Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

How We Made a Successful Indie Movie and Got It Out There

Jamie Stein · Thursday, August 2nd, 2012

While it is harder and harder for indie filmmakers to get their films made these days, it's still possible – if you keep your eye on the ball, understand the emerging business model of digital product and video-on-demand, and learn how to transform your financial limitations into sources of creative inspiration.

Last year, I co-wrote and produced a feature-length independent movie called *Cheesecake Casserole*. On July 3rd, our little movie was released in 50 million homes across America via iTunes, amazon.com, and on-demand cable channels.

It definitely feels like a personal accomplishment – especially given the current climate of independent filmmaking. We were a pair of first-time writers, directors and producers, and we managed to assemble a cast of working actors, to successfully shoot the film in two weeks and, most importantly, to get picked up for video/online distribution at the highest price point possible.

With *Cheesecake Casserole* now officially out in the world, it feels like an appropriate time to highlight a few of the finer points and strategies that helped us get it off the ground, in the hopes that it can help other aspiring filmmakers make their own projects a financially viable reality.

1. We Hired a Casting Director

We didn't know it at the time, but hiring a reputable casting director served several purposes.

First, it gave us access to talent that we would have never otherwise had the chance to audition. When you do casting on your own, you tend to either reach for the big name actors who will most likely pass on your indie or you're working with unknowns. Hiring a casting director, however, introduces you to a wide middle-ground of professional, working actors who both have name recognition and also a willingness to build their body of work by taking a chance on independent features.

We ended up with Brit Morgan, who had a two-season starring role on True Blood, Torrey Devitto, who currently stars in not one but two hit series (*Pretty Little Liars* and *The Vampire Diaries*) and Paige Howard, Ron's daughter and Bryce's younger sister who had just started making a name for herself in independent movies like *Adventureland.* Our cast really felt like a Godsend – not only was each woman perfect for her role, but they all brought their A-game, and they all ultimately made our project a much more valuable project for online/cable distributors.

I feel like this is an especially important point because so much of an independent movie's creative and financial success rides on showcasing great performances. Which means, more often than not, you're going to need professional actors who can handle the demands of what can often be a challenging shooting schedule. Working with a casting director introduces you to a whole tier of

talented, professional actors hungry for fulfilling work that you might otherwise completely overlook.

Second, hiring a casting director got our script into the casting breakdowns, which gave it immediate industry visibility, and, by extension, greater legitimacy. In other words, once our script was in the breakdowns, it was in the "industry cosmos." We had people posting positive comments about the screenplay on our IMDB message board before we even went into production. We also had actors *coming to us* wanting to audition for the movie. This was all great for boosting our morale as we headed into production.

2. We Created New Business Models to Work in Our Favor

Money is almost always an issue with making independent movies, and some filmmakers might cringe at the idea of allocating some of their precious budget toward something like hiring a casting director.

To compensate for this, we struck up a unique business model in working with our casting director: we paid a minimal upfront fee to cover the basic costs of holding castings, and then made the rest of payment contingent upon the actors we were able to cast; our casting director supplied a long list of possible actors for the various roles, these actors were then broken up into different tiers according to their level of celebrity, and the bigger the name our casting director was ultimately able to help us attract to our film, the more she would get paid.

It was a great business model because it saved us money upfront, it motivated our casting director to really work on our behalf, and the amount of money paid was directly proportionate to the names we ended up casting (which, given how much talent determines a lot in terms of brand recognition, built-in fan bases and likelihood of getting into festivals, makes perfect sense).

3. We Wrote Characters That Were Attractive to Actors

Living in Los Angeles, I can tell you that the vast majority of actors are hungry for a good role that genuinely excites them. It's one thing to act for a paycheck, but it's another thing altogether to act out of a genuine love for the project. I have had conversations with everyone ranging from established movie stars to newer actors who are just starting to make a name for themselves who all say virtually the same thing – good scripts (that are actually getting made) are few and far between.

As a result, many actors find themselves navigating a tenuous world where they feel like they're picking the lesser of many evils and weighing the pros and cons of choosing work that puts bread on the table versus work that really feeds their creativity.

This is something that can actually work in favor of the independent filmmaker. When you write a project that features interesting, dynamic characters, you're putting yourself in a prime position to attract well-known actors who might be willing to take a chance on your movie.

