

*How to Get to Grips With the
Film Festival Market*

Understanding Your Place Within It



*A complimentary eBook for all
subscribers to the Lift-Off Family*

Contents.

1. Introduction
2. Ambition. Laziness. Great Expectations
3. Research, attend & compare
4. Marketing starts at home
5. Festivals worth the submission fee
6. When the film is ready for submissions
7. What should be the life of my work?
8. A festivals approach & selecting films
9. A mass market. Why not?
10. Lift-Off's final word

1. Introduction

The information contained in this eBook has been collected over a period of ten years working both as filmmakers submitting to festivals and from the many years experience we have had as festival directors and programmers. This is not a guaranteed result proving manual, because we can't control the quality of your content, nor can we guarantee your approach, but it is a document that will certainly help you to see the festival scene a whole lot clearer from a new perspective and we can guarantee that our insights will help you to at least limit your risk and expenditure for when it comes to creating and implementing your own film festival submissions strategy.

Maybe you are already a season professional or maybe this is your first taste of submitting to festivals, either way, we hope you see value in this document either in all or in some of it. We have written these eBooks because we want our paying submitters to receive actual value for the submission fee they spend with us.

In this eBook we will start with a detailed look into the common mind-set issues we find with filmmakers and how we believe very strongly where and why these attitudes start to hinder and hopefully how it can all be overcome. Our experience as professional actors, turned filmmakers, and now festival directors has been vital in our growth, and we believe that by sharing what we have learnt we are doing something good for the business. New voices need to be heard and an entirely new industry lead by you is on the edge of being created. It is a hanging time for film, but that is not a negative thing. If filmmakers can understand the real opportunities, and if they can work smart in ensuring a community becomes an industry then all of us will succeed.

We hope you enjoy the eBook.

James Bradley, Lift-Off Co-Founder.

2. Ambition. Laziness. Great Expectations.

First of all it is fair to note that all human beings suffer from the same curse. That is the curse of ambition, laziness and great expectations. We have it. You have it. It is very much a plague of our modern world and we are all trying night and day to change this – it's easily the root cause to most of our problems. So we will start with breaking down these three key elements and then move forward into where we can put things right.

Ambition – This is a great resource for any creative. Ambition creates targets that we all try our best to work towards. Many of us dealing with it differently, some of us ignore it but then rediscover it again in the form of a mid life crisis or at the declaration of a new beginning. But like any emotional drive, it comes at a cost. Ambition has to be balanced; it also has to be specific. My father always told me to be 'careful for what I wished for' because sometimes your wishes become true and these dreams can sometimes be delivered in not so positive ways. He always retells the story of his friend who chased money and wished to be rich all of his life. Then during an agricultural accident he lost both of his legs and received a pay out of \$2.5million dollars – he now has dreams of being able to walk and stand back on his own two feet and he'd give up everything he owned to have that back.

Ambition has to be specifically channelled. "I want to win an Oscar" can't be serviced in a particularly constructive or positive way, there are far too many obstacles and moments of fate that would have to play out in order for you to get at least nominated. It relies on too many factors. But what could be greater, less self serving and far more rewarding could be something like: "I want to learn the power of transformational acting, story telling, and getting the absolute best out of my team – learning from my mistakes and from the critique of others while still maintaining a total desire to make work I give a shit about ." That seems like a great focus, which could only ever serve the artist venturing down that path.

We meet these two types a lot, the...

'I want to win an Oscar' type.

And we meet the...

‘I’m doing this to grow and get better as an artist taking those who commit as I do, with me”

... and it is always the latter who has all the luck, gets all the breaks, and creates better work every time they engage into something new. We love those factors, we love these types of filmmakers. We love their ambition. We welcome them with open arms into the Lift-Off Family.

“So what are these barriers that keep people from reaching anywhere near their real potential? The answer to that can be found in another question, and that question is, which is the most universal characteristic? Fear or Laziness?”-- Friedrich Nietzsche

Laziness...

