



Film Festivals

Educational Programming

Just as exhibitions aren't only about the art on the walls, film festivals are not exclusively about the films being screened. Unfortunately, festivals rarely take advantage of their full educational and outreach potential. But there's no time like the present to begin exploring new ways to engage with audiences and take them beyond the passive viewing experience. Here are a few suggestions to help you reframe your approach to programming and audiences.

1. Target audience does not refer to the capacity of the theater.

Observation: We know that it's important to fill seats, but the strongest proposals will demonstrate an understanding both of who's coming now and who you want to come and why. Though festivals will always depend on marketing to a greater or lesser degree, strong proposals to this category will look beneath or beyond the numbers to identify groups that should be coming, should be coming in greater numbers, or should be more engaged.

2. What are you doing besides showing films?

Observation: Think beyond q&a's and industry-sponsored workshops. These chestnuts are often chosen because they require the least effort on the part of the organizer. Unfortunately, the price of no effort is less control of the product, which is a shame if this is the only variety of extended engagement. Look for models of more substantive programming at some of the larger festivals, or even in other discipline areas like museums or theaters. Not every program has to happen at the festival or even during the festival. Education can help you increase your visibility in the off-season.

3. Media literacy is a worthy adjunct to any participation goal.

Observation: Media literacy is an evergreen need for both adult and school-age audiences. The degree to which programming takes viewers beyond the entertainment value of the medium and teaches them new ways of seeing and understanding film, the stronger the proposal is likely to be.

The Films

The artistic side of film festivals poses a different issue. Though juried competitions are a less competitive species of project in the visual arts, largely because there are no examples of the proposed artwork to show the panel, they are virtually the only format that film festivals use.

The trick, therefore, is how to show merit without actually showing who you will be presenting. Here are a few things to keep in mind.

1. You need a track record.

Observation: It's very hard for first-year festivals to establish artistic merit. If you have DVDs that show a selection of work from your previous festival, panelists can at least judge the level of quality you're likely to aspire to. Include programs from the festival as supporting material and talk about what you've been able to do in your narrative. One other obstacle for newcomers: unless the festival is sponsored by an existing organization with a programming history, new groups may not be able to meet the Council's eligibility requirements.

2. What do you know about the upcoming festival?

Observation: Tell it all. Is there a theme? Are you planning to change the festival in any way? Will the artistic programming be organized to explore any particular genre or content in depth? Etc. Any sign you can offer of a shaping intelligence will help raise you above the open call only proposal.

3. That would include curated sections.

Observation: Curating a part of your festival allows you to control the content and quality, which is why it tends to be a more desirable format in a panel context. You can use guest curators or in-house expertise, though you would want to provide adequate credentials for either choice.

4. Commercially released films have their own sources of distribution.

Observation: It's not to say you can never show commercial releases at a film festival; it's just that independents may have an inside track for limited grant funds. Something that's available at the local video store may be less compelling than newly created work or work in limited release. However, with any film, what you do with programming activities to frame the viewers' understanding can go a long way towards justifying your selections.

5. What are you doing for and with artists?

Observation: Film festivals typically charge artists fees to enter. Despite paying this fee, a sizable number of these artists will likely not have their work shown at the festival. Acknowledging that this is an industry practice, it's still reasonable to ask, What is the festival offering to artists beyond a lottery ticket? Do you pay filmmakers to speak, sit on panels, do workshops? Do you pay expenses of artists and speakers you've invited to come? Are you a resource for filmmakers, whether they're in the festival or not? How do you use your web site? Artists are, after all, a crucial *audience* for you and a fair number of them will not benefit from the exposure you principally offer. And even for those that do, there's so much you can do to deepen their connection. After all, as one artist wag put it who apparently had been given one too many "opportunities": "Exposure is great—but you can die of exposure."