In this particular case, we had a movie about four young women in their early 20's – an age range that usually has actresses playing two-dimensional bimbo or ingenue roles. During filming, all of our actresses mentioned that they were drawn to our project specifically because it gave them the rare opportunity to play interesting characters with complete dramatic arcs.

There are all sorts of character brackets that suffer from similar typecasting – write a great role for a middle-aged woman, for example, and I guarantee you'll have impressively big names expressing interest in your project. Having said that, I've met handsome, 30-something famous actors who similarly feel starved for good work.

I've seen this with my script consultant work as well – many of my clients have attached big names to their debut scripts (e.g. Kristen Bell, William H. Macy, Jamie Lee Curtis, Jeff Bridges, Kristen Stewart, to name a few), and they all receive the same kind of feedback: "It's so rare to find a genuine script that has something to say."

At the end of the day, most actors consider themselves artists first and foremost. Artists long to be

creatively satiated. Hollywood often doesn't fill that need. That's where the right independent script can enter the picture. Write the right role at the right time and place, and you have a great shot at attracting big talent.

In other words, this is really just my way of sneaking in my usual advice as a script consultant: *write for story and character first!* Don't worry so much about writing a "gimmick" plot that will get your movie noticed. I guarantee you that deeply felt, beautifully expressed characters will win more interest from big-league actors than the script that is trying to be clever or different for the simple sake of being clever or different.

4. We Made Our Budgetary Concerns Work For the Story

We knew we wanted to make the most of our budget, and we knew that shooting our movie in one location would help us to do that. The key then became to make our one location an essential part of the story landscape.

The original play that Cheesecake Casserole was based upon took place in a college house shared by four senior friends and utilized episodic narrative that jumped from one month to the next to form an impressionistic sense of an entire senior year.

We knew that could never translate to the film medium: constantly jumping forward in time in one location would no doubt make for an altogether suffocating and meandering movie, and the constraint of staying inside one location would no doubt seem like an awkward and transparent tactic on our parts to make our movie as cheaply as possible.

Instead, we moved the action to an investment property owned by the family of one of our main characters. Rather than spanning an entire school year, we compressed the narrative into one, singular weekend – the *final* weekend our four friends would be spending together before they graduate from college.

Suddenly, our screenplay had inherent shape – the movie wasn't taking place in one location for the simple sake of saving money; no, the movie was now taking place in a location that had actual dramatic meaning and resonance for our characters.

We additionally upped the stakes by making the house carry personal symbolic significance to one character in particular – it's the first time our heroine has been back to this particular residence since the suicide of her mother ten years ago. So, not only does the location have current-day dramatic relevance for all the girls (the spot of their final weekend together), but it also informs major backstory for a specific player that ultimately comes to the forefront of the plot.

When you think about other movies that make use of one major location, you'll find that that location always serves an important dramatic function – the rendezvous warehouse in *Reservoir Dogs,* the bank in *Dog Day Afternoon,* the house that represents yuppy success in *The Big Chill* – and we wanted to make sure our one-location film carried the same meaningful resonance.

The Blair Witch Project is a great example of this – the use of unprofessional home video became the entire thrust of the faux "lost footage" context. They didn't just settle for making a cheap-looking horror movie – they used their limitations as an essential part of the story.

In other words, when you find yourself faced with certain restrictions that heavily impact the drama depicted on screen, always make sure that you can find a deeper reason for it in the larger world of the story. Then these so-called restrictions actually become creatively liberating for both you and also your viewers.

5. We Did the Impossible: We Shot Our Movie in 2 Weeks

We shot our feature-length movie in two weeks.

You know the expression, "They said it couldn't be done?" Well, we quite literally had people telling us we couldn't shoot our movie in two weeks. And this was coming from potential first-assistant directors that we were interviewing to be a part of the crew.

But we proved them wrong.

Obviously, the use of one location played a huge part in making our abbreviated shooting schedule work. However, there were other key factors as well.

First, we spent time with our cinematographer pre-lighting the entire house – this means that the fundamental lighting set-ups were all ready to go before principle photography even began. As a result, the crew needed to complete a minimum amount of scene-specific set-ups, a shortcut that saved us a ton of time.

