



DOCUMENTARY
ORGANIZATION OF CANADA
DOCUMENTARISTES
DU CANADA

What Are Film Festivals For?

AUTHOR: Sean Farnel

Film festivals are the primary exhibition platform for the independently produced point-of-view and creative documentary. Premieres at the top-tier festivals, followed by a critical mass of worldwide festival presentations, can be a gateway to domestic and international markets and a catalyst for marketing, sales and, ultimately, revenue generation. In Canada, we now call this “discoverability.”¹

Yet, with somewhere between 3,000 and 8,000 film festivals globally (clearly, estimates vary widely), today’s Canadian independent documentary filmmaker faces a gauntlet of strategic decisions. Parsing the difference between types of festivals, understanding the benefits and leverage each can offer, and knowing whether the festival circuit is the optimal launch platform for their production is tricky, even for the most experienced producers.

For example, it is not atypical for a producer to spend thousands of dollars in festival submission fees without success. Or, to accept a world premiere at one festival only to discover that now many other festivals will not consider the production because of the festival’s premiere criterion. Or, to pay to submit a film to a festival and never receive any response or indication that anyone even watched their production. And these are just a few of the frustrations inherent in navigating the culture and business of film festivals.

Deciphering the present festival landscape has become an onerous task for the independent producer, due to:

- the sheer volume of international film festivals
- the puffed up claims of credible festivals and the emergence of “scam festivals”²
- the number of submissions to both major and minor festivals, and the sense that submitted productions are not fully considered

- the significant expenses of both submitting to, and servicing, film festivals
- wild inconsistency in curatorial judgement and application of festival policies

Increasingly, forward-thinking producers and distributors are taking a bespoke approach to distributing their works, designing market launch plans that are production specific. Within this approach, most recently called “creative distribution,”³ marketing, distribution and exhibition strategies (including festivals) are tightly integrated, deliberate and customized. Key to this approach is a strategic assessment of each production’s potential, and the development of a nimble, coherent distribution strategy to realize that potential. Here, a film festival launch is just one option among many. In some cases, a community outreach or online launch may make more sense than a film festival launch.

All this has engendered the notion of “film festival strategies,” which is a relatively new, but necessary, consideration for media producers and distributors who aim to get the most out of film festival participation. Designing film festival strategies is an emerging skill, linked to—but different from—traditional distribution strategies. It’s one that Canadian documentary filmmakers should be working to develop.

Table of Contents

Festival Distribution Services.....	4
What Are Film Festivals For?.....	6
Case Studies.....	7
CIELO - The Theatrical Launch.....	8
MERMAIDS - Sink or Swim.....	14
A BETTER MAN - The Impact Campaign.....	18
Festival Concierge Services.....	22
Festival Concierge Service Packages.....	23
Festival Concierge Sample Consultation: HOW TO BEE.....	24
Notes On These Notes.....	28
Are You Ready For Festival Concierge?.....	29
Funders/Credits/Acknowledgements.....	30



Festival Distribution **Services**

Internationally, many national institutions and agencies have long prioritized festival distribution services as key to international promotion and export. These institutions employ the services of festival officers that offer a wide range of services, including submission strategy and aggregation, festival negotiation (for programme placement, scheduling, and screening fees, for example) and supporting national cinema programmes and delegations.

More recently, private sector companies specializing in film festival distribution have emerged to meet a demand for such services. For instance, The Festival Agency⁴, aug&ohr medien⁵, Pink Eyes Distribution⁶ and Festival Whizz⁷ offer fee-based submission, marketing and festival logistics services (providing DCPs, for example) to independent producers. However, such services can be costly and, frequently, not the most effective manner in which to leverage the strengths of individual productions.

A survey of members of the Documentary Organization of Canada (DOC) indicated that over 90% of DOC's membership submits works to international festivals, while 85% submits to national festivals and 75% submits to regional events. The majority of members (53%) submit to more than five festivals, and 28% of these submit to more than 10 festivals.

FESTIVAL CONCIERGE

DOC's Festival Concierge service was originally conceived in 2012, by Sean Farnel. During his many years as a film festival programmer at the Toronto International Film Festival and Hot Docs, Farnel had perceived a gap in knowledge and support services for independent producers who were seeking to leverage the international film festival circuit. As a result, Canadian productions were underrepresented on the festival circuit and were therefore limited in stimulating further revenue generating opportunities. As a festival programmer, Farnel had experienced the advocacy and support that many film institutes, particularly those in Western Europe (German Film, Swiss Film, Danish Film Institute, Austrian Film Commission, etc.) provided to independent productions. After stepping down as Hot Docs' Director of Programming, he began working with DOC to create such a service to support Canadian documentary producers.

In March 2014, DOC launched the first iteration of the service, with Julian Carrington serving as the main Festival Concierge (FC) consultant. During this start-up phase FC provided festival support services to more than 250 productions. In 2018, DOC paused the service during a period where organizational resources were focused on governance and operational restructuring. In fall 2018, Farnel was re-engaged to work with DOC staff to refresh and reboot Festival Concierge, now being relaunched in summer 2019.

