

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Docs and Indie Film Promotion

Lisa Bowers · Wednesday, October 14th, 2015

You have overcome two of the biggest hurdles in independent documentary production: procuring [distribution](#) and raising funds. Congratulations!

Now you need to attract viewers who will identify with your film's topic. They need only to be made aware of your film and where to see it. However, if you're just thinking about promotion now, you will be behind the 8-ball. [John Trigonis](#), Film Campaign Strategist for Indiegogo, warns, "If you don't put in the work before the campaign and you are coming across like a used car salesperson after it's completed, you are not going to be successful. There is a mythological belief that once you complete your film, the next step is a screening and the next step after that is someone buys your film. Even if you get that big distribution company deal, you still have to do your own marketing unless you're Stephen Spielberg. And once your movie comes out is too late to begin promoting it.



© Kim Kardashian West, *Selfish*, Rizzoli, 2015

Even the hallowed but slightly staid *PBS NewsHour* understands the value of publicity and attracting viewers. The first line in a recent article at the Art Beat section of PBS NewsHour's [website](#) was "Kim Kardashian West is worthy of your attention." The article included **7** photos of Kim Kardashian and generated ten times the average number of comments of an Art Beat article.

Do not forget about **marketing** when creating your program budget. You don't want to go to the effort of producing a film that only your best friends and family members see, do you?!

Most of the promotional ideas below are applicable to a variety of documentaries and independent films, although some speak specifically to programs and films that are public television-bound.

The biggest difference is that producers of public television programs have an additional target to the film and television viewing public that all filmmakers must reach and that is the very influential 365 local public media station programmers.

Maximizing Viewer Eyeballs

Let's first talk about how to maximize viewer eyeballs. You should have a plan to promote your documentary or film project. The tactics and ideas listed below will generate more viewers for your program, but think about what is unique to your content: **be innovative!** As Public Relations expert [Ellen Stanley Booth](#) suggests, "find different platforms to take advantage of."

Some campaigns are able to use one or two tools quite effectively, perhaps an ever present Twitter campaign and conversation. Other campaigns have more breadth, using multiple channels to ensure reach to a fragmented viewer base with different preferences for content consumption. Such a campaign might provide several avenues to a trailer on YouTube, using search engine optimization, Facebook promoted ads and Promoted Tweets, and digital ads at sites favored by the film's target. Even if your budget and resources do not lend themselves to a comprehensive campaign, or your target audience is so niche that it is more efficient to reach them through more direct means, prioritize the possibilities within your budget to achieve your objectives and reach your target.

The devil can be in the details. Bob Petts, Program Development Manager at NETA (a public television distributor), recommends titling your program so a potential viewer has some idea of what they are going to see. Remember that viewers are quickly scrolling through a 200 channel interactive guide or using a voice command to decide what to watch on a given evening. In addition, a daily timeline leading up to the launch (including promoting ongoing viewing post launch), ideally managed by a strong project manager, will keep you on track.

Lisa Tawil, Interim Managing Director of Marketing and Communications at ITVS ("public media's independent voice"), offers, "We are in the golden era of some of the best documentaries created and we at ITVS are proud to have worked on some wonderful, award-winning, marketing campaigns. When considering documentary promotion, find your audience, cultivate your fans and niche advocates early, and consider creative materials that showcase the heart of the film as opposed to trying to share the topical story or characters. Also, your doc may have many moments to shine at festivals, in theaters, on television and through digital platforms – pick your publicity and marketing moments when people can immediately get more information or access your film. A national write-up when your film is in festivals might not be the most opportunistic timing."



Image from Ai Weiwei: The Fake Case, watchable on POV through 11/1/15. © American Documentary, Inc.

If you don't bother to market your program and make it as visible as possible, you are shooting yourself in the foot. Your program is competing with thousands of hours of content vying for viewer attention – you need to figure out how to get noticed. Says veteran public television producer [Greg Reitman](#), program promotion "requires a lot of heavy lifting." He highly recommends PR and social media, and finding people who understand affiliate marketing and social media marketing.

