

Business of film



Short Film Festival Strategy

Building the best
festival strategy for
your short film

by Neil Fallon



Introduction

Every year more than 8,000 short movies are produced and submitted to more than 3,000 film festivals worldwide. How can your short film stand out amongst such a vast number of submissions? Will a great short lead to a successful career in festivals? That depends. Because beyond the intrinsic quality of a film, much of its success depends on how you develop your strategy to target the right festivals at the right time. Success is the combination of many elements to create a virtuous circle.

In this guide, we will outline all the elements needed, but also all the traps to avoid to build the best film festival strategy for your film, to turn a great short into a successful one in festivals.

Why submit your short to festivals?

The primary goal is to get accepted into and to screen in as many festivals which in turn will create the opportunity to win as many prizes as you can in order to build credibility for your next project, whether it's a short film financed by private or public funding or your first feature film as a director or producer.

The success of the first goal leads to the second goal, which is to secure a distributor to get your film seen by a wider audience once its festival run comes to an end. This could be on a TV network, a theatrical release or even an airline playlist.

By securing distribution for your short, it can generate revenue. This means potentially covering your initial production costs and/or your marketing costs and festival entry fees.

How films are selected in festivals ?

As part of your film festival strategy, it's important to understand how festivals are structured.

The most important person for you, the filmmaker, is the Festival Director of Programming. They are the people in charge of the films shown during the festival. The Festival Director of Programming has a huge responsibility as to the success of the festival and its capacity to attract a large audience each year. Therefore, the Festival Director of Programming, whether or not they head a particular committee of selectionors, still have the ultimate say in which films will screen.



The Festival Director of Programming guarantees the editorial lineup of the Festival

A Festival Director of Programming spends a good deal of time travelling to other festivals to watch shorts and build their own pre-selection. In general, a Festival Director of Programming has more or less the same list of festivals that they attend, which attract a similar audience.

All films selected in festivals go through an official public selection process. You, as a filmmaker, register your film and submit it using one of the online platforms. Once submitted, your film will be viewed and rated similar to a script contest. Based on the size of the festival and the number of films received, your film might be viewed by several raters until it makes the final selection, which is supervised by the Festival Director of Programme and committee

In most cases, viewers, (film students, retired professionals,...), are hired to watch and rate hundreds of films received by the festival.

Viewers are usually paid an amount similar to a script reader in a screenplay contest.

How to enter festivals

Short film festivals utilize online platforms specifically designed for short film submissions. In addition to uploading your film, you can upload additional materials to promote the film, such as a press kit or still photos.

Some platforms are free to submit; others charge a small fee. These include:

- Submittable
- Film Freeway
- Festival Focus
- Reelport (Europe)
- Festhome
- One of the original and most popular submission sites, Without a Box, recently announced plans to phase out their service.



Festival entry fees vary, but expect to pay between \$40 to \$100 per festival.

How to develop a festival strategy ?

Most festivals require that your film be completed 18 months prior to the festival date.

This means that, depending on the submission deadlines, you can have two opportunities to enter your film in a particular festival within an 18-month period. Of course, this depends on the actual submission dates in relation to the completion of your film.



You can only enter a particular festival once, so the strategy becomes whether to enter the film the first time around, or wait until the subsequent year.

It all depends on your goals with your film, which will be discussed below. But it's important to have this knowledge in mind when you start developing your festival campaign.



This also means being diligent about which festivals are more important and which will gain you the most visibility, as you can only submit to a festival once.

So, first determine what is most important. Is it getting into one of the major international festivals? Well, often the amount of time between the submission, the selection and the actual festival dates can last the better part of the year. Major international festivals may want a worldwide or national Premiere. That means sitting on your film and waiting for this one festival. If it fails to get selected or make a significant splash when it plays, that's a significant amount of time during the 18 months where you've done nothing with the film. It's a huge gamble, obviously.

Another strategy during this period is to select key festivals you specifically want to target and enter smaller festivals to build up your

film's resume. A film with a significant number of accolades will impress the larger festivals. But that means timing the entries so you don't submit to your preferred festivals too soon before you've built your resume but not waiting too long to miss the "two-season" window.

Also, if your target festival is in a certain region, like New York, you don't want to enter too many New York area festivals to build up that resume as the target festival may want films that are exclusive viewing in the geographic area.

Example "The Tribeca Film Festival" :

Say you believe your film will do well at Tribeca, an important festival on the circuit and located in New York City. Tribeca requires your film to have an exclusive New York Premiere status. This means that you won't be allowed to compete in any other festival taking place in New York before the Tribeca festival. Logic

dictates that you should try to apply for Tribeca as soon as possible in order to compete in other New York film festivals in case of a negative answer from Tribeca. Yes this is an option.

