

# **DIY Distribution for Filmmakers**

Workshop Series Developed by Cecilia Araneda

## **LEARNING OBJECTIVE:**

Participants will learn how to establish realistic audience and market objectives for their films, and how to develop tactics to meet those objectives.

## **TARGET STUDENT:**

Emerging to mid-career film directors with 1-5 years' experience in filmmaking

## **INTRODUCTIONS, INCLUDING:**

- 1) Type(s) of works you make
- 2) Current distribution objectives (if any)
- 3) What has worked for you in the past?
- 4) What are you seeking with distribution:
  - As wide an audience as possible?
  - Prestige screenings?
  - Money?
  - Career longevity?
- 5) What kind of distribution resources do you currently use?
- 6) What kinds of budgets do you work with for your distribution?

## THE BENEFITS OF DISTRIBUTION

Whether you are self-distributing, working with a distributor or both:

- 1) In Canada, the principle benefit to distribution is career longevity
- 2) There is also the opportunity for a minor gross financial return, but typically this ends up becoming a financial loss, as filmmakers rarely can budget for this work at an adequate level.
- 3) Getting your stories out in front of audiences – for some work, the benefit is getting the work seen, versus it getting it seen by a specific kind of audience.

## THE RIGHT PLACE FOR YOUR WORK

- It's important to objectively understand the place of your work within the larger context of Canadian and world cinema in order to establish both aspirational and realistic expectations
- Does your film offer a new or fresh perspective on a particular subject matter?
- Does your film undertake an aesthetic approach that is novel or highly sophisticated?
- What does your film offer to programmer or academics to meet their professional objectives?
- Does your film provide a value to communities beyond family / friends / cast / crew?
- Who, exactly, is the target audience for your work? Once you know the target audience for your work, then you will be able to begin a distribution strategy.

## STRATEGIES FOR DIFFERENT GENRES, FORMS AND LENGTHS

- In the independent market, documentary, experimental and animation forms will have the widest distribution potential
- Certain kinds of documentaries lend themselves to a community screening release and are worth the effort for a grass-roots release strategy
- Drama has a very limited audience in the independent world because of the need to compete with the potential established by Hollywood. Low-budget / independent feature films that do not have recognizable stars in them are particularly difficult to find markets for.
- The exception to the drama distribution limitation is for the French-language market

## STRATEGICALLY TARGETING MARKETS

- The reason you want to be strategic about targeting markets is due to the workload and budget factors that play into releasing a film
- How can you tell if a market could be meaningfully receptive to your work?
  - Look at the prior works they've programmed or acquired – does it realistically fit with your work?
  - Examine the screening trajectories of filmmakers you feel your body of work is parallel to (either on personal websites or by googling their films)
- Is there something uniquely special about your work that might open up other markets?

## PREPARING DISTRIBUTION ASSETS

- In order to be able to release your film (even if you are also working with a distributor), you will need to have developed the following assets, as a minimum:
  - Preview screeners on a password protected viewing platform (Vimeo or Youtube)
  - Screening files available in a variety of screening formats (including MP4/H264, MOV/prores, DCP, etc.); access to your file to be able to export to other formats
  - 3 film stills
  - 1 director headshot
  - Dialogue list (ideally timecoded); subtitle translations and SRT files are worthwhile for some markets
  - 2-3 sentence synopsis
  - Director's notes of 1-2 paragraphs
  - Brief, one paragraph director bio
  - Short director filmography list (title, duration, genre, year)
  - 30 sec clip, 60 sec clip or trailer
  - Specially designed marketing materials as might be needed for specialized markets



## ONLINE DISCOVERABILITY

It is very important for filmmakers to control the first page outcomes of a search on their name. Sometimes opportunities are looking for you, and you need to let them easily find you

Discoverability audit:

- What appears on the first page results when you search your name on the Internet?
- Does this result accurately reflect who you are as a filmmaker and how to reach you or your official agent(s) directly? (if it is your official agent, are you confident they will forward relevant inquiries to you in a timely manner?)
- Does a search result in an accurate bio appearing
- Does a search result in accurate information about your films and filmography appearing

# PORTFOLIO WEBSITES

Portfolio websites can be very valuable to independent filmmakers to support control of online discoverability.

If you don't have a website currently, it is a good idea to start developing one. You should be able to manage your website independently without major expense, and there are platforms like Wordpress that will facilitate this for you

The audience for a website is:

- Programmers / curators from around the world
- Arts council jury members

Information to include:

- Bio
- Film card (technical specs, synopsis, awards, screenings, etc.)
- Contact info (your email address and not a contact form)
- SEO service to enable your website to speak efficiently to search engines

## SERVICES AND PLATFORMS TO ASSIST IN DISTRIBUTION

- Can you name the different kinds of services or platforms that can help support a distribution strategy?
- How do you find out about open calls?
- How do you assess if a market opportunity is worthwhile to target re: potential return in exchange for cost and labour involved?
- How do you find out about opportunities that could be worthwhile for you?
- How do you make an assessment of the value of different film festivals?

## FILM FESTIVALS + DIRECTORIES

- Typically, smaller festivals funded by the Canada Council pay artist fees (they all should, but the reality is that many don't and it seems to be an unchangeable reality)
- Larger festivals or those with larger submission fees should be assessed very carefully
- The major festivals worth looking at in Canada are:
  - Toronto: HotDocs, Images, TIFF, ImagineNATIVE
  - Quebec: Festival du Nouveau Cinema, RIDM, Regard (Saugeny), FIFA
  - Vancouver: VIFF, DOXA
  - Others: Ottawa International Animation Festival
  - Specialized Indigenous festivals list: <https://imagineative.org/other-festivals>  
(some aren't Indigenous festivals, but have Indigenous sections)
- Larger festivals will have premiere requirements, so you should consider this when making a decision for when to start releasing your films. Typically you'll need to decide on a target film festival per region (inside Canada) and per continent (outside Canada) and follow other opportunities after these selections

## THE BENEFIT OF INDEPENDENT DISTRIBUTORS

- Independent distributors are generally non-exclusive, so you can work with a distributor while also doing your distribution work yourself at the same time.
- Independent distributors have their own specializations which could be worthwhile to consider, but the largest benefit is being included in the discoverability of their catalogues and the occasional promotion they will provide you. Often, curators and programmers will research their holdings to develop programming, without releasing an open call
- Independent distributors are also good for managing all the paperwork needs and deliverables of complex sales categories, such as institutional streaming sales.
- The independent distributors in Canada all charge a membership fee and some charge a per-film deposit fee as well. After that, they typically provide you with a 70% royalty on the sales that they make.
- The independent distributors in Canada will not assume copyright or ownership of your work. Some other distributor-like organizations and agencies do, so beware!

# INDEPENDENT DISTRIBUTORS

- The major Canadian distributors are:
  - CFMDC in Toronto, which specializes in experimental filmmaking
  - VTAPE in Toronto, which specializes in video art and carries a strong % of works by Indigenous artists (is not an Indigenous org)
  - Winnipeg Film Group is a good regional distributor option with a strong % of works by Indigenous filmmakers (is not an Indigenous org)
  - Les Films du 3 Mars in Montreal focuses on French-language feature film theatrical release in Quebec
  - GIV in Montreal focuses on video art and documentary made by women
  - There are other historic video distributors, but the benefits of these are less clear
- All of the distributors have communication struggles, so you may need pro-active check ins with them to ensure you know how they're handling your film
- Distributors may not submit your films to festivals or opportunities that you might want them to, and so I would not recommend leaving your distribution strategy completely up to them.