

# 5 STEPS TO PROMOTING AND DISTRIBUTING YOUR FILM

You've made a video. Now how do you get anyone to see it? Veteran photographers-turned-directors share their advice.  
By Greg Scoble



"AT THE END OF THE DAY, STRONG WORK IS GOING TO STAND out no matter what," says Maisie Crow, a photographer and the director of the documentary *The Last Clinic*. Crow likely speaks for many artists when expressing her belief that quality films will eventually find an audience. Her faith may be justified, but it can't hurt to give them a push. While there's no ironclad formula for propelling a film from obscurity to mass recognition, we were able to distill several valuable lessons from industry professionals who have had some success in this regard.

## 1. ESTABLISH YOUR DISTRIBUTION GOALS EARLY AND MAKE PROMOTION A PRIORITY FROM DAY ONE

Some filmmakers only worry about marketing and distribution as the shooting wraps, says Michael Lumpkin, executive director of the International Documentary Association. While that approach works for some, Lumpkin argues that it's more effective to ask yourself at the outset, "Who will see my film and how will they see my film?" Answering these questions before the process starts can inform critical issues such as the length and tone of the film. What works for the Sundance Channel may not work for PBS (Public Broadcasting Service), and vice versa.

Early goal setting is vital, says Dan Habib, a filmmaker in residence at the University of New Hampshire. "When I started work on *Who Cares About Kelsey?*," his documentary about a high-school student diagnosed with ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) who had a history of homelessness and substance abuse, "I knew I didn't want to go for a theatrical release," he says. Instead, he focused on national TV broadcasts. "I realized that would be the most cost-effective way of reaching the most people." With this in mind, he made the film the proper length for broadcast (56 minutes) and presented it to would-be funders and partners with a specific set of goals for the film's release. "You're far more likely to get funders if you can show them a comprehensive plan that shows what your promotional and distribution goals are and how you plan to achieve them," Habib says.

In fact, the more you've done on your own to build an e-mail distribution list or cultivate an audience on social media, the more attractive your piece will be to distributors, says Andrew Mer, vice president of Content Partnerships at Snagfilms, an independent film distributor and streaming service. "We like to see a filmmaker who has already done some of this groundwork before bringing it to us," he notes.

Stills from Shauf Schwarz's documentary *Narco Cultura*, which began as a short for the *TIME* website. The film was screened at the Sundance Film Festival and picked up by a distributor. Top: A victim's family grieves. Bottom: *Narcocorrido* (drug ballad) singer Alfredo Ríos (aka *El Komander*).



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## 2. MAKE A QUALITY FILM THAT AUDIENCES WILL WANT TO SEE, AND DEFINE WHO THAT AUDIENCE IS

"We look, fundamentally, to distribute great films that we think we can promote well," says Mer. Greatness can be defined as a compelling narrative or filmmaking technique, an arresting story, interesting characters or a subject that's unique, he adds.

Beyond quality, though, distributors take a transactional view of your work: Will people want to see it and why? Is it, in Mer's words, "promotable"? It's a question you must be ready to answer, preferably before the cameras roll.

Peter Sutherland's documentary *Pedal*, about New York City bike messengers, for instance, "struck a chord" when it premiered at the South by Southwest Music Conference and Festival (it was later picked up by the Sundance Channel) because it keyed in on several themes that had become popular at the time, he says. "It was marketable because it was about New York City, it focused on an interesting subculture and it was fast paced," he says. And while Sutherland says *Pedal* was conceived without these marketable qualities playing a conscious role, conceiving a film with an eye toward marketable hooks, like a celebrity narrator, may boost its chances of getting noticed.

Film festivals, particularly the marquee ones like the Festival de Cannes and Sundance Film Festival, continue to be vital for gaining exposure and distribution but the odds of getting accepted are long and impressing judges "takes a good amount of luck," Sutherland says.

"There's no secret sauce," to impressing festival judges adds documentary film director Shaul Schwarz, whose *Narco Cultura* did impress and was accepted into Sundance, and later picked up by the distributor CineMGM Entertainment Group. What can help, though, is casting your festival submissions beyond the big-name venues. Sutherland, for instance, identified a bicycle-themed film festival when marketing *Pedal*. These smaller, themed festivals can bring your film to a passionate audience, he says.