Festival Concierge supports Canadian documentary filmmakers in parsing the best possible strategy for their productions, troubleshooting the options, reacting to developments (not being accepted at a festival, for instance) and building a knowledge base that will strengthen the Canadian documentary sector's engagement and discoverability on the international film festival circuit.

Canadian producers have access to an array of funding (nationally and provincially) to support core expenses for film festival travel, participation and marketing. For a complete overview of such programs, we refer you to DOC's recently published "The Roadmap To Creative Distribution," a current and comprehensive overview prepared for DOC by Chanda Chevannes.

DOC's Festival Concierge, providing direct strategic guidance and supporting resources for film festival distribution, is the only such service available to independent Canadian filmmakers.





What Are **Film Festivals** For?

The membership of the Documentary Organization of Canada (DOC) has identified festivals as a primary platform for premiering and exhibiting their productions. With the re-launch of Festival Concierge, we are striving to assist documentary filmmakers in their goal of building a successful festival release. This publication also aims to support that goal.

But, what are film festivals for, *really*?

When we pose this question at Festival Concierge workshops our doc-maker members invariably check the boxes that have been rote assumptions within festival culture: exposure, acclaim, publicity, sales, marketing, audience engagement, professional development, networking, awards, laurels, travel. These are attractive value propositions. They are, even, attainable outcomes—for some productions.

But we must be cautious. There is a significant variable to consider: the vast majority of films submitted to any given festival are not selected. Take the Sundance Film Festival as an example. It is, by any measure, the world's best film festival for premiering an English-language feature documentary. It checks all the boxes and has been singular, among film festivals, in shaping the contemporary canon for English-language creative documentary. In 2019, the Sundance Film Festival received 2,649 feature documentary submissions. Forty-nine of those productions were ultimately presented at Sundance, less than 2% of the total submissions.⁸ While it's reasonable to assume that

Sundance is among the most difficult festivals for which to be selected, its acceptance rates are not an anomaly. Were such data transparency offered from other major festivals, we'd expect to see similar results.

This suggests that the primary function of film festivals is not amplification, but a winnowing of market attention. We can generously hypothesize that less than 10% of feature documentaries submitted to film festivals are selected for programming. The irony is that, for most documentaries seeking a path to market through film festivals, the major obstacles are film festivals themselves.

Within any artistic aspirations, the odds against access are rarely a deterrent to the attempt. And rightly so. Happily, mitigating the dismal rates of acceptance at film festivals is the sheer ubiquity of these events. How many film festivals are there? Again, the available data is scant. In 2013, the U.K.-based film data researcher Stephen Follows suggested that "there are around 3,000 film festivals currently active."⁹ FilmFreeway, the leading festival submissions platform, currently has

listings for some 8,000 film festivals. So, for those makers seeking to collect film festival laurels to adorn their posters and websites, there is bountiful opportunity.

However, just as festival gatekeepers focus market attention and add value to a small fraction of films, the makers and the industry around them do the same with festivals. We do our own winnowing, conferring value upon festivals through how we prioritize submissions and premieres and where we gather in critical mass, all in pursuit of the aggregate buzz. The list of festivals we filmmakers value, then, is considerably smaller. How many of the world's 3,000–8,000 film festivals matter depends upon who's asking. For those that assume a currency in film festival laurels, the answer seems to be "all of them!" But, most of us know that not all laurels have equal weight. Through content buyers, sales agents, financiers, programmers, juries, media, funders, and other stakeholders, the value of film festivals is concentrated within a fraction of annual events.

We are claiming that conventional assumptions around the value and purpose of film festivals (at least for makers) are grounded in the hypothetical success rate of a very small percentage of productions submitted annually to the major festivals. It's bad math, for makers. The rest of it, thousands of other films and festivals, percolate in the peripheral, gaseous glow that emanates from the hot canonical core of the top-tier festivals. While many of our assumptions hold true at the core, there are no immutable laws in the periphery (except that the drinks are less frequently for "free"). Yet, it is within this ether that the vast majority of what happens at film festivals happens.

Taken as a whole, are global film festivals a circuit, a market, a platform, a network, a bazaar, an ecology? These are practical questions if we are to determine strategies and tactics for navigating this topography as part of a sustainable practice of making and exhibiting documentaries.

Our intention here is to move beyond assumptions and anecdotes about film festivals. As we've suggested, most of how we think about festivals has congealed around the function of a fraction of films and major film festivals within a much broader ecology. But there is a significant opportunity here for doc-makers to make better use of the wider film festival system.

CASE STUDIES

Through three Canadian case studies, we will identify potential functions of film festivals for documentary producers. We will draw on the shared experiences of our DOC members in navigating this vast and largely unmapped terrain. The ultimate purpose is to inform and clarify how we, as documentary producers, make sense of film festivals.

What else are film festivals for?

CIELO – The Theatrical Launch

Cielo is a feature documentary directed and produced by Alison McAlpine (Second Sight Pictures), co-produced by Paola Castillo (Errante Producciones), with Executive Producer Carmen Garcia (Argus Films).



SHORT SYNOPSIS

Cielo is a cinematic reverie on the crazy beauty of the night sky, as experienced in the Atacama Desert, Chile, one of the best places on our planet to explore and contemplate its splendour.

