



Michael Wiese Productions
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10 Tips to Find a Distributor for Your Independent Film

1. Collect Exhaustive Distributor Information – Before you begin anything, you need a list of companies. Look to specialty film making books that list independent-friendly operators in their appendices. Next, hit the Net. Search engines are extremely helpful when collecting distribution company data. Also be sure to visit a couple of video rental and retail stores. Check the back of video and DVD packaging for distribution information. Investigate the resource areas of filmmaking associations and groups such as the Association of Independent Video and Filmmakers (AIVF), Independent Feature Project (IFP) and others. Finally, peruse libraries, bookstores and newsstands. *The Hollywood Reporter*, *Variety*, *Moviemaker*, *Independent Filmmaker* and *The Independent* are all newsstand publications that offer distributor listings throughout the year.

2. Survey and Qualify Distributors - You need to determine which distributors among those located in your initial search seem most suited to working with your film or video. Though personal contact is the best way to gather these facts, a good base of information on probably every distributor can be garnered from some more intensive Web-based research. Most, if not all film and video distribution companies have a Web presence describing the firm's history, key officers, types of product, current releases, even submission guidelines for independent producers. If you can't make the decision based on this data, call the company direct and speak with the acquisitions staff. Describe your project and ask if it is something the distributor might be interested in screening for possible acquisition.

3. Learn Who Helps in the Process – Just as a distributor adds clout when it comes time to selling your film or video to the various markets, so too can an industry representative – or venue – add clout when you are hunting for a distributor. Having your project presented by an industry insider or viewed in a favorable environment breaks many of barriers facing an independent's entry into the market. Some of the many people who can get involved in the hunt for a distributor include producer representatives, agents, film festival and film market staffers.

4. Create a Presentation Package -- A properly created presentation package allows potential buyers to view your film or video, and its associated marketing elements, in the most advantageous environment possible. Since face-to-face meetings are unfortunately unlikely with most prospects, this sales "kit" must do the selling for you. While it can't prop up an ill-conceived production, a polished presentation package can add that extra incentive

needed to arouse more than cursory examination of your project by those who matter. The presentation package is the physical culmination of all of your promotional efforts. This multi-piece marketing tool consists of all or some of the following:

- Sales/cover letter
- Media kit
- Trailer
- Full-length screener
- Key art
- Sample packaging design
- Production photos
- Publicity photos
- Point-of-purchase items

5. Decide When to Approach – At what point do you solicit a distributor with your project? You really only have three options:

- During the project's development stage - Unless a distributor specifically states development funding is a part of their service, don't waste your breath and set yourself up for unneeded rejection.
- During production - Completion funding is one of the main reasons independent producers contact distributors and other potential buyers during the production or post-production phase of a project. To offset an imbalance of cash, producers often solicit distributors, hoping they'll become a project's "white knight" – fronting whatever monies are needed for completion in exchange for the exclusive distribution rights of the property.
- When project is "complete" - In the world of independent video and filmmaking, it's best to approach distributors with finished product. With more than 2,000 feature films and at least an equal (but probably greater) amount of videos produced and promoted annually, it's hard for acquisition agents, distributors and other entertainment product buyers to sort through the screeners on their desks, much less consider proposals for projects that need start-up capital or completion financing.

6. Make a Game Plan – Seek out interested studio and large independent distributors first. These guys offer your best chance of a widespread release for your project should they decide to acquire it. Using your list of qualified distributors, create an action plan that details how you will solicit each company. Consider the manner of contact (in-person screening, mailed screener), whom you are contacting (level within the firm), timing of the contact (how long has film been available for distribution) and desirability of contact (first, second or third choice).

7. Don't Blow the First Call – Wait at least two weeks from the day you mailed the packages until you start calling distribution companies to discuss their interest in your project. Before dialing anyone, relax. Don't get nervous. Once connected with the specific person you solicited, introduce yourself and ask if he has received your package. Don't take it as an immediate negative sign if the distributor is unfamiliar with your project. Hundreds of films and videos cross their desks, it's impossible for them to remember everything. Ask if they've had a chance to review the contents of the package. Ask if they've watched the screener. Don't rush anyone. Mention the fact that you were simply confirming receipt of the package, quickly point out why your film or video is so marketable and ask for a good date to call back.

8. Be Tenacious with Follow-up – Most, if not all, of the work involved in finding a distributor is the independent producer's responsibility, so you'll be making hundreds of phone calls to follow-up every solicitation. Three outcomes are possible in most follow-up calls:

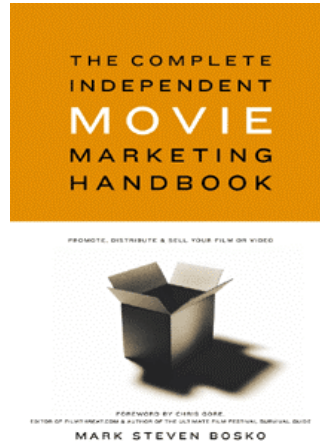
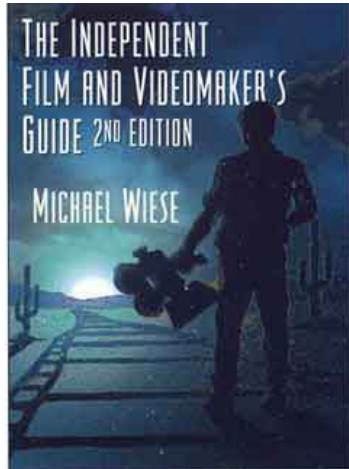
- The buyer is not interested
- The buyer needs to give it more thought
- The buyer is interested

When a distributor tells you that your project is not something they want to work with, use the opportunity to learn. Ask uninterested distributors what it is about your film or video they didn't like. What made it unattractive to them from a business standpoint, and, if they are willing and the conversation is not rushed, ask what they did or didn't like from a personal point of view. Also ask for a referral. If possible, don't let the distributor off the phone until he gives you the name of at least one other individual or firm who may be interested in your project.

9. Carefully Navigate Offers and Deals – Initial discussions are all about "feeling" the other party out. You want to know what the distributor can do for you and your project just like they want to know if you'll be able to hold up your end of the deal. What this means is a distributor that says, "I'm interested in your project, let's talk," isn't offering you a distribution deal. You're a hell of a lot closer to one than you were two minutes before the phone call, but you're not there yet. To keep the deal progressing, be sure you don't jump the gun on media announcements or unnecessarily rush the distributor.

10. Understand Realities – As you solicit traditional studio and large independent distributors for your project, it's a good idea to keep this figure in your head: *Approximately 10-20 independent films and videos are finished daily – every day of the year.* Attached to each of these is someone just like yourself who has dreams and aspirations of becoming famous or rich or self-supporting through their passion for making entertainment, and who also believes that their project is the next big thing. Not everyone is going to get offered a deal. It is both mathematically and economically impossible. And

it's not always quality that is the determining factor in the buy or pass decision. Timing, salesmanship, location and resolve also play into the equation.



For more detailed independent film distribution information and instruction, check out *The Independent Film and Videomaker's Guide* by Michael Wiese and *The Complete Independent Movie Marketing Handbook* by Mark Steven Bosko at www.mwp.com.

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