Even when a filmmaker is not currently working on a film project, he or she should be engaging and interacting with both other filmmakers and film-lovers. A Twitter or Facebook page that only contains posts or tweets about your past projects will come across as self-serving. Film festivals and industry events are great venues at which to meet other filmmakers and potential audiences. Having a conversation and getting to know someone will go a long way when you do have a film to share.

Your objectives and target will greatly affect the plan and timing. For example, the budget and tactics for a special television event will have a much shorter timeline than an ongoing series streamed on Hulu. Promotion types run the gamut from traditional media, such as television (usually in the form of on-air promos), print ads, public relations and radio, to less traditional types

of media, the most common being social media. Social media and e-mail campaigns may be more appropriate and cost-effective for most documentarians. Ideas and examples follow.

Traditional Promotional Vehicles

Traditional advertising and promotional vehicles include television, print, and publicity.

Television/on-air promos. Veteran public television producer Andrew Walworth, producer of *Ideas in Action* and *Sportskool*, finds promotion on public television difficult because the “schedule is all over the place, which makes it difficult to get press.” He suggests, “Think first and foremost of promoting to the public television audience. Doing anything that doesn’t target the public television viewer is not worthwhile. Produce terrific promos, which in some cases will mean you are given :30’s to promote your series nationally.” Distributors, particularly local public television stations, will generally run on-air promos for free; your only cost is producing them. Stations might be willing to invest dollars in advertising and promotion to expand a program’s reach and leverage assets like trade agreements with local radio stations.

On-air promos can provide the mass reach for which television is traditionally known (and that reach is magnified with a high frequency). However, they may not be targeting your best audience. On-air promos on public television may reach an older audience than is your target, missing an audience willing to watch a compelling program on a network that is not normally on their radar.

Print. If you know your audience and have an adequate budget, print ads can be an effective way to promote specific types of programs to public television viewers. According to Mediamark Research, Inc., viewers of PBS news and public affairs programs are 107% more likely than the average TV viewer to read *The Wall Street Journal*. And PBS viewers are 48% more likely to read the *Sunday New York Times*. While PBS does not typically promote programs outside of a few “tentpole” events each year, it’s usually best to try to leave big budget advertising of this nature to a distributor because of the high expense. For example, a black and white ½ page in *The Wall Street Journal* could run you \$135K; a 1/3 page black and white in *The New York Times Magazine* costs approximately \$32K. And this does not include the cost of creating the ad.

Digital ads can be less expensive than print ads, but generally are more complex. Rates can vary widely depending on frequency, duration, target, placement, format, and size. The pricing models are most often based on CPM (cost per thousand visitors) or CPC (cost per click). Unless you are well-versed in digital media, consider enlisting someone who understands digital advertising to create a digital media plan.

Publicity. J.J. Kelley, an Emmy nominated filmmaker and adventurer, opines that “filmmakers are generally not good at selling themselves.” He hired a PR firm that did a great job promoting his *Battle for the Elephants*. Mr. Kelley says that a good PR person is invaluable and suggests factoring that expense into your budget early on: finding “someone who is going to work hard to promote your film is just as important as having a good editor and good cameraperson. No one is going to see your film if there is no outreach and it is not on a network that has committed to promoting it.” PR firms have met with the press before but filmmakers are “calling them out of the blue.”

E-mail and Newsletters. Do not discount the power of e-mail or a regular newsletter to keep your fans informed. They can be easily forwardable by subscribers who feel that the content is worth

sharing. Many standard e-mail platforms exist and make it easy to send readable and visually appealing newsletters for little to no cost. If you are running a crowdfunding campaign, e-mails are facilitated with [regular updates](#) that are integrated into the actual crowdfunding campaign.

21st century (or Nontraditional Promotional Vehicles)

[John Trigonis](#) has benefited from the big change from “the old school of traditional PR and marketing” to “the new school.” Declares Mr. Trigonis, “most independent documentarians can not afford the tens of thousands required to do traditional marketing right. . . . Filmmakers have to learn how to be marketers. You can’t be a shy filmmaker. The good news is that we have a lot of tools at our disposal to do that easily. However, there is a big investment in time, energy, and work required.” He finds that many filmmakers are quite passionate about their film project but are not passionate about learning Google Analytics, how to create Facebook ads, and willing to learn best practices and be active on social media. The option for these filmmakers is to hire experts.