Though commissioned by the Canadian digital broadcaster documentary Channel, Cielo was conceived and realized as an art film. McAlpine's goal was for Cielo to premiere at a major international film festival, preferably one with a reputation for showcasing art cinema, followed by a theatrical release. "It was my hope that Cielo would be available to, and first experienced by, audiences in cinemas," recalls McAlpine. "The images and sound, the entire structure of the film, was intended to create an evocative space to slow down, reflect and rediscover our world." Early in production, McAlpine enlisted the support of festival consultant Sean Farnel to design and implement a festival launch strategy. Farnel is also the author of this publication, as well as one of the consultants for DOC's Festival Concierge.

Upon screening a rough cut of Cielo in May 2017, Farnel assessed that Cielo did, indeed, have reasonable prospects of achieving McAlpine's goal. They targeted major festivals in Fall 2017 for the initial festival launch window. By mid July 2017, the producers had received notice that Venice, Telluride and the Toronto International Film Festival were declining the production. In mid-August an invitation materialized from the New York Film Festival (NYFF).

As NYFF would be Cielo's world premiere, McAlpine and Farnel had to make a quick determination (within 24hrs, as requested in the invitation) if this was the best option for the film. The alternative would be to push back the festival premiere window to January/February 2018, prioritizing Sundance, Rotterdam and/or Berlin.

The following factors were considered:

- the Canadian broadcast window granted 6-12 months for a festival window and subsequent theatrical exhibition
- given the declinations from several major festivals, it would have been a huge risk to push back the festival launch by several months while the producers awaited decisions from other major events
- waiting would significantly limit a festival run in North America prior to theatrical release
- NYFF was one of the world's oldest and, curatorially, most respected festivals

NYFF PREMIERE

After weighing the decision, McAlpine confirmed the World Premiere of Cielo at the NYFF for October 2017.

Pros:

- Cielo would have its world premiere at a highly respected film festival in a major media market
- with a festival premiere confirmed, the producers could now create and implement a strategy for festival and theatrical distribution, well in advance of the tentative Canadian broadcast window
- the producers could leverage the NYFF presentation to assess critical reception in a discerning, tough New York art-film milieu

Cons:

- NYFF is not a “market” festival, limiting sales prospects directly from festival screenings
- because Cielo is a Canadian film and the NYFF would be its first screening, that screening would represent both the “world” and “international” premieres for the film, meaning that other festivals would be limited to offering the film as a regional premiere
- Rotterdam and Berlin would ultimately decline Cielo and the premiere status could reasonably be assumed to be a factor
- While Telefilm offers support to Canadian films that have been selected to screen at NYFF, the festival is considered a “Tier 3” festival, with support now capped at \$1,500 per production (at the time of Cielo’s application, however, that amount was \$5,000). By comparison, invitations to “Tier 1” festivals (Berlin International Film Festival, Cannes International Film Festival, Sundance Film Festival and Venice Film Festival) can trigger up to \$25,000 in support from Telefilm. Though Cielo would later receive Telefilm festival support

for the European premiere at Karlovy-Vary International Film Festival (now a “Tier 2” event in the Telefilm matrix), the decision to present the world premiere at NYFF limited access to this essential support.

NYFF PREMIERE

The producers assessed the prospects of generating media coverage and distribution sales at NYFF to be minimal against the required investment. For example, hiring a publicist for NYFF would cost approximately \$5,000, and Cielo would have been competing with star-driven Oscar hopefuls supported by large publicity agencies.

Rather, the producers decided to leverage the NYFF presentation as a “market test” screening and to use the premiere to “seed” future opportunities and partnerships. McAlpine would attend the NYFF screenings and get a sense of how this first, and very discerning, public audience responded to her film. Targeted outreach was conducted to New York astrophysics and amateur astronomy networks. As well, the producers tested digital ads on Facebook and Twitter, which would subsequently inform a broader digital marketing plan.

Among the benefits of the NYFF presentation was a pre-festival press/industry screening for New York media. Of course, it’s also a harrowing proposition for any filmmaker: thirty-five accredited media and fourteen accredited industry attended the pre-fest screening in New York. Critics from The New York Times, The Guardian, Screen Daily, Cineaste, and Village Voice were all in attendance.

Two significant reviews of *Cielo* were published out of NYFF. The Hollywood Reporter was mixed but offered a great pull-quote: "Seen on a big screen, these images — photographed by cinematographer Benjamin Echazarreta — have a transporting power that comes close to approximating what it must be like to actually stand in Atacama, gazing up in awe." On the website Culture Trip, respected veteran film critic Graham Fuller raved "No planetarium could hope to replicate the awe-inspiring spectacle that is Alison McAlpine's *Cielo*, a documentary screening at the 2017 New York Film Festival." These early reviews, and other signals via Twitter and several blogs, offered essential encouragement as the producers proceeded with plans for theatrical distribution.

Immediately following the NYFF presentation, the producers had the DCP sent to Film Forum programmers, so they could experience *Cielo* on a big screen. The fact that film festivals were considering this cinematic, meditative work from a Vimeo link was not ideal. Film Forum immediately expressed interest in a summer 2018 theatrical run in New York, which became the anchor booking around which the producers built a significant North American cinema release. As a direct result of the NYFF screenings and the Film Forum booking, the producers secured U.S. distribution without engaging a sales agent.



