

# Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

## How to Meet Your Audience

Adam Leipzig · Thursday, January 31st, 2013

When I worked in theatre, the best part of the day arrived about 7 pm, as the audience started to mill about the lobby. You'd go downstairs and see the folks you were working for. Then at 8 o'clock, you could sit in the theatre, high up and in the back, and watch them watch the play. You'd learn something every time, and never feel out of touch with your audience.

Judging from the reaction of some of the filmmakers at Sundance this year, that's something they should try. A few of the films sold well and quickly—those were the true crowd-pleasers. But most of the movies could have used adjustments; without the benefit of fine-tuning, they did not reach their potential.

Not just their artistic potential. They won't reach their commercial potential either.

Why not? The filmmakers didn't build time into their schedules to watch their movies with audiences, and make some nips and tucks. Instead, they finished just in time for the hard drives to arrive in Park City.

"Did people laugh at the jokes?" one director asked me. "Why they didn't understand the back-story?" wondered another after a Q&A. Those are good questions, but the directors should not need to ask them. They should know the answers before they share their films, and if the audience isn't reacting right, well, then, they should have taken time to fix the movies.

That's one thing movie studios do well: preview films to test audiences, then refine the movies over and over.

But Sundance's indie filmmakers didn't need to look to studios for their inspiration. They could just amble up Main St. and get a veggie burger.



That's where Morningstar Farms, the vegetarian food producer, in an effort boost its visibility, had setup a burger joint. The line stretched along the sidewalk because the food was free, but that's not what made this the most effective promotional activity at Sundance—far outstripping lounges run by Acura, HP, Chase Sapphire and the like.

What made Morningstar different? Its people and the high level of corporate involvement.

You see, the Morningstar Farms burger joint wasn't staffed by part-timers or low-level staff. Senior execs served the meals. The Head of HR was at the beginning of the line, and explained the difference between the "Alpine" and the new "Mediterranean." The Product Development Leader took my order. And the Corporate Controller cleaned up my table.

These executives saw their audience and interacted with them for the entire 10-day festival, from morning to night. Know that they *didn't* do? They didn't ask us to opt-in. Or data-mine us. Or beg us to "like" their Facebook page. They just took care of us, gave us a warm meal and a place to

hang between movies.

That's enough to make me a Morningstar Farms evangelist, and put a spotlight on their extraordinary level of corporate engagement. By the way, these weren't just senior Morningstar execs—Kellogg owns Morningstar. The person who bused my table held a senior position in a \$21 billion company, yet realized that meeting the audience was more important than crunching numbers for a week.

I wish every filmmaker would try getting that engaged with the folks who buy the tickets. They should also try the new Mediterranean burger—it's pretty damn good.

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