online and in hard copy fest programs and posters, as well as screening schedules—which are often printed in secondary media outlets' ads and editorial. Additionally, depending on the fest, anywhere from dozens to thousands of viewers will get exposed to the film when it plays. But what is the true value of this publicity?

"While every festival promotes itself as having the ability to deliver high levels of publicity and awareness, we looked hard to specifically choose those

that we believed would be receptive to a comedy/horror movie with a transvestite killer nun (Tim Sullivan) and Ron Jeremy playing Jesus," says Tampa filmmaker Shelby McIntyre on his team's fest selection process. "You can probably imagine that our choice of possible festivals meeting that criteria was not huge," he jokingly adds. But the festivals at which McIntyre's movie—*Bloody Bloody Bible Camp*—premiered provided the desired benefit: Raising awareness within the film's target demographic.

"Following our midnight screening at Texas Frightmare, our Facebook page blew up with postings from horror fans

"ONE STRATEGIC SUCCESSFUL SCREENING CAN DEVELOP YOUR FILM'S BASE."

across the country, and that awareness bled onto thousands of other horror movie junkies who weren't at the show. That one successful, very strategic screening helped develop a fan-base for the movie, and also assisted getting *Bloody Bloody Bible Camp* a larger video-on-demand (VOD) footprint."

Filmmaker Michael Gordon's efforts follow McIntyre's direction. "In the beginning, we were hoping, like all filmmakers, to secure a large-scale theatrical distribution deal," says Gordon of his film *Fear Lives Here*.

"But as we learned more and more about how hard it is to get that from a festival screening, we decided to only target those events that would build a fan base and allow us to create awareness that would benefit us when it was time to shop the movie to buyers."

SECURING AND IMPROVING DISTRIBUTION

McIntyre's efforts and Gordon's approach nailed two of the most vital publicity "deliverables" that can come from festival participation: general awareness; and development of a perceived target audience for distribution. *Bible Camp* landed a broad-based iN DEMAND deal after positive word-of-mouth from the fest circuit drove rentals during the film's initial smaller-scale VOD release. To McIntyre, that meant 60 million more cable households now had access to his movie.

Though none but the largest and most well-known festivals can legitimately advertise the possibility of a traditional, studio-based distribution deal as an end result for selected entrants, the advent of VOD means more indie flicks than ever are now commercially available, and festival participation at many levels can assist in that effort.

Frank Lin, director of the dance-fight action film, *Battle B-Boy*, had the same expectations when entering the festival fray.

"We wanted to build awareness, generate buzz, and drive business for the film as we were in the initial stages of planning for a VOD release," said Lin. "As the film became available on iTunes, Amazon, Vudu and Playstation 3, our festival participation allowed for enhanced marketing on these release platforms, which meant more sales."



Lin's film, which features an extremely diverse cast, was also entered in a number of foreign festivals, with the aim of developing demand with a specific segment of its intended target audience: A little market call "the rest of the world."

"Of the eight festivals we entered, three were focused on the Asian culture, as both the subject matter and cast of *Battle B-Boy* are reflective of those populations. Working with the Chinese American Film Festival, Beijing International Film Festival, and Shanghai International Film Festival allowed us to promote our film to this very specific demographic, as well as to the festival programmers who have wide and deep contacts with foreign film industry insiders—a group of individuals that are nearly impossible to penetrate from the U.S."

MAKING CONTACTS AND NETWORKING

One of the greatest benefits you can get from a film festival is the networking opportunities afforded to attendees—something moviemakers should consider when choosing where to submit.

"One of my goals in selecting and entering festivals is the opportunity to connect with other filmmakers, fans and those in the professional film community who may have an affiliation with the event," says Tom Biscardi, storied Bigfoot researcher and prolific producer/director of five Bigfoot-themed documentaries in just six years. His latest, *Hoax of the Century*, which dispels the iconic Patterson-Gimplin Bigfoot footage as fake, landed a screening spot in the Poconos Mountains Film Festival 2012, and in 2011, his two

documentaries *Anatomy of a Bigfoot Hoax* and *Bigfoot Lives 2* won a dual "Best Documentary" prize at the same fest.

"Festivals that allow for networking with a diverse group of industry peers is one of the benefits I consider before entering," says Biscardi. "Though the Poconos Mountains Film Festival isn't the largest event of its kind, it has allowed me to meet and spend time with Hollywood insiders such as David Saperstein and Micky Hyman, and Re'shaun Frear from BET's top-rated *Black Poker Stars*."

Biscardi notes that not only has he developed a friendship with these—and other—folks he has met from attending the festivals (which take place in a region rife with reported Bigfoot activity), but he's also been able to glean valuable knowledge and

“COMPILING GOOD REVIEWS FROM CRITICS CAN HELP SELL YOUR FILM.”

insight about producing while using those relationships to meet even more people. His newest film, an untitled found-footage project, came to fruition due to just this sort of in-festival networking.

“We are now fully immersed in production with two separate film crews shooting simultaneously in two separate sites in the country. That is only happening due to the contacts I made in the Poconos, which is 3,000 miles from my Northern California home.”

In addition to rubbing shoulders with Hollywood luminaries, fellow filmmakers and potential cast, crew and investors, film festival participants can also find themselves making friends with influential critics and journalists—people whose words can propel a film toward success at many levels.

REAPING REVIEWS

“Nothing looks better than when an objective third party says your film is great instead of you just saying your movie is great,” says McIntyre about garnering reviews via the festival circuit.

And he’s right. An objective account of the merits of your movie is one of the best ways to build a case for your project when it comes time to sell. Compiling positive reviews from recognized professional critics and reviewers can attract acquisition agents

and buyers, and help with sales and promotion for deals.

VOD platforms such as iTunes, Amazon Instant Video and Vudu all recognize the value of positive reviews from festival screenings. Accordingly, broadcasting good reviews can help usher films onto the bigger platforms. And for movies that are already available digitally, a good response from critics can garner a film better placement on the various VOD websites. A quick example: following McIntyre’s successful festival run, *Bloody Bloody Bible Camp* was moved to iTunes “New and Noteworthy” page, which, compared to the film’s previous general listing, delivered highly increased awareness amongst iTunes users. More awareness means more opportunities for sales, and that’s a benefit every filmmaker desires.

With thousands of film festivals of all sizes and foci taking place around the globe each year, it can be a daunting task for the independent producer to find those that make the most sense for his needs. And though a formal festival strategy, while recommended, is not often in place before the process of submissions begins, moviemakers should at least be selective in their fest participation, working only with those events that offer the best match for their project and personal goals. If you keep those lessons in mind, you’ll

reduce the costs associated with entry fees, deliverables, travel and accommodations, and you’re a lot more likely to produce tangible, positive results. Happy submitting!

7 BENEFITS OF FESTIVAL PARTICIPATION

1. General Awareness of Your Film
2. Generating Demand with Target Audience
3. Finding Offers for Distribution
4. Securing Reviews for Marketing Use
5. Halo Effect from Association with Prestigious Festival
6. Networking and Connections with Industry Players
7. Travel and Fun while Attending (but keep an eye on costs) **MM**

Mark Steven Bosko, of Bosko Group, has been helping filmmakers worldwide find DVD and VOD distribution and promotion for their films since 1997. Bosko Group films can be found on iTunes, Amazon, Netflix, CinemaNow, Vudu, Hulu and in Redbox, Family Video, and thousands of independent video rental and retail stores nationwide. He is the author of The Complete Independent Movie Marketing Handbook and DVD OnDemand and the creator of the web-based series “Top Ten Tips to Distribution.”