Alison McAlpine in front of space observatories

FACTS AND FIGURES

- Cielo was submitted to 87 international festivals and to date has been presented at 30 festivals, for an acceptance rate of 35%
- other festival screenings of note included the European Premiere at Karlovy-Vary International Film Festival and Canadian screenings at RIDM, Hot Docs and DOXA
- the producers kept their submissions expenses below \$500, by taking advantage of Telefilm Canada's festival submission waivers, requesting waivers directly from festivals and generating solicited submissions
- the producers received market access funding from Telefilm Canada (\$5,000 to offset NYFF world premiere expenses) and SODEC (\$9,000 to offset European premiere expenses at Karlovy-Vary International Film Festival)
- approximately \$8,000 in revenues has been generated from festival screening fees to date, with an additional \$2,000 in cash awards
- in late summer 2018, Cielo also had a very successful North American theatrical release, including being held-over at art-house cinemas in New York, Toronto, Montreal, Santiago and several other markets

TAKEAWAYS

- planning for festival and theatrical distribution is, or should be, a parallel process
- risk is inherent to any festival premiere, and indecisiveness is also a risk
- an additional challenge for art films is that festival programmers are considering submissions from laptops, not cinema screens
- festivals are truly a “long tail” distribution platform...currently Cielo is being presented widely at Mountain Film Festivals, almost two years following it’s festival premiere
- look up!



MERMAIDS – Sink or Swim

Mermaids is a feature documentary directed by Ali Weinstein and produced by Caitlin Durlak (Naiad Productions), with Executive Producer Ron Mann (Sphinx Productions).



Cookie De Jesus at Coney Island

SHORT SYNOPSIS

Following the stories of five extraordinary tail-donning women who are part of a growing “mermaiding” subculture, audiences voyage between mermaid theme parks, conventions, tail-making studios, and deep into the ocean where transforming into the empowered icon of the mermaid is possible.

“We set up our whole schedule with the intention of being done in time to submit to TIFF, but we weren’t ready to by their deadline, so we kept editing and didn’t submit and then built a festival strategy from there with Sean, submitting to top tier festivals first like IDFA, Sundance, Berlin, SXSW. We always knew we wanted to premiere at a great festival so even though we were picture locked at the end of August 2016, we waited until end of April 2017 for our Hot Docs premiere. After all the build up to trying to get a prestigious premiere, then there was a sudden feeling of ‘oh wait, we didn’t submit to second and third tier festivals because we were so busy submitting to and waiting for all the best ones’. At that point we felt a bit of exhaustion and a need to start pushing ourselves in the spring of 2017 to start applying to more festivals.” - **Ali Weinstein**

Weinstein and Durlak proceeded with a “top-down” festival submissions strategy. They were mindful not to submit too early, before they locked picture, and they took advantage of Telefilm Canada’s submission fee waivers to major festivals. They also directly requested submission waivers from many festivals, with some success. Mermaids was declined by IDFA, Sundance,

Rotterdam, Berlinale, SXSW, True/False, CPH:DOX, Tribeca and Full Frame prior to being invited for a world premiere at Hot Docs in April 2017, closely followed by an invitation to DOXA.”
 “I felt our film had good audience potential, our subject had a pop culture bent, and I felt we were telling a very inspiring story - I was proud of our film and had great expectations for it. But as this was our first feature and the whole experience was a big learning curve for us, I would learn that the competition to get into festivals is much larger than I had fathomed and perhaps my pride in the film was only a small factor into acceptance rates.”
 – **Caitlin Durlak**

The world premiere at Hot Docs was a success, with sold-out screenings and a high ranking on the Audience Award poll. Conversations were also started with distributors, including Gravitass Ventures, which would eventually acquire world rights, excluding Canada.

U.S. PREMIERE

Following Hot Docs, Weinstein and Durlak turned their attention to securing a good U.S. premiere. "It was a balancing act of trying to, really, guess what is going to be the most beneficial festival for the film, the filmmaker, and the subjects of the film." Having already tested the waters with major U.S. festivals, they assessed the invitations that were starting to materialize following Hot Docs. The Lower East Side Film Festival, in New York, offered Mermaids an Opening Night slot in the festival's competition. While somewhat "off-Broadway," in festival circuit terms, they ultimately accepted. A premiere priority in New York (Tribeca) had already declined, and holding for a DOC NYC decision would take months, with no guarantees. A New York screening on the heels of Hot Docs would enable the filmmakers to have one their subjects, Cookie, present at the screening. They would also go on to win their first, and only, award for Mermaids at the Lower East Side Film Festival.

While attaining a critical mass of film festival presentations was elusive (partly due to producer burnout) Mermaids would go on to be presented at over fifteen festivals in North America and Europe, garnering attention wherever it screened. Weinstein and Durlak reached out to the mermaid community (through, of course, "The Mer Network"), wherever they played. At the Cleveland International Film Festival, nearing the end of Mermaids' year-long festival run, eight local mermaids self-organized a live performance in front of a huge fountain in the local mall where the festival is based. "It was so exciting to have people who identified with the film and wanted to be part of it," Durlak said. Adds Weinstein, "It was at some

of these smaller festivals that Mermaids had the most audience and festival attention. The Atlanta Film Festival had a live mermaid performance on stage as well and we got amazing audience feedback at these smaller festivals." Later, at OUTShine Film Festival in Miami they received further distribution interest, though had signed with Gravitass Ventures.