I am battling with my ‘inner lazy’ every hour of every day. We, as humans, have evolved and continue to do so with an enthusiasm to make everything autonomous, our society is driving for an automated existence. We are obsessed with downtime; we love to do nothing, and that is why we must first recognise this before we can beat it.

We can beat it. You can beat it.

First of all it is vital to know what we are dealing with. Laziness can come from several psychological sources. One is from the insecurity of knowing deep down that your wasting your time and another is from flat ignorance. Nether is wanted and neither is helpful.

Imagine if you knew what your responsibilities were as an artist? Do you?

Imagine that you actually cared about the people who have invested in the project. Do you care? Your work and their input deserves for your project to be completed and then that journey deserves for you to later find momentum, and move on to the next adventure.

So many filmmakers loose their way at the first hurdle. There must be millions of unfinished films sat on the hard drives of hundreds and thousands of filmmakers around the world. Excuse after excuse, not making time, not prioritising other peoples commitment to your

work, only doing the project to prove something to yourself – these are the barriers we face but you have got to wake up.

The people who have committed to you deserve an end product, even if you don't feel that you do. So finish the unfinished, fulfil the unspoken promise, and move on to your next endeavour.

Laziness is something we must accept into our lives. I love my downtime and I love my work. As I have gotten older I have greatly changed my activities but I still like to completely forget about what I do, I love computer games, escapism types of films, and general socialising with friends and family. I think it is important to build clear boundaries between work and non-work activities, it may sound basic, but time management in this way is healthy for your mind and usually the best ideas will arrive when you are totally unprepared to receive them. The majority of mine arrive while I'm in the bath, and rarely am I having super ideas after a 15-hour shift building a festival programme or managing the office at Pinewood. Accept that you can be lazy, and make time for it. Then you will find out very quickly that your productivity levels and overall enjoyment of work will quite literally ***Lift-Off!***

Ultra high expectations. It is clear that you have never been to a film festival, especially a good one with good programming if you expect your film to be selected without any tension or hesitation by festival judges.

This is the reality. The festival market is absolutely saturated by excellent work, and the festival programmers try their best to select an as diverse a programme as possible – it is easily one of the worst parts of what we as a festival have to do: rejecting films. When we do it, many times it is the filmmakers who feel rejected more so than the work and this is as ever present when rejecting the work by filmmakers with amazingly high expectations.

So many factors are at play against each-other, and we have tried over the years to keep it all as balanced as possible but there have been times when a really successful film elsewhere hasn't made it into our programme over another and vice versa. We have to cater for the tastes of the general public; the results from our judges, the length of the work and the overall shape and feel of the programme.

With that all at play it can seem fairly chaotic at times but our approach does tend to work. I will go into more detail about our programming methods a little further into this eBook but know that at the face of it we love the work, we love the filmmakers and with all the right attitudes moulded into one, they will always have success with us.

It is rare that we meet filmmakers who aren't for us.

Don't be fooled, we love confidence in an artist. We love it. But many times an email will arrive from a filmmaker telling us why we would be stupid to ignore the film they have created. We don't ignore these emails and we don't use them as an excuse to pre-ostracise content but we get them a lot and usually the work that is supposed to '*change the face of cinema*' scores low with our judges.

Delusional ego runs thick inside some work. We can see ego, we can see the narcissism in the shots, and it is normally where a heavy emphasis has been placed into one discipline and the rest has been largely ignored. At the beginning of the Lift-Off journey we were amazed by the amount of work that had a lot of effort thrown into the look, the cinematography was prioritised over everything else, these films always fell short of the acting and the story structure. We would always get very harsh replies to the rejections we'd send out to these projects – largely because the filmmaker was adamant that spending the whole budget on the camera and post was the best way to get great work. As professional actors turned filmmakers we felt very differently, this happened a lot, in fact it is pretty fair to say that it was a bit of a creative industry epidemic so there was no surprise when organically from the depths of our late night programming sessions for London Lift-Off came our festivals our motto...