But on the other hand, you don't want to compete too soon. Rather wait until you have won prizes outside New York and then submit to Tribeca the following year with a multi-awarded film. That could make a key difference. As you can see both options have Pros and Cons. You need to weigh them based on your overall film festival plans.



Always check the selection conditions/eligibility section for a festival, in particular the date your film needs to be completed in order to qualify. That's an essential element to take into consideration.

For the World Premiere, it complicates things a bit more. But ultimately, it depends on the date your film is ready.

Let's take the example of the Cannes Film Festival. This short film competition is organised by the Cinefondation. The Cinefondation requires your film to have not been screened at another major international festival (although they do accept that it may have been screened at a festival in its country of origin, a possible source of confusion.)

So, the Cinefondation submission deadline is in March and you've completed your film in February. You have nothing to lose by submitting your film right away. If you're selected, you get your world premiere in just a few months of the completion of your film and have plenty of time to enter subsequent festivals. However, if your film is completed in say, June and the selection for the following Cannes festival won't take place before next

April, (Cannes is in May), it's probably not worth waiting and losing that important year-long window to submit to other festivals. And remember, Cannes receives over 5,000 short film submissions every year!



Never rush to submit your film to a key festival. Check the dates of completion required by the festival and ask yourself if it's better for your strategy to wait another year until your film gets more recognition.

Your budget

As already mentioned, submitting your film to festivals can be costly. A full campaign can easily cost over \$1,000. As this money will be spent over a period of 18 months, it's more manageable in terms of cash flow but still quite a bit of money. So if your marketing budget is limited, you must carefully consider the festivals you target.

In addition to the festival entry fees, you will have to plan an additional budget of approximately \$2,000 to create a DCP version of your film. The DCP, (Digital Cinema Package), file is the standard format screened at festivals. Finally, in certain cases you must plan a budget for subtitles. The budget will vary depending on the length of your dialogue.



Create a spreadsheet of festivals you want to target and note the dates of submission and the festival itself, especially if there are any specifications such as Premiere Status, English subtitles, the cost of submission and the geographic area. This will help track the festivals more easily and help you build your strategy based on the total forecasted budget

Film Status

The first festival you enter will be determined by the date your film is completed or ready

for submission/showing. Many festivals will accept an unfinished version of your film when going through the selection process, but this is not recommended. Decision-makers who view and rate films won't necessarily be aware that the movie is not yet graded, or that this is not the final edit. They'll make their judgement solely on what they see.

Prize Qualifications

To start your strategy remember : **prizes bring more prizes, success brings more success.**

And the great aspect of film festivals is that they offer many different prizes: Best Film, Best Director, Best Actor, Best Script, Best Music, Best Cinematography, , Audience Award, to name a few.

Winning any one of these prizes is important to getting into other festivals and ultimately having your film distributed.

So when researching different festivals, always consider the different prizes they offer. There may be prizes tailored for your film. For example if you have a great score, it is worth applying first to festivals that offer a prize for best music.

Your personal connections

Do you personally know a Festival Director? Having a personal connection doesn't guarantee you that your film will be selected, but it could give you a significant advantage during the selection process. This is where networking at festivals is important. Consider attending as many festivals as you can. There are usually networking events, such as opening parties, where you can make great connections. Remember to have business cards on hand and always ask for a card from anyone you meet. You never know who they know.

The niche/genre festivals

If your film is a genre film, such as horror, comedy, science fiction, identify those festivals that are specific to that genre. This gives your film a huge boost in that the selection committee is specifically looking for these types of films. And, the audience is mostly made of fans of the genre, which could create great buzz for your film. Similarly, some more broad-based festivals feature certain genres within their programmes, so consider those as well.

Also, be sure to check festivals that run concurrently with major festivals in the same city. For example, the Berlin Independent Film Festival runs during the dates of the Berlin International Film Festival (Berlinale). This allows you to take advantage of major festival events without the high cost of submission.



Festivals need to be financially viable. Receiving as many short film submissions as possible is also a great source of revenue for them. Therefore, when you submit your film in a country whose main language is not the language of your film, make sure that your film has an equal chance to be viewed and assessed by the selection committee. Simply, check the list of films awarded the previous years and see if there are any films made in your language. That will give you a good idea.

The local festival

Do you come from a small or medium size town where there is a festival? Do you have personal connections within a region where a local festival is organised? Indeed, festivals love to promote local artists. By doing so, not only do they promote their festivals but they also promote their region. With a personal connection, you and your film get more visibility,

more press and increases the likelihood of winning an audience award, if offered.

Also consider your talent when it comes to locality. For example, Australia is a long way away. But if your main actor is from Australia, that can get your film a lot of press in a local festival. Similarly, if your film has an Irish connection (i.e., subject, location, actors), it may be worth the expense to enter films in all Irish Film Festivals in the U.S., such as Chicago or Boston.



