



by
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How To Profit From Film Festivals

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HOW TO PROFIT FROM FILM FESTIVALS

Even if you don't have a film in competition at Sundance or one of the other major film festivals, there are still ways to profit, and potentially profit big. So if you don't have a film playing Sundance or Cannes, don't lose heart. There are many ways to utilize film festivals to your advantage. It may not be money in the bank right now, but there is certainly a lot you can do to make those relationships now which will count so much down the line, and to get everything you can out of the festivals, which you'll be so glad you did later.

I have split this guide into two sections. The first part deals with the big film festivals – Sundance, Cannes, and Toronto included. The second part deals with the smaller festivals. Making the most of any film festival where your film is playing or one that you're attending is key in ensuring you profit big from every festival you attend.

PART 1: THE BIG FESTIVALS

1 Set up meetings with buyers

First of all, know where the buyers go. Historically, buyers will only attend the biggest of the film festivals - Cannes, Sundance, Toronto, Berlin, SXSW, Tribeca, Los Angeles. Although if in or near New York or Los Angeles there is a chance buyers may come to a second-tier festival if it's convenient (most acquisitions executives in the U.S. are located in New York or Los Angeles).

If you will be at one of the major, buyer-attended festivals (or a second-tier festival located in or near NYC or LA) if you can not find an attendees list then a good strategy is simply to contact buyers who you think are appropriate for your film, e-mail them a link to your trailer, and inquire if they will be going to the festival. If they are in the market for independent films, chances are they will be in attendance. These buyers are accustomed to scheduling meetings. And if they like your trailer and have some time to meet with you, they will set something up.

At the major festivals, no doubt buyers will be busy running around to screenings, taking meetings, going to parties, etc. So even if you can't get them to meet with you then, making that e-mail introduction may not be such a bad idea since you may run into them somewhere along the line at the festival and now have the perfect icebreaker.

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2. Attend as many panels, networking events, and parties that you can:

Most film festivals have panels (and just about every day at the major festivals there are multiple panels), networking events and parties to attend. The dilemma becomes, at least at the major festivals, how many can you attend in one day! Take a look at the schedule and carefully and strategically choose the events you go to. For example, if you notice someone is speaking on a panel that is an appropriate distributor for your film, or other contact that can help you – make a point of attending that panel so you can approach them afterwards and meet them face-to-face. So much of getting your foot in the door is actually being able to meet people face to face so that you are no longer an ‘unsolicited submission’.

Another important part of festivals is networking with other filmmakers. You will be able to share information and get the scoop on what distributors they have met with, and possibly get some referrals to distributors, agents, and reps. Plus, it’s always great to be surrounded by a bunch of likeminded individuals who share your passion and who might be able to teach you a thing or two or introduce you to that amazing editor or know of that great unknown writer who’s got the script you’ve been dreaming about making.

3. Go to screenings

First, and this goes for all festivals, knowing what’s getting made and how audiences are receiving it is important for filmmakers. So attend as many screenings as you can.

If you’re at a festival where buyers are in attendance, even though buyers aren’t known to sit in screenings for any lengthy amount of time (some leave after 5 min) it can be a good opportunity to see which distributors go to which screenings, and get an indication of what types of films they are interested in acquiring. For example, if you had a film that was similar in genre to what they were watching, you could always contact the distributor after the festival and send them the link to your trailer. Something like Amazon does with – if you liked “XYZ” Film (the film they watched at Sundance), then you may also like “ABC” Film (Your film). Filmmakers always want to know just what types of films distributors are looking for so what better way to learn than to see it for yourself.

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4. Be prepared with marketing materials for your film

Always be prepared! If you have a film that you are trying to find distribution or financing for, by golly have postcards, fliers, pens, merchandise or any other marketing materials you can think of so that when networking with buyers, reps, or anyone else you have something to hand them with your film's details on it, as well as your own contact details.

5. Get used to asking for people's cards

This may seem quite obvious, but I am always amazed by how many filmmakers fail to develop one simple habit that can mean so much. That habit you should develop for film festivals is to collect people's business cards – whether it's distributors, reps, attorneys, or even other filmmakers. You may think you'll remember everyone when you get home, but believe me, you won't. So get in the habit of asking for people's business cards (don't worry, it's quite customary) and keeping them in a safe place and even taking notes on the back of the cards, so you can remember what you talked about and be able to follow up properly after the market. At the very least, I would recommend sending everyone an email that you met at Sundance when you get home, and just say it was nice meeting you...this is how you will develop your network.

6. Hire a publicist

If your film is screening in the Sundance official competition then you definitely want to invest in a publicist for your film. And believe me, if your film was *accepted* to Sundance, you will have no problem finding one. In fact, they will probably find you and propose their services (probably starting at \$10K and up plus expenses). However, if you were not accepted to Sundance but your are screening your film *during* Sundance (out of competition) then you should consider hiring a publicist who can help you get key press, distributors, and other players to attend your screening. You will be competing with so many other screenings and distractions, that if you want to profit from your screening, it really makes economic sense to invest in a publicist to help you get people to attend. Same goes for the other BIG festivals.