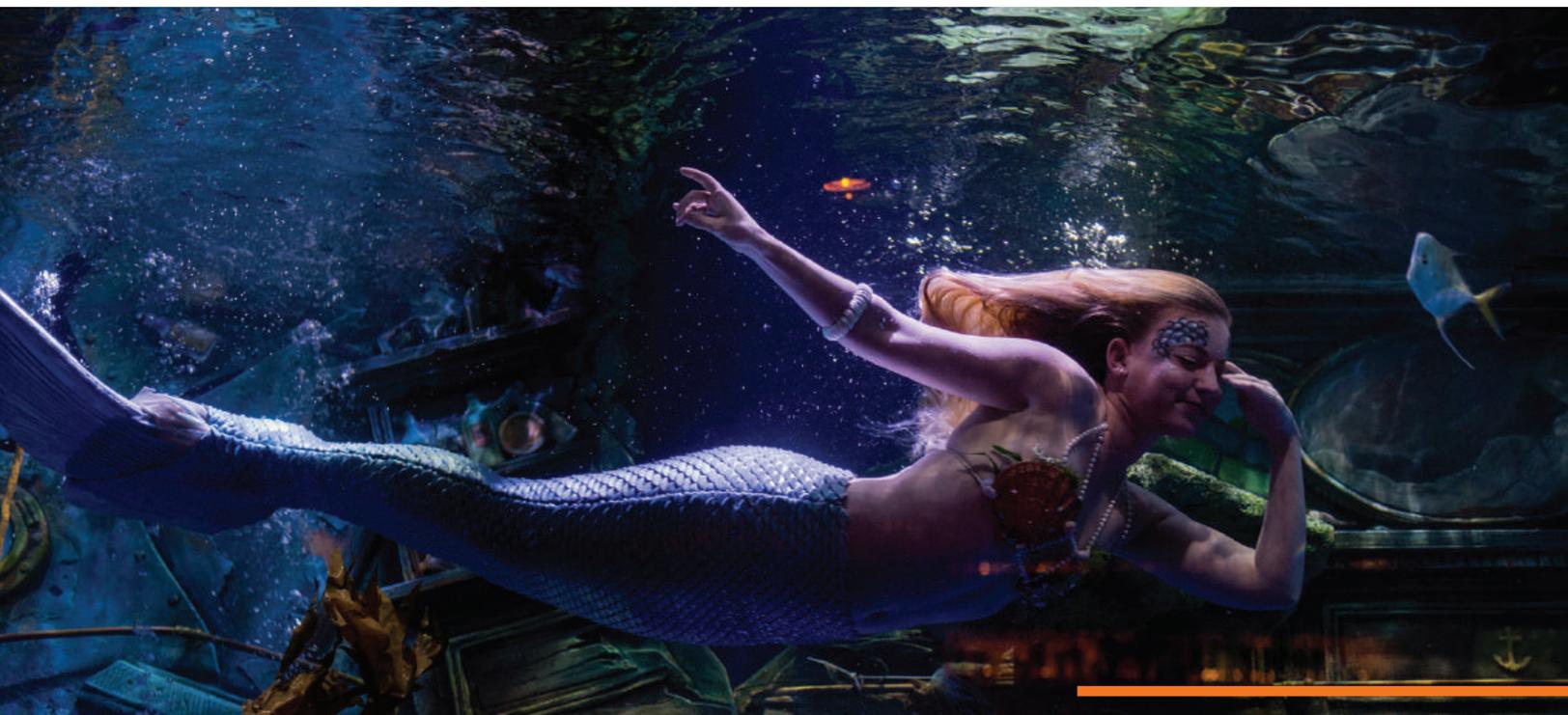
Beyond securing distribution and now being "discoverable," worldwide, Mermaids' festival launch has yet to translate to meaningful producer revenues. "What I hadn't learned about, but did going through the festival process, was leveraging the festival run with trying to figure out how to make money from the film. In hindsight, we could have been thinking about using these festival presentations to simultaneously launch our VOD, leveraging the publicity we were getting at the festivals... I think sometimes you can get caught up in festivals as an ego thing. - *Caitlin Durlak*

FACTS AND FIGURES

- Mermaids was submitted to 62 festivals and invited to 15, for an acceptance rate of 24%
- the producers spent approximately \$400 on submission fees
- approximately 55 fee waivers were requested, with 23 partial or full waivers granted
- Mermaids earned approximately \$800 in screening fees and also received travel support in some instances

TAKEAWAYS

- making your doc is only half the work, the other half is getting it out and into the market
- managing the marketing and distribution of your production requires both renewed energies and an extended skillset
- start early, have a plan and a series of fall-backs
- don't underestimate the value of the smaller, lesserknown festivals in designing a festival exhibition strategy
- aligning a festival tour with revenue generation is something that has to start as early as possible, and be built into the DNA of the production
- mermaids are real!