“Look beyond the gloss, put talent before technology”

A filmmaker who is ambitious in a socially and professionally conscious/generous way, with an acute awareness and management solution surrounding their work ethic and with a set of really grounded expectations built on their own exposure of the film industry is our kind of filmmaker.

It isn't hard to be one of these. It costs nothing. It guarantees success. But it takes one hell of a brave person to admit to him or herself that they're not quite there yet.

This eBook will hopefully help with that.

3. Research, attend & compare

FilmFreeway currently states with enormous pride that it has over 5000 film festivals registered on its platform. Withoutabox is roughly the same. Bare in mind a lot of overlap and it's fair to say that there are around 6000 film festivals out there, the majority of which are keeping alive due to the sheer amount of filmmakers paying them to submit. From the very beginning we have tried to provide genuine value for the submission fee, from exclusive content on our website, to emails, inspirational newsletters and constant contact. In reality we hate having to charge for submissions, but now we are large enough and well known enough to drop the price each year Lift-Off City by Lift-Off City, making it more affordable for others but by still adding more value to our network. We are now in a position to supply the cheapest rates, the most exclusive content (including this ebook), cost effective extended feedback and a mentoring system where if you engage with us we will do our best to get you on our network.

We may reject films from time to time but we never reject filmmakers.

The two major submission platforms WAB and FilmFreeway have a great search imbedded into them, one a little more modern than the other, we'll leave that for you to work out which, but both of them are easy to use and help you to find festivals quickly.

In our experience filmmakers don't tend to go to film festivals, unless they are programmed at them. This seems ridiculous to us.

The best chance you will give yourself of creating work that is festival friendly is by doing exactly this...

Spend three months attending as many film festivals your deposable income can afford. Meet the programmers. Meet the founders. Talk to the attending filmmakers get a real grasp on what they've experienced so far at the festival you're both at and others they've been to.

Then make your film.

Build a great social media marketing campaign focusing on generating interest from potential audiences in cities where your target festivals are based.

4. Marketing starts at home.

Creative people are bloody brilliant at marketing. If you are a filmmaker you will be great at it. Honestly, try it.

It is so simple to create a Facebook page dedicated to your film, including posting up development and casting news, adding all of the crew and cast. The best content is always what we call “people driven” - do some small bio’s on your crew, introducing their resumes – making double sure you tag your team members in each of the posts, as and when, you get their commitment to the project. Giving shout outs to the people in your team, especially when they are volunteers is a great way to drive traffic to your project nice and early, and build followers.

Use the social channels to target your targets.

Follow, with your page, the festivals you wish to get into, start to appear in their consciousness early. With your team members display their previous work, post regularly about the development stages, uploading storyboards, concept ideas, clips from other films that influenced your project. As you reach out to other organisations, look to the other people who follow the festivals you’re targeting. What are they into? Are they potential audience, what could you do to get their attention? When you get to the shooting stage post up photos of the shoot days.

Keep building the hype! And make sure that you keep up to date with the festival targets happenings, comment regularly on their social pages, send them positivity it will certainly help you, your team and your projects chances – while spreading good karma.

Chances are you have already done most of these things, but it is never too late to go back and *retrospectualise* (**new word**) your updates, posting the details about your cast and crew we mentioned. Adding festivals, looking up local audiences.

Social media presence is the 2nd best way to get onto a festival selection committees radar, but it can’t beat actually attending the festival itself and showing your support outside of your own screenings!

5. When the film is ready for submissions.

After your film is finished. Go back to the festival market only when you are as sure as you can be that your film stands up against the work you have seen at the festivals you've attended and submit your work.

Ensure that in your cover letter you name the people you met, you tell the festival why you are picking theirs over others, mention your social media activities including your involvement with theirs and explain, very clearly, the work you have done to generate interest in that festivals area – this includes location, genre and the festivals overall ethos.

