



creating

MARKETING CAMPAIGNS

for documentaries

Screen Australia staged a one-day marketing workshop for documentary filmmakers in August 2010. The aim was to help producers get as much exposure as possible for their documentaries by keeping the audience in mind from the outset. Information provided on that day by Jackson Pellow, then a Screen Australia Marketing Executive, has been fed into this guide.

The marketing campaign for any film or television program has one key aim: to get as many people as possible to head out to the cinema, tune into the television, visit the video store or go hunting online for the production being promoted. It takes a lot of careful thinking and execution to rise above the competition.

Each project has its own unique strategy but all projects should have compelling sales and publicity hooks. The key is to look for what is newsworthy or different, then work out how to best exploit those distinguishing characteristics.

The campaign should be seen as a continuation of the effort put into the package that was created to attract financiers. It should run for at least a year; the longer interest can be maintained, the more people will seek out the film.

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There are many components to a campaign

The importance of a campaign cannot be underestimated and someone must take responsibility for overseeing it. Here are just a few examples of what has to be done:

- drafting a marketing plan and seeking agreement from key stakeholders on its implementation
- producing all deliverables including trailers, stills, the press kit and key art
- implementing a festivals and awards strategy
- managing the marketing budget and marketing timeline to ensure all deadlines are met
- hiring, briefing and staying in touch with contractors
- ensuring brand consistency, and
- compiling a report after release that assesses the campaign's success.

Everyone involved has to work together

Many people will be involved in the campaign and, to be effective, they must all pull in the same direction. This applies whether it is the sales agent trying to interest potential buyers, the producer seeking out opportunities at festivals, a network publicist creating interest prior to the television release, or an educational distributor concentrating on getting the film into libraries and schools.

Agreeing to use the same synopsis through every phase of the campaign effort is a simple example of how to stay on the same page. If everyone is on the same page, there is more chance that they will create momentum around a project. But there has to be flexibility too: documentaries are unscripted and it is not unusual for the story, and therefore the synopsis, to change as a result of what happens on set or in the wider world.



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Hiring the best photographer is an early priority

Once the outline of a strategy has been decided upon, one of the first tasks is to hire a skilled photographer to take the publicity stills on set. Having great images is crucial: they are used in publicity, as the central component of the key art and on the website.

Eight to ten still images may be enough to fulfil the delivery requirements but it is much more preferable to have about 40 key images for stand-alone documentaries and up to 100 for series. Audiences can be reached through many channels and they all need servicing with fresh, interesting stills.

“Stay alert for opportunities to secure material that has the potential to go viral.”

Grabbing stills from the footage is not acceptable because the quality is not good enough.

Excellent behind-the-scenes footage also has to be gathered from the set. All the key players from behind the camera must be interviewed, and those in front of the camera too if appropriate. However, decisions have to be made early on about who is going to feature most prominently in the campaign.

This material is for use in DVD extras, on websites and by the electronic media. Stay alert for opportunities to secure material that has the potential to go viral.

It is necessary to generate great words as well as great pictures. As the project moves into the fine-cut stage, a skilled writer who knows what kind of information is required by the media has to be engaged to produce the press kit.

[See *Working with a Unit Publicist*, *Working with a Unit Photographer* and *Producing an EPK*, which are designed for feature film producers but may still prove useful: www.screenaustralia.gov.au/marketing/guides.aspx]

The trailer must be compelling

Research indicates that one of the most powerful ways to attract audiences is with a compelling trailer. It may also be necessary to have a sales trailer for use at markets.

Keep in mind how easily video material can be distributed and shared on social networking sites. If the documentary has a great title sequence perhaps this can be adapted for online use to drive people to the official website.

Remember that the look and feel of the film, from the colour palate to the font used for the credits, should be cohesive across all marketing materials, from the poster to the DVD packaging.

Feature-length and short documentaries play best at festivals

For certain documentaries, getting positive exposure through festivals can have a big impact on success. Feature-length and short documentaries with a personal point of view or a unique story tend to do best in that environment.

Documentaries that don't tend to play well at festivals are typically series, television hours, formats or films with content that only connects to one group (whether because of geography or subject). That doesn't mean these productions won't be extremely successful in other contexts.

After allocating a budget of \$500 to \$6,000 for the festivals and awards component of the campaign, create a target list of at least 25 festivals and competitions, carefully noting down the deadlines for each. The success ratio is likely to be 5:1. Each entry or approach to an event must be tailored to the event.

A film ages quickly so it's important to start the process as the film is being completed. If a fine cut is being submitted, ensure that the film is clearly labelled as such and include a letter stating the same.

Look for niche festivals or awards that are appropriate to the subject. Many events are purely about sport, the environment, Indigenous peoples, history, science and so on.



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Play to the strengths of the film. If it has a great script, enter it in screenplay awards. Being selected for a key festival, or being nominated for or winning an award delivers 'brag rights' that can be utilised with partners, the media and, ultimately, the audience.

Launch events need to be carefully planned

Launch events can play a big part in raising awareness if they are well attended, memorable, managed properly and timed correctly. It is essential to have the right mix of high-profile guests, speakers, stakeholders and media representatives. Work with an event partner or interest group and choose an interesting and relevant location for the launch. Where possible, include the core cast and crew and ensure there is a high level of engagement between them and the guests.

Advertising is costly

It is costly to create stills, a press kit, a website, trailers and teachers' notes. A launch event alone could cost between \$3,000 and \$10,000. The minimum costs for any campaign are:

- feature documentaries: \$45,000
- documentary series for television: \$30,000
- one-hour documentary for television: \$15,000
- half-hour documentary for television: \$12,000
- interstitials for television: \$10,000
- digital documentaries: \$5,000.

Beware of the cost of advertising as it can substantially increase the cost of a marketing campaign. There needs to be a good reason to go down this route.

Success can be judged through an analysis of ratings across all platforms, the online feedback generated, the buzz created around awards and festivals, and reviews. Learning from this will assist on your next project.