**Rachel Smith performing
at Dive Bar**



A BETTER MAN - The Impact Campaign

The feature documentary A Better Man (ABM) was written and directed by Attiya Khan and Lawrence Jackman, produced by Christine Kleckner (Intervention Pictures) and Justine Pimlott (NFB).

SHORT SYNOPSIS

On a hot summer night 22 years ago, 18-year-old Attiya Khan ran through the streets, frightened for her life. She was fleeing her ex-boyfriend Steve, who'd been abusing her on a daily basis. Now, all these years later, Attiya has asked Steve to meet. She wants to know how he remembers their relationship and if he is willing to take responsibility for his violent actions.

Early in production, the ABM producers developed an impact campaign aligned with the film's clearly stated intent: "The purpose of this project is to persuade the public, policy makers, and those who work in the domestic violence field to widen their focus to include abusers as a means of preventing violence against women."

A crowdfunding campaign (IndieGoGo) was launched on November 10, 2014, with a funding goal of \$75,000. The campaign closed on December 20, 2014, raising \$110,765 from 1,010 backers.

"Our crowdfunding campaign followed an extensive research process which included building a base by collecting endorsements from professionals and influencers in the Violence Against Women community. The crowdfunding campaign was designed to build interest and long-term support. 3% of the crowdfunding campaign was allocated to social media outreach, which was the seed for designing the film's messaging. The designing of assets, etc. was voluntary."

- *Christine Kleckner*

A marketing plan was prepared by the producers at the development stage and refined through production to support both outreach activities and funding. "The two strategies often intertwine and were required, or at least we felt they were, for development and impact applications."

- *Christine Kleckner*

In November 2015, very early in production, Kleckner prepared a "distribution action plan," prioritizing a festival release, predicated on the following goals:

- leverage the power of cinema to highlight a social issue
- bring industry attention to the creative team
- generate publicity opportunities
- attract market and philanthropic interest and partnerships
- stimulate further festival interest
- build marketing networks through grassroots organizers



Lawrence Jackman and Attiya Khan

Still approximately twelve months from completing the production, a preliminary festival strategy was outlined:

- a. ABM will be entered in A-List festivals around the globe. We would like to see the film have an International Premiere (i.e., Berlin or IDFA), a US Premiere (where potential theatrical distributors attend). We are well-situated in our timeline for a Sundance Premiere, which will attract a US theatrical distribution deal.
- b. ABM will be entered into secondary festivals and community screenings.
- c. The ABM co-directors will be at major festival screenings/markets, which will not only support the sales effort for the film, but also leverage grassroots and social impact opportunities after the festival launch.

Unfortunately, “A-list” international festival invitations did not materialize. Following several declinations in late 2016 and early 2017, A Better Man premiered at Hot Docs (Canada’s largest documentary film festival) in April 2017.

“We didn’t have as much success as we thought we would have with festivals. I was super surprised at some of our “nos” and less surprised by others. It’s very personal to be rejected. It’s something you have to really get your head straight about, because it can deflate you and it shouldn’t. There are so many variables around these (programming) decisions.” - **Christine Kleckner**

And yet, a world premiere at Hot Docs is a coveted slot for Canadian documentaries. Premiering at their “local” festival gave A Better Man advantages in generating significant media coverage and

launching the production's multi-faceted, "long-game," impact distribution strategy.

"There's a huge opportunity to get your work covered in the press if you're in a major festival. And if you're doing social activist films, which is the work I do, not only will film critics cover your films, but you'll also be able to find other journalists and writers that want to discuss what your film is about, opening up other opportunities beyond the film media. But they only want to give attention to films that are interesting to the world, and festivals help generate that interest." - *Christine Kleckner*

Community Screenings And Conferences

Deeply ingrained within the intent of the production, and the marketing plan designed around it, outreach was amplified by the festival screenings. "When we are screening at a festival in any city, we connect with organizations in fields of work aligned with A Better Man and leverage that screening so that these people can find ways of using the film in their work, which they do," suggests Kleckner.

FACTS AND FIGURES

- submissions were managed by the NFB's Festivals and Audience Development office, excluding U.S. festival entries, which were managed by the film's U.S. distributor
- A Better Man was submitted to 66 festivals, of which 9 invited the film
- another 16 festival invitations were secured through solicited submissions and direct invitations
- since its release, A Better Man has been screened at over 100 community screenings and conferences, many of the latter offering significant screening and speaking fees

TAKEAWAYS

- plan and prepare for, but don't count on, festival distribution
- be ready with contingencies
- focus festival goals and tactics around the intent of the production
- the utility of festivals is best considered, and leveraged, within the context of a broader marketing and exhibition plan
- festivals can be an effective catalyst in generating community and conference exhibition opportunities, amplifying your production beyond the festival bubble
- time's up!



Festival Concierge Services

The primary objective of Festival Concierge remains consistent with the original intent of the service: to create space and discoverability for Canadian documentary productions within the domestic and international film festival circuit, as a catalyst toward career development and sustainability for DOC makers.