## 3. LEVERAGE ONLINE PLATFORMS TO BUILD AN AUDIENCE AND RAISE MONEY

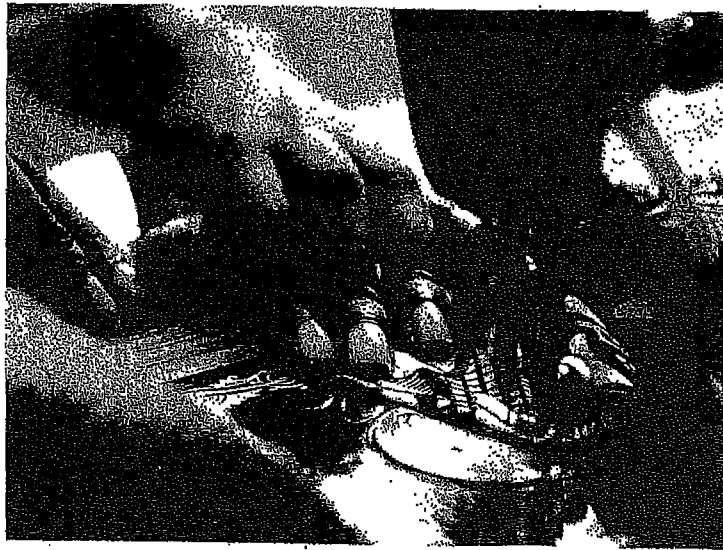
The Internet is clearly a potent tool to generate awareness and cultivate an audience. Several pieces emerged from our conversation with filmmakers as must-haves: a dedicated website for the film that hosts not just the trailer but additional material to engage audiences—such as a mix of blog, behind-the-scenes stills and/or videos, and biographical tidbits of the central characters and/or filmmaker; creating a dedicated Facebook page and Twitter account to transmit news and build online community for the film are also important.

For *Who Cares About Kelsey?*, Habib populated his website with all the above plus a series of original "mini films" from the project

that further explored the subject matter. These were put in place after the film was complete but before it was broadcast.

Filmmakers can also use crowd-funding services like Kickstarter and Indiegogo both to raise money and to start building awareness. Gail Mooney pursued both for her film *Opening Our Eyes*. Indiegogo proved to be the more effective platform for her since, unlike Kickstarter, it's not an all-or-nothing fundraiser. If you do opt to use a crowd-funding platform, it's best to think about what "perks" you'll offer to your financial backers beyond the film itself (Mooney offered an e-book) and how much time and effort creating those "perks" will entail.

The Web isn't just a vehicle for promoting long-form content, it can serve to springboard shorter pieces into larger projects. Schwarz's *Narco Cultura* began its life as short documentary produced for *TIME* magazine. The online film served as a critical "proof of concept" that Schwarz was able to shop to producers and grant writers to generate interest in a longer piece, he says. This approach is especially valuable for photographers looking to break into long-form video, Schwarz adds, since there's now a large appetite among the online properties of publications like *TIME* for higher quality video content.



Top: Screenshots from Peter Sutherland's film *Pedal*, which was screened at SXSW and a bike-themed film festival, and later aired on the Sundance Channel. Bottom: A still from *Opening Our Eyes* by Gail Mooney, who offered an e-book as one of her crowd-funding "perks" on Kickstarter and Indiegogo.

## GEAR FRAMES PER SECOND



Top: Stills from Dan Habib's Emmy-nominated film including Samuel. Habib hired a station relations professional to pitch the film, and was able to secure 837 telecasts. Bottom: Stills from Habib's newest film *Who Cares About Kelsey?* For both films, Habib set up dedicated websites that included the trailer, behind-the-scenes videos and additional material to engage audiences.

**DAN HABIB: "You're far more likely to get funders if you can show them a comprehensive plan that shows ... your promotional and distribution goals."**

### 4. IDENTIFY PARTNERS THAT WOULD HAVE AN INTEREST IN PROMOTING YOUR FILM

Documentaries can drive awareness to issues in dramatic fashion. If your film touches on issues of broader social significance, concerned parties (nongovernmental organizations, charities, advocacy groups, foundations, etc.) will want to know, Mooney says.

Reaching out to these groups early in the filmmaking process, and soliciting their feedback and input (and, potentially, funds) will build a base of support for your production before it's even finished. These partners are what military commanders would describe as "force multipliers" for your promotional efforts.

When working on *Who Cares About Kelsey?*, for instance, Habib identified over a dozen groups concerned with education and troubled youths to reach out to, including the American Federation of Teachers and the Autistic Self Advocacy Network. "We closely engaged [our partners] at every step of making the film, showing them early cuts and soliciting their feedback." Through that collaborative process, Habib got his partners invested in *Who Cares About Kelsey?* and they, in turn, helped promote news of his film, hosted screenings and in some cases, contributed funds.

### 5. SEEK PROFESSIONAL HELP

One theme that surfaced again and again in conversations with filmmakers was that the business of marketing and promoting a film is its own full-time job. Your time will be consumed by traveling to film festivals, hosting screenings, cultivating social media, identifying and pitching distributors, and on and on. It's not, as Schwarz puts it, "a one-person sport" nor is it a set of skills that all creative people have. Therefore it makes sense to include a line item in your budget for a dedicated marketer.

When pitching an earlier film, *Including Samuel*, to public-television stations, Habib hired a station relations professional (akin to a public relations specialist but focused solely on public TV) to woo the top broadcast producers in the country. He credits their efforts with helping *Including Samuel* secure 837 telecasts covering 83 percent of all markets in the country with an estimated viewing audience of three million people.

Hiring a publicist might seem old-fashioned in the do-it-yourself, social-media marketing era, Lumpkin adds, but he or she will bring a set of skills and relationships to your marketing that would otherwise be missing if you were to go it alone. **Full**