Social media. Social media is a great marketing tool for filmmakers – it is inexpensive, can reach exactly who you want to reach, and can be used 24/7.

[John Trigonis](#) went on Twitter and just “talked” to other filmmakers, making friends on Twitter, for 6 months before launching a crowdfunding campaign for his short film *Cerise*. These filmmakers became the first people to support his project, even before his friends and family. Almost 70% of the donations to his campaign were from total strangers. Mr. Trigonis comments, “Social media is not a promotional tool, but an interaction tool.” In terms of the best social media platforms on which filmmakers should engage, Twitter has “the more robust network of filmmakers.” He taps into the conversations of this independent film community, a “giant cocktail party,” using hashtags like [#supportindiefilm](#).

If you have a public television distributor that is a presenting station, that station already has a built-in social media fanbase. Max Duke, Vice President, Content and Community Partnerships at [WPBT2 South Florida](#) Public Media, comments that WPBT2 can reach more potential viewers, especially viewers who are younger, in a more immediate way through social media. And these are people who are already fans of public television programs.

Many filmmakers have fallen prey to schemes where they can purchase followings, using “[click farms](#)” based overseas. If you’ve purchased 35 to 40% of your fans, often just a penny a click, but they are based in Bangladesh and have no intention or ability to see your film, these are fans and followers with no value. Instead of focusing on increasing the number of followers or getting retweeted by big name celebrities, concentrate on engagements instead.

The best engagement platforms are not necessarily the best advertising platforms – Facebook ads are generally recognized to be more effective than Promoted Tweets (although this could change). Facebook ads can be implemented at a very low daily cost, using very specific target filters so you are reaching the people most likely to view your film.

There are many tools that can make your social media interaction more efficient. Tim Ferriss, author of *The 4-Hour Workweek*, recently launched [The Tim Ferriss Experiment](#), a 13-episode television series in which he tries to learn very difficult skills, such as professional poker, in one week. After an initial email promoting the series, 3,300 of his fans and fellow influencers helped him announce the series launch using [Thunderclap](#), reaching 7 million people. The campaign drove

people to [a page](#) where they could watch the series and check out exclusive content. During launch week, the series was the number one most-downloaded TV season on iTunes, beating *Game of Thrones*, and *Downton Abbey*.

Community building and affinity groups. When asked which promotional method had generated the most traffic, Mr. Kelley, also director of the one-hour film *Warlords of Ivory*, which was on the front page of *USA Today* and reviewed by *The New York Times*, said that special interest groups had worked best for him. If interested in your cause or content, they will promote it on social media and other outreach platforms for you. He suggests thinking about who is going to be most interested in your film project and getting their attention before you've finished your project.

A nonprofit affiliation can pay great dividends, especially for cause-related films. When *A Place at the Table* was released, a national action center was launched. This informed filmgoers of [actions](#) they could take to address the hunger problem in their own towns. The campaign included a Capitol Hill screening, as well as congressional screenings all over the U.S. According to Media Impact Funders, “the filmmakers worked very closely with each of their funders, which enabled them to create a multi-layered social action campaign for 2 years (2013-2014).

The most significant outcome from their efforts is the development of a new 5-year, multi-million dollar social action campaign, called Great Nations Eat. This media campaign has the goal of featuring Great Nations Eat on major national and local media platforms. A partnership between Share Our Strength, the media agency Mediavest, and the filmmakers, Great Nations Eat will ensure that both the cause of hunger and the *A Place at the Table* film will continue to be on the radar of Americans nationwide, as well as that of the media.

Crowdfunding is another very effective way to community-build. Most crowdfunding platforms offer promotional tips and tools to their creators. It is in their best interest for you to run a successful campaign. For example, Mr. Trigonis provides guidance for filmmaker crowdfunding launching campaigns on Indiegogo.