Festival Concierge will achieve this objective by offering the following services to Canadian documentary producers:

- a digital hub/database to track DOC-member productions, facilitating film festival-readiness and, ultimately, submissions
- submission-fee waivers and discounts for DOC members
- a monthly Festival Concierge e-bulletin providing festival-related information (deadlines, etc.) and member success stories on the festival circuit
- advocacy, marketing and promotion of Canadian documentary production to international festivals and markets
- direct fee-based consultation services for Canadian producers
- a “Discoverability Lab” to provide 6-8 documentary producers with mentorship and guidance prior to and through the market launch of their productions

Festival Concierge Service Packages

DOC MEMBERS

- monthly Festival Concierge E-Bulletin
- discounts and waivers on festival submission fees
- basic festival distribution resources
- listing in the DOC production digital hub

• **FREE**

BASIC

- FC reviews the production and provides a brief written assessment with recommendations
- proprietary festival distribution resources, including festival tracking sheets
- 30-minute in-person/phone/online consultation

• **\$250 (FEATURE)/\$150 (SHORT)**

STANDARD

- FC reviews the production and provides a written assessment with recommendations
- 45-minute in-person/phone/online consultation
- proprietary festival distribution resources, including festival tracking sheets
- 3 x 30-min follow-up session via phone/online meeting over 3 month term

• **\$500 (FEATURE)/\$350 (SHORT)**

PREMIUM

- FC reviews the production and provides a written assessment with recommendations
- 6 x 30-min follow-up sessions via phone/online over a 6 month term
- proprietary festival distribution resources, including festival tracking sheets
- extended market support, including sales and distribution coaching and introductions

• **\$750 (FEATURE)/\$500 (SHORT)**

FESTIVAL CONCIERGE SAMPLE CONSULTATION: HOW TO BEE

In preparing for the re-launch of Festival Concierge, DOC has done several pilot tests, providing FC consultations with independent producers. We thank Whitehorse-based producers Naomi Mark and Vivian Belik (How to Bee) for agreeing to share their consultation with the DOC community.

The core service of Festival Concierge is direct producer consultations, including what we might call a “pre-market assessment,” in which we provide notes and several follow-up actions, to start. In the case of How To Bee, the consultation happened shortly after the film’s world premiere at the Available Light Film Festival in Whitehorse, Yukon. It was a hometown premiere (which we love), following declinations from Sundance, IDFA and many of the producer’s other “A-list” festival submissions.

More ideal is to begin the process of assessing festival viability and developing a corresponding strategy well prior to project completion. Such an assessment may also include bypassing the festival circuit altogether. In this instance of How To Bee, the producers were seeking to regroup after the letdown of several key festival declinations.

This was the starting point of the consultation, and here are the assessment notes and recommended actions:

HOW TO BEE

Director	Naomi Mark
Producers	Vivian Belik, Naomi Mark
Running Time	83'
Screened	Available Light Film Festival
Subject	Filmmaker returns home to be with her ailing father as he teaches her Beekeeping in Whitehorse, Yukon, Canada.
Content	Family, Nature, Wellness, Health, Filmmaking, Lifestyle, Travel
Structure	Narrative
Reality	Observation, POV, Interviews, Impressionism
Genre	Biography, Personal, Cinematic, Instructional, Reflexive, Archival
Worldview	Love, Admiration, Optimism, Disillusionment, Tragedy, Inquisitive, Self-seeking

Festival Screening Status:

- premiered at Available Light in February
- invited to DOXA, early May
- significant volume of declinations from major and secondary fests (IDFA, Sundance, Berlin, SXSW, CPH:DOX, Tribeca, Hot Docs, etc.)



Don Mark beekeeping

Distribution Plans & Goals:

- Canadian Rights: Knowledge (clarify VOD holdback)
- Worldwide Rights: Producers have all rights
- Producers have worked with a digital strategist around sourcing outreach to Beekeeping and COPD communities
- Producers' goal is a "platformed" release strategy: Festivals > Limited/semi-theatrical > Educational > VOD

Strengths:

- engaging, tender, moving family story
- beautiful characters in a beautiful setting
- durational narrative, unfolding over years
- multi-layered
- interesting and informative, we learn things
- reflexivity re: filmmaking and beekeeping
- wellness, lifestyle (including heightened interest in bee ecology and beekeeping)

Resistance:

- between genres and content categories (i.e., “Part biography, part point-of-view documentary and part intro to beekeeping”)
- quiet, modest, leisurely paced...requires attention for full appreciation
- preliminary marketing plan/strategy hinged upon a critical mass of festival play to stimulate “impact/outreach” around the issues of beekeeping and lung health, even though neither is the primary focus of the film (and, unfortunately, key festival invites are not materializing)
- there have been several bee-related documentaries on the festival circuit over the past five years, including Honeyland (an art doc), which just premiered at Sundance

Festival Prospects

- first wave of festival submissions tested curatorial interest at major events
- it’s good work, and should be of interest to indy/local/thematic festivals in North America, less so internationally (as with most personal docs)

Sales/Market Prospects

- prospects for international broadcast sales are minimal to nil (given length, pace, subject)
- likewise, and “all-world” or even U.S. SVOD deal (Netflix, Amazon, Hulu) seems like a longshot
- working with an aggregator or self-publishing are likely the best options for VOD discoverability
- setting up and automating direct sales via the film’s website might offer another way to get the film in front of audiences

NEXT STEPS

Marketing:

Next, Festival Concierge will work to assess the following:

- Is this an “impact” film? If so, who is developing, managing and financing the campaign?
- Is there producer bandwidth/capacity to drive such an approach?
- Are there partnership prospects?
- If it’s not an “impact” film, what are other options?