6. Festivals that are worth the submission fee.

Ignore press slogans like ‘film festivals worth the entry fee ‘ in certain publications and try not to base your submissions on an academy award qualifying agenda. These festivals are swamped with submissions, so it would take any filmmaker a gulf of knowledge and research to penetrate them. Try to see firstly what you get for your submission fee...

1. Do you get any resources from the festival for the fee you pay – at the submission level alone?
2. Are there feedback options, and are these affordable?
3. Is their feedback, in the form of reviews, from other selected filmmakers on FilmFreeway and is the buzz from past officially selected filmmakers good and worthy enough for your work?
4. What do you get if your work gets selected?
5. Do they support your social media?
6. Do they offer PR support?
7. Is there some form of alumni scheme where you won't get forgotten?
8. Is there some form of resource online where you can watch past winners and previous selections, in order to get a good gauge of the work they select?

If the answer is yes to all of these then you're looking at a Lift-Off, or a copycat *we must find and destroy...*

(Just kidding. Not kidding.)

In all seriousness we have a strong belief that filmmakers should demand value back in the submissions fees they pay (hence this eBook). If all of the 6000+ festival around the world did this for filmmakers then we would have a very positive market and ultimately it would do wonders in helping us to achieve our super-objective, which is to create a mass market for true indie film.

Contacting the festival targets.

A typical scenario, a festival receives two great films, both 10 out of 10, both fairly similar in aesthetic and genre. The only real separating factor is the cover letter supporting each film. Here they are...

Cover letter one...

Dear Jury – this film has been received with 5/5, ten out of ten reviews in 25 countries around the world and has been heralded as a big game changer in the world of cinema. We are sure that you will feel the same and await your acceptance.

Cover letter two...

Dear Ben, James and the Lift-Off Team,

During my research into finding the best festivals for my work, I have been unable to attend a Lift-Off event, however I did manage to get to the Plymouth Film Festival where I met Marc Focman who told me great things about your network. I have since watch your first five years of Lift-Off on Vimeo and I am confidant that this would be a great fit for Manchester and New York Lift-Offs.

I have had some great interest from people in both cities surrounding this film and if selected I will be sure to market my screening and your event to them. Thank you for the consideration and best of luck with season ahead.

Filmmaker B

Which of the two above submissions would you be inclined to go for? There's no right or wrong answer to this, but I'm sure you'd come over a bit warmer, if not a lot more receptive to 'cover letter two', how can you not? Its personalised, researched and it isn't ALL about how awesome the film/filmmaker is.

Many filmmakers get their budget and simply carpet bomb the submissions – taking little care to who they are submitting to, we know this because we have had on several occasions filmmakers totally unaware that they submitted to us!

Festivals want attendees. They want audience. If you can help with that you will make the decision surrounding your work very easy for the programmer.

7. What should be the life of my work?

“Look at the hundreds of people wanting to watch the work, I found this audience for free and all of them are organic traffic. Imagine what we could do with a marketing budget!!?”

Look for potential audiences first. Associations, groups of cinemagoers, people mad for the genre of work you have created. Find them. A great tool is the Facebook advert analytics engine, it uses Facebook’s profile data of it’s billions of members to find key areas where people that are into your type of film exist. It costs nothing to use it as a research tool and the data it provides is great in locating potential audiences. Once you have found these hot spots, you must then engage with the film community there. Do this by finding pages in that area.

A filmmaker, who made a really good found footage horror, discovered that there were thousands of horror fans in the English northern town of Leeds. By using the above search method, he contacted two festivals in that area and then submitted his work. Immediately after getting selected he had 200 new followers on his Facebook page, and at both festival screenings his film was a sell-out. That’s how you do it.