Second, we shot each scene with two cameras. This is where the glory of digital filmmaking comes into play. Like just about every other independent movie, we used the Canon 5D, and we used it double. This means we were able to get twice the amount of coverage for every second filmed.

Third, we wrote a dialogue-driven film. The reality is that complex physical action takes longer to film than a more passive conversation. When the thrust of your movie comes down to two or three or even four characters conversing with one another, you only have a few camera set-ups to deal with in each scene. And then you can use the luxury of your extra time to brainstorm how to make the action more cinematic (for example, we had one camera rolling back and forth on a dolly during our centerpiece dinner scenes to help provide motion within the frame).

6. We Maximized Our Distribution and Marketing Options

The advent of the internet has been a double-edged sword for all facets of the entertainment industry. On the plus side, it creates an amazing and comparatively easier venue for getting your product out there than standard theatrical distribution. With a few clicks of a mouse, viewers can open up iTunes, download your movie, put cash into your investors' pockets and increase your professional visibility; likewise, if you have a finished product that has already been financed and fully produced, it costs purveyors like iTunes and cable channels next to nothing to make your content available to the viewing public. On the negative side, however, there is now more supply than ever, and the simple fact of having your movie "out there" in the world can be a far cry from actually earning money off it. It's one thing to have your movie available to the viewing public, it's a whole other thing to having precious viewers making those valuable clicks to purchase your movie.

It's a good thing to know the basic model for internet and VOD distribution. In many ways, it works very much like the old theatrical distribution model: there are distributing middlemen – such as Gravitas Ventures, GoDigital and Brainstorm – who will essentially package your movie to purveyors like iTunes and various cable channel bundling services. So, it is essentially a two-tiered process: you must first get interest from the distributor to shop your film around, and you must then get interest from the purveyor to actually carry your film. Additionally, the purveyor decides at what price point to offer your film for purchase and rental – for example, on iTunes the highest price point for movie purchase is $14.99 ($19.99 for HD) and $3.99 for rental ($4.99 for HD). Different companies offer different financial breakdowns depending on the project – however, you can expect that both the distributor and the purveyor will take a percentage cut of every sale made.

It's still unchartered territory with no set rules. But, for the sake of financial planning, you would do well to make a conservative estimate of receiving 50% of every sale made. So, if you make a ballpark figure of your price point, and know that half of that price point will end up in yours and your investors' pockets, it can give you a somewhat more tangible sense of how many units will ultimately need to be sold to cover your planned budget.

To help augment sales, we decided to increase product. We created an actual DVD – replete with exclusive special features such as a blooper reel, cast interviews and deleted scenes – that we're selling independently through amazon.com. Since amazon effectively cuts out the distribution middleman, we get to keep a bigger share of the profits. Additionally, we get to charge more for the DVD since we're dealing with actual, physical product. The key here has been to make the DVD something of a collector's item and to then target it toward the fans of our leading actors.

Likewise, we have made our original score available through iTunes – this is yet another means of creating sellable product that both cuts out one of the middlemen and also potentially generates excitement from our built-in fan base.

This preceding point touches upon a key marketing principle, which is to not be afraid of getting really specific with your advertising outreach. Oftentimes, a narrower net is preferable to a wider net – though you may reach more people with a broader approach, you are less likely to reach people who will actually buy your movie. In our case, we had three actors who gave us direct lines to three different cult hit TV shows – Brit Morgan had a lauded, two-season role on True Blood; Torrey DeVitto has roles on both the teenage mystery Pretty Little Liars and also the supernatural soap Vampire Diaries; and Ryan Merriman also had a leading role on Pretty Little Liars. Fans of cult shows tend to be ravenous in terms of any available related content, and that often extends itself toward incredible loyalty to principle actors in other roles. As a result, we created several Facebook ad campaigns targeted toward these players' specific fan bases. We additionally created a tumblr blog about the experience of making the movie utilizing hashtags that alert any interested internet surfers to our material.

In Conclusion

We live in an amazing time where we're able to create films with far greater ease than in previous decades. The use of digital film combined with personal resourcefulness can get just about any project on its feet. Be realistic about your limitations, and always ground your limitations in the world of the story.

Image from Cheesecake Casserole.

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