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7. Collect as many magazines and other collateral that you can

During the bigger festivals, all the normal film and industry magazines turn out special Sundance editions, and give them away for free. They will be stacked all over the place. Be sure to collect as many of these as you can as they have all the daily updates on which big sales were made, what big events are happening that day, and most importantly contact names and details of various distributors, reps, and other industry players. You will be able to use these assets when you get home to follow up and contact people with a link to your film.

8. Look and act professional

When you're at Sundance, Toronto, SXSW, etc. you will notice that there are often several filmmakers lined up to speak to one distributor or rep...and having been on the other side I can tell you that when people are lined up to talk to you, the ones you will want to speak to first are the ones who look and act most professional. Now, this obviously doesn't mean you have to be dressed in a suit or anything, but definitely be dressed as professional as is appropriate for the event, be well groomed (sorry, I know most wouldn't dream of looking completely inappropriate, but I have to mention this because you'd be surprised – maybe even shocked --at what I've seen!), and be prepared with business cards or your film's postcard or some other material that you can use to identify yourself and your film. Having a simple postcard can do wonders for you – and distributors, reps, lawyers, etc will always take someone who is prepared and professional much more seriously than someone who didn't even take the time to get a business card made.

Also you should pay attention whenever you are on one of the shuttles that takes everyone around Park City or back to the hotels, because you never know who is sitting behind your or in front of you. You want to act professional when you're on these shuttles as well and that means not blurting out comments about other films and filmmakers and distributors, and so on. Just be conscious that someone who knows these people could be seated right next to you.

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PART 2: THE SMALLER FESTIVALS

So what if your film isn't playing at one of the huge, buyer-attended festivals?

So this isn't just a referendum on how to connect with buyers (although that is what a lot of filmmakers want to get out of festivals, so I wanted to start there), festivals are always a great opportunity for filmmakers.

Here's a shortlist of ways to turn every festival to your advantage:

Gain exposure and to find an audience

Whether you're looking for a traditional distribution deal, looking to drum up grassroots support for your film, looking to build a press kit, or looking to pursue alternative distribution, film festivals give you EXPOSURE. And this is key. No one will know your film is out there unless they see it or hear about it. Film festivals are not only an ideal place to have your work seen, but it's a public screening opportunity (more about that to come) and a chance to start building your audience offline. Plus, it gives you a great opportunity to build the all-important press kit.

It's a great opportunity to see your film in front of an audience and to gauge how the audience reacts.

1. It's great that family and friends love your film, but how an audience of strangers reacts is going to be crucial to knowing what you've got on your hands.
2. If you are thinking of self-releasing your film into theaters via four-walling, a service deal, or a limited theatrical run you should always see how it plays in front of an audience of strangers first.

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Meet and network with other filmmakers.

Sundance and the other major festivals are massive and don't allow for too much by way of personal interaction and meaningful relationship building – there's a lot going on at those festivals, they are overwhelming, and, there are a ton of distractions. Smaller festivals are far less overwhelming so instead of losing half of what you're taking in in sensory overload, you can actually connect with fellow filmmakers and other professionals in a meaningful way. In a business of relationships, this is key.

Use the press office.

Most festivals have a press office...if your film is playing at the festival you should absolutely be using it. It exists and it should be utilized.

Get reviews and start building your press kit.

As mentioned earlier, you will need to start building that all-important press kit and use the festival screenings as an opportunity to do this. Send out press releases about your film and screening, then pick up the phone and try to get local press to cover the screening. At festivals like Sundance this can be pretty tough cause there's so much competition. However, smaller festivals are the perfect place to court the local press and start getting your film reviewed.

Make contacts and collect business cards

Festivals aren't just to show films. They are an opportunity to make professional contacts. Once again, be sure to collect business cards and make sure you follow up once the festival is over. A lot of great professional relationships are born this way.

Make up business cards, postcards, etc.

Just because buyers may not be at a certain festival does not mean that other people who could be important to you are not there. Always make sure you are prepared with marketing materials for your film and make sure you always have your business card on you.

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Collect email addresses at all your screenings

Get the e-mail address of as many attendees at your screenings so you can start building your audience. Having a way to get in touch with

Get your own publicity

If you're at a smaller festival that doesn't merit hiring a publicist, try to do your own local publicity to get the word out about your screening – contact local radio, papers, even, if possible, local organizations who are concerned with the subject matter of your film. Get the word out on the grassroots level as much as you can to attract viewers to your film...and don't forget to collect those e-mail addresses so if you choose to self-distribute later, you already have a built-in audience you can reach directly and try to sell your DVD to later.