Festivals:

- regroup and identify 10 late-summer/fall fests to prioritize...and set a submissions budget

FC Recommendations:

- you seem to have Canada covered with upcoming submissions
- suggested U.S. regional/local festivals, Fall 2019:
 - Sidewalk: <https://www.sidewalkfest.com/festivals/sidewalk-film-festival/>
 - Indie Memphis: <http://indiememphis.com/>
 - BendFilm: <https://www.bendfilm.org/>
 - Hot Springs: <https://www.hsdfi.org/>
 - Cucalorus: <http://www.cucalorus.org/film/>
 - Nashville: <https://nashvillefilmfestival.org/>
 - Denver: <https://denverfilmfestival.denverfilm.org/>
 - eco, green, natural world film festivals... source here: <http://greenfilmnet.org/>
 - Wild & Scenic: <https://www.wildandscenicfilmfestival.org/>

Canadian Theatrical

- test theatrical interest directly with venues, starting with VanCity, move East

Sales Actions:

- sales email set up...follow-up to come
- targeted outreach to a cross-section of traditional sales agents/distributors up to and including Hot Docs...use this window to test traditional market interest and assess prospects post Hot Docs
- begin prep for direct sales and self-publishing to VOD



Naomi Mark beekeeping



Notes On **These Notes**

First, you can see that Festival Concierge is part of a process where a now-finished production, your “baby”, is being considered as an object in the world. And it’s a vulnerable time, this period of expanding the range of opinions and inputs around a production that you have been very close to, for a long time. We prompt filmmakers to revisit their core intentions and to stay connected to their purpose in making the film, whilst practicing some detachment and resilience during these early days.

Questions will be asked. It’s good practice to anticipate such questions. What is it? How might the market categorize it? Also, it’s important to take an expansive view in these early days. It’s not just about festivals, but about imagining a full market path for the production and how festivals may, or may not, be a portal to further amplification. Festival Concierge seeks to guide and focus producers at this critical juncture. Where are energies and resources best applied, what options could be eliminated, and what are the possibilities? The notes above, for HOW TO BEE, are the beginning of a conversation which will then extend over several months (typically 3-6). Any notions of a “market launch plan” must anticipate, and be prepared to respond decisively to, all contingencies.

HOW TO BEE – A STATUS UPDATE (JUNE 2019)

Mark and Belik have secured a limited theatrical distributor (Demand Films) for North America. They have submitted to some 15 festivals, have received several declinations and one invitation, at Rhodes Island for their U.S. Premiere. As they await decisions from festivals in September and October, they are also seeking partners for community and institutional screenings, while developing E-commerce and licencing options on the film’s official website. Their festival strategy moving forward will focus on environment, nature and wellness-focused festivals and events. The conversation and market testing and exploration continues.

Are You **Ready** For Festival Concierge

Is your production at, at least, the fine cut stage,
with a final delivery date in sight?

Are you the primary rights holder, with the rights to
submit and present this production at film festivals?

Please email DOC's Festival Concierge office to
get started: festivalconciierge@docorg.ca



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ABOUT DOC

The Documentary Organization of Canada/l'Association des documentaristes du Canada (DOC) is the collective voice of independent documentary makers across Canada. DOC is the premier organization for Canadian documentary advocacy, policy analysis, and insightful research. Guided by a mandate to promote and protect documentary and the people who produce them, DOC helps Canadian documentarians get their work made and seen. Our membership is comprised of over 800 Canadian documentary professionals, working from coast to coast to coast.

Executive Director: Mathieu Pierre Dagonas

Administration and Communications Coordinator: Christine Ciuciura

Stylistic and Copy Editor: Chanda Chevannes

Graphic/Publication Designer: David Ramesar



Sean Farnel - Festival Concierge Consultant

Sean Farnel provides creative, marketing and distribution services to documentary producers, companies and institutions. He was the first Director of Programming for Hot Docs, which tripled its audience during his six-year tenure. Prior to joining Hot Docs, Sean created the popular screening series Doc Soup and founded the documentary programme at the Toronto International Film Festival. Sean has done research and strategic consulting for the National Film Board of Canada, DOC, FilmFreeway and other media companies in the private and public sectors. Research funding from Telefilm Canada supported Sean's deep dive into festival and creative distribution prospects for independent documentary makers, including this research paper.

DOC would like to thank all the producers who took the time to share their experiences; helping to illuminate the unique paths that different films can take.

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We would also like to thank the late Pepita Ferrari, who was a tireless and essential figure in championing and defining Festival Concierge, both as Chair and Executive Director of DOC. Thanks Pepita, we miss you.

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International Film Festival, Cinéfest Sudbury International Film Festival, and Gimme Some Truth Documentary Festival.

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ORGANIZATION OF CANADA
DOCUMENTARISTES
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docorg.ca | info@docorg.ca

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