



creating **ONLINE STRATEGIES** 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 projects by keeping the audience in mind from the outset. Information provided on that day by James Franklin has been fed into this guide on online strategies. Franklin currently works for Movie Sparks, which provides software for selling and marketing films online.

Many people of all ages and socioeconomic groups stay in contact with their family and friends online and get most of their information online. They have become an important component of spreading word of mouth. For this reason, a digital strategy has to be part of the marketing campaign for any film and television project.

Documentaries with a focus on raising money or getting support for social change can particularly benefit from having a strong online presence. This is because it is easy for audiences to take action using online tools and to encourage others to do the same.

The online component of a project is a starting point for a cycle of sharing and re-sharing. It is the key to building an audience that is interested, committed and active, and this can significantly extend the life of a project.

There are companies that specialise in building websites and widgets, managing social media strategies and designing online advertising for documentaries and other long-form factual projects. It is well worth tapping into this expertise.

Online communication has to be a conversation

To be effective, digital content must be about engagement. Relying on the filmmaker to show and tell is not enough. People don't want to be lectured to. They want to get to know the filmmakers, have conversations with them about the experience of making the film, talk to others interested in the topic and perhaps engage with the subjects too. And they want the chance to voice their own opinions.

People won't act – whether that's attending a screening or adding their weight to a cause – unless they feel an emotional connection. They won't feel a connection unless the online communication is authentic. Getting this right, while challenging, can be enormously beneficial for a film.

Start thinking about online early

The most effective online strategies are designed hand-in-hand with the development of the documentary or factual production. It is not possible to start thinking about online too early, even if it is only throwing ideas around.

The aim is to generate a snowball effect. There is nothing wrong with starting with the basics – even just a photo and a few lines of information – and then slowly expanding on it. Having something to improve on is much better than having nothing at all. Prompting people to bookmark a site with the intention of returning is like planting a seed. It will build awareness and give people the feeling that they were on board at the beginning.

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Digital assets need to be refreshed or adapted

Building an effective website, with the corresponding apps and widgets, will take at least three months, and it needs to be up and running a minimum of six months before a documentary's first outing, whether that be a festival screening, a theatrical run or television exposure.

The job doesn't stop there. The digital assets will have several lives during the film's release cycle but it will need to be refreshed or adapted as the project enters different territories, phases and windows. Resources have to be available for this.

Not surprisingly, costs vary depending on the extent of the online marketing campaign. There will be no change from \$3,000 and, on some productions, expenditure can be far more than \$20,000.

It is not a case of the more you spend the better the results; rather it is about matching the tools and the technology to the project and making judgements about the likely return on investment for the film, the filmmaker and the campaign.

Online communities and their behaviour never fails to surprise

It is impossible to judge how long it will take to build an online following because there are so many factors at play, including the imagination and skill of the team executing the digital strategy. One of the biggest determinants of whether it takes six months or several years is beyond the control of the filmmakers and their partners: it is the size of the community or communities that already have an interest in the content and whether those groups have been tapped. The only certainty is that the behaviour of online communities never fails to surprise!

Being omnipresent is the key

Social networking sites are at the heart of online marketing for documentaries. Facebook, with its massive user base, is now so important that it is vital to any campaign.

But there is no magic bullet: being omnipresent is the key and that means exploring all avenues not just Facebook and Twitter, MySpace and Bebo, but also social news websites such as Digg, the discovery engine StumbleUpon and so on and so on: the list grows bigger by the day. Engines such as Ning also make it possible for people to build their own powerful networks.

It is important to monitor success so that the most effort can be targeted at the channels that are returning good results. Those sites are also likely to lead you elsewhere.

A successful online campaign establishes a fan base that can be contacted at any time and that fan base can provide an understanding of the extent of the potential audience across gender, geography, age and interests.

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