The important thing is, to use any advantage you can—be it cast, location, subject matter—when selecting the right festival to enter.

The Oscars®

Another aspect of your strategy is getting consideration for an Academy Award in the short film categories. This, of course, is a risky

strategy as it precludes you from entering smaller festivals. You must maintain premiere status and win an award at an Oscar® qualifying film festival. The Academy publishes a list of eligible festivals on their website.

Otherwise, the second option to qualify for Oscar® consideration is to have a screening at a theater in Los Angeles. Clearly, this is an expensive proposition and should be weighed against realistic expectations.

Film Festival Strategy: The core idea

Ultimately, the core idea of your strategy is to first submit your film to small and medium size festivals where it can be seen and potentially win prizes. . Once you start gaining recognition and winning a few prizes, then you tackle the bigger international festivals.



Submitting your film - regardless of its quality - to major festivals with no track record of winning prizes is very risky. Of course, the downside is you lose out on the previously mentioned premiere status. So it's important to consider this in your overall strategy.



Plan your festival strategy over a 2-year period. In the first year, try to get into small festivals to gain recognition and win awards. In the second year, aim for the bigger international festivals based on your previous success.

The distributor

The vast majority of shorts submitted to festivals don't have a distributor. And they can do very well without one. But it's worth exploring the possibility of collaborating with a

distributor at an early stage. But what is the role of a distributor?

A distributor works on the two commercial aspects of your film:

1. Getting your film promoted in festivals.
2. Getting your film sold to TV networks, streaming services, cinemas, and even airlines for in-flight entertainment.

Using a distributor to promote your film in festivals

If a distributor believes in your film, it will be in their best interest to strongly promote it at festivals to gain high visibility. This increases your film's chances of winning prizes and boosting its value in the market when it's time to sell it.

In addition, having your film distributed is also a way to get it labelled as “professional” and have it stand out amongst the hundreds of other

movies, especially those without distribution. Having a professional distributor demonstrates to key players that there is belief in your project. And finally, distributors cover the costs of festival entry fees, which is not negligible if you submit your film to 20 or more festivals.

Distributors tend to have important relationships with Festival Directors of Programming, which will certainly help to boost the visibility of your film.

It's important to note that working with a distributor at a very early stage of your film's festival career can have downsides. As distributors represent a catalogue of films, it's impossible for them to send every film to the same festival. So, unless your film is a top priority, it may become lost in the middle of dozens of other shorts and not receive the important exposure you expect and need.

So when your film is nearly finished, it's worth meeting with a distributor and seeing if there

is any interest, how they'd promote your film in festivals and if there are similar films in their catalogue which might compete with yours.



It's important to note that you shouldn't count solely on the distributor to do the work to promote your film in festivals, but you should take a strong proactive role yourself. If so, then it's worth considering a collaboration at an early stage.

Selling your film

When your film's festival run is over, getting it sold to a TV network, streaming service, cinema or airline in-flight entertainment service is also very important. This brings a wider audience and helps you to make money, or at least, recoup some of your production costs.

And while this is nearly impossible to do without a distributor, a winning festival performance will

allow you to find one. In fact, chances are one or more will come to you.



Distributors usually take a commission fee of up to 30-35% of the selling price. A short film can generate a net sum of up to \$10,000 for the producer.

To summarize, establishing a collaboration with a distributor is key to give your film the maximum opportunity for success. The question becomes, when is the optimal time to contact, whether it be early stage or later in your film's festival path? While there is no definitive answer, it really all depends on the film itself, how strong your personal connections with festivals are, and how much work the potential distributor will do. Still, it's important to contact a distributor—the earlier, the better, even if your collaboration starts at a later stage.

An alternative solution to distributor

If you don't have a distributor, another key strategy to consider is a festival submissions management company and/or consultant who specializes in marketing films to festivals. The advantage here is that they are knowledgeable and can devise a submission strategy, as well as handle all the logistics of submitting your film. Often, they have relationships with the festival committees, so this can gain you significant leverage against the competition.

However, unlike the distributor who doesn't charge an up-front fee, these companies will invoice for their services. This can run at \$2,000 - \$3,000, plus expenses. So it's important to factor this into your festival marketing budget.

Marketing to festivals

There are two important aspects to marketing your film: the Press Kit and Social Media. The Press Kit will help you get better attention from the Festival Director of Programming, selection committee and festival audiences during the selection or competition process, while social media will help create a buzz during and after the festival.



The Press Kit is your film's calling card that includes information about your film that a distributor, acquisition company, journalists, etc. can read at a glance.

Press Kit essentials are:

- 1. Simple design** - don't go overboard on creating fancy designs. It's the information inside that's important. You should have both a PDF version