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Film Sales and Acquisition Amid a Pandemic

by Elizabeth Austin

In selecting a film for acquisition, sales consideration should always be a part of the process. In depth screening and the ability to discover the production's potential can make the difference between success and failure in the digital markets. But what does that actually mean during these times when 'business as usual' no longer applies and production is greatly limited?

It is summer 2020 and the pandemic continues to disrupt lives and productions. Only months ago, the industry was looking at burgeoning array of new programs for film and television. Netflix and Amazon had entered the fray of competing companies by producing their own slate of original programs to entice new subscribers. Emboldened by a strong economy, media giants pushed for mergers with AVOD platforms while still newer internet TV services like XUMO, IMDbTV and Crackle plus a spate of others mushroomed, boasting an ever-expanding selection of channels in the hope of sharing revenues on smart TV. And then came Covid-19.

Production halted around the globe. Sets shut down and no one could predict when it would end. Nothing like this had happened since 1918, when Spanish Flu ravaged communities worldwide and altered the Silent Film era as many independent theatres could not withstand the financial losses of being closed for months with no new film to offer. Then Albert Zukor, the movie mogul, bought up failed movie houses and created the studio system we know today where major companies control acquisition, production and distribution through the digital medium.

As the industry struggles into reopening, genres able to effectively flourish are primarily documentaries, audible or animation. Audio is blossoming. Smaller productions with manageable size casts and crews are filming but it is obvious that we will be well into 2021 before larger film and television shoots in the U.S. regain their ability to go into full production. Markets around the globe are searching for a new and different style of television and films while an industry that we could not have imagined a year ago is being born.

Having worked in both acquisition and sales for distribution, I have learned to value unique opportunities in film and series. Today's standard digital offerings process consist of involved metadata listings formatted onto spreadsheets and ingested into company systems often decided by algorithms and analytics. Programmers decide where and when to slot a title for the best views and in every case, the film's ranking is a major consideration to producers. However, unless the production is well known,

Austin/2

exclusive or has a large fan following, it is often difficult to rise through these complex digital ranks. Clicks versus actual minutes watched become the tell-all on whether the film will make money from advertising dollars, single downloads or an uptick in subscriptions.

In the global film market, it is critical to choose films or series that will perform well on wide range of VOD and linear platforms. Independent productions, with their mix of better-known producers or directors, festival winners, Indie or foreign film, make up a substantive percentage of those newly streaming. Each requires a sensitive eye when screening before determining whether to invest the financial resources to acquire them. Unfortunately, companies will often resort to creating a data entry catalogue offering with little effort being invested in understanding where a production should be presented or whether the particular company would show interest.

Film sales are more than analysis. They need a combination of careful research, judgment in matching the production with a digital media outlet plus an instinct for seeing a film's saleable qualities. The film industry arising from this pandemic has challenging currents to negotiate in presenting new films that will draw an audience's attention and hold it. We sell to people and it is the emotional connection drives what they choose to watch. Whether acquiring or selling, it is necessary that we recognize human vision is still the key to uncover the true value of any production and make it a success.

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