Public media station-specific promotion. Mr. Walworth suggests offering a distributor film assets that incents them to promote your project. He says that his projects have been most successful when they send a program host or star to public television stations in the top 5 to 10 markets. These stations then use their station's publications and events to promote the series. When writing your program's description in public television's “Program Offer,” think carefully about how to best present it. This is most likely not be the same language in your treatment.



Tyler Mathisen and Sue Herera co-anchor NBR (Nightly Business Report), a public television weeknightly staple for more than 35 years. APT Exchange

Some public television distributors offer ways to promote directly to public television stations. APT hosts the 3-½ day [APT Fall Marketplace](#), which showcases APT-distributed or APT-pipeline programs, every November. Sponsorships of everything from meals to Wifi service can increase the visibility of your program with producers and programmers. Sponsorship opportunities range in price from \$100 to \$21,000+. At the Producers' Showcase, programmers wander around what Judy Barlow, VP Business Development and International Sales, refers to as a cross between a cocktail party and a mini-trade show. Producers can sponsor booths for \$1K to \$2.5K.

PBS' [Annual Meeting](#) is described as “the premier gathering of public television professionals and

decision-makers representing PBS's 162 member licensees." The sponsorship fees to get in front of this audience range from \$300 to \$20,000. NETA has a [Professional Development Conference](#) for public media professionals every Fall. Producers can invest in a myriad of sponsorships, ranging in price from \$75 to \$12,500, in the hope that conference attendees will notice, and remember, their program.

Mobile Marketing. While this may be a promotion tool that is not currently on many documentary media plans, mobile ads and promotions may need to become part of your promotion consideration set, especially if you are trying to reach Millennials. If you do not have expertise on best practices regarding privacy, permission, targeting, and distribution, hiring a mobile marketing expert is highly recommended.

Sponsor Support. Many documentary sponsors are eager to activate their investment. In so doing, they promote your project. You cannot always count on sponsors to help promote your film, but when they do, the co-branded promotions that result are a big win-win. These co-branded promotions could include an employee awareness campaign, including employee screenings; film materials in sponsor retail locations; downloadable film posters; online advertising on the sponsor and partner websites; and a print campaign featuring film messaging with the sponsor logo.

Public television sponsorships need to get particularly creative to activate their sponsorships given on-air restrictions. Many examples of effective activation exist, such as [Stride Rite's sponsorship of Curious George](#), which included Mommy blogger campaigns, a custom bi-lingual "Tie Your Shoes" campaign with a branded instruction sheet, TIME for Kids Curious George classroom printouts, family activity booklets, "Who Knew? I grew!" stickers with shoe sizes, and a co-branded discount flyer distributed by local public television stations.



Doc Martin (Martin Clunes) and Louisa (Caroline Catz) tie the knot in this quirky "dramedy," one of the highest rated series on public television. Doc Martin, from APT Syndication

SEO (search engine optimization). Do not discount the importance of organic search, or someone typing in a word in Google directly related to your film's content. Your website or blog should be search engine optimized. It may be worth finding an expert who can ensure that it is. Most experts recommend:

- A good **title** for your video. Think like a search engine or at least like someone who might be looking for a film like yours. What would they type to search for it? Include keywords in the first few words of your title.
- A strong film **description**. If you are using YouTube as your primary video platform, make sure your videos are findable both inside and outside of YouTube. Some people recommend starting your description with a URL. Use relevant keywords in the description. Videos often appear on the first page of search engines.
- **Tags** – do not forget to spend some time inputting all related keywords!
- On Twitter, strategic **hashtags**. Some filmmakers add #documentary to their tweets so they come up higher in search.

Today's enterprising filmmakers have many more ways to promote their films than they did in the past. And many are at very low cost – and can be fun ways to directly connect with people who love your work. Tell us your story and what has worked for you. And feel free to promote your film to us – the [Cultural Weekly](#) community wants to know about great films, programs, and

documentaries!



Host Karen MacNeil of the Grace Creek Media series Wine Food & Friends

RESOURCES:

Cause Campaign Case Studies:

- Media Impact Funders provides excellent detail about the Great Nations Eat campaign at its [website](#).

Helpful Industry Trades:

- [RealScreen](#)
- [IDA \(International Documentary Association\) Magazine](#)

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