Another great way to spread the news is on discussion forums, professional and amateur groups. Tell them about your film, introduce yourself on their discussion boards, like their relevant pages/posts and spread the word about your project – always making sure you add your own projects page at the end of everything you say – then, sooner or later, you’ll have a group of people dying to see your work. Festivals love this!

Submit to the most local of all the groups you have found. If you have a Facebook page with followers from Kentucky, Alaska, Devon & Cornwall and Seoul, submit to best looking, best reviewed, best value for your submission fee and most local festivals you can find there. Feed your audience with festival screenings and then once the audience run is done, look to release online, or offer your rights to an agent, and move on to your next project, taking all of the learning from the entire process with you.

If you are ultimately unsure where should your film end up? This all depends on why you made it in the first place. If you want to make money from the content, then you need to engage solidly in building an audience yourself, if you can do that for no money, then you have the perfect pitch to any buyer.

Shorts get sold rarely, so be careful who you give your rights to. If you are making short films to make money you need to stop.

Proof of concept shorts will go on to be show-reels, trailers, pitching aides – resulting in a feature film.

Feature films should be poised toward a global market. In this scenario it is wise to get a sales agent on-board early, failing that try to get one working with you as soon as possible. If you have a commercially viable product then it is fair to say that, again, you must prove that you have a unique audience following.

8. The festivals approach to selecting films.

We get tons of films that are great. Of course one persons 'awesome' is another persons 'lame', but this is certainly something we try to cater for, and we are positive that other festivals do this too.

A great point to note is the dilemma of programming. If we receive, again, two films that are ten out of ten 'awesome', but one of them is seven minutes in length and has five actors in it, and the other is twenty-five minutes in length but has only two actors, our festival has to prioritise the seven minute film because it potentially brings with it more attendees, and it takes up a little over a third of the time. Of course we don't favour films directly due to length and the number people in them, but if we have to make a decision and drop one film over another that is one of the core areas we focus. For us time in a theatre we don't own is money, and if we can fit more films and sell more tickets we might stand a chance of breaking even, something that has only happened a dozen of times with Lift-Off. Like I said we don't seek it out directly, but it is certainly something to have in mind.

9. A mass market why not?

We have noticed that many filmmakers over the years have been more self-serving than community driven. It is understandable a director is lone wolf at the best of times, but this attitude has to change and the filmmakers who create the work we love to screen need to engage more with the community. Firstly, as mentioned above, it will help them, it will help you, and secondly it will lead the pathway for new people, fresh audiences to the work, resulting in a marketplace where films made for \$50,000 or less are making \$300,000 around the world and everyone is getting paid for it. Why not?

Why have we allowed the major production companies to take over cinema? Why have we allowed ourselves to venture out to discover new music, art, literature, but not new film? There is a monopoly, from the big five all the way through the mini-majors and it is killing filmmaker's chances of having humble careers inside a market that should be thriving.

What can you do? Firstly go to more festivals. Watch more work by directors you have never heard of before, and rent films online by other directors the same, and then blog, post on Facebook, share links and tell the world when you see something that rocks your world.

We as a species follow trendsetters and you are the trendsetter – so please tell everyone you know to watch and pay to watch indie film.

Real indie film

10. Lift-Off's Final Word

It can be tough. You have picked the most challenging industry to be a part of, but hopefully with our help you have begun to see that if you have the right pieces in place all with the right attitude you can really start to get noticed.

We are here to help in anyway we can. Our competitions are tough, we only pick who we think are at the right stage in their journey to join us, but this does not mean that will never be you.

Please keep watching indie films, please keep attending festivals, and please keep telling other people to do the same. If you are a filmmaker that wants to be in this business of filmmaking, you need to be supporting your entry-level industry because without it there is no opportunity for anyone, anywhere. Our institution is here to stay, so please keep in touch and let us know about your projects.

We absolutely hope to meet you in person one day.

We absolutely promise to do all that we can to help you in making that happen.

Keep making films and see you at the festivals...

James, Ben and the Lift-Off Team at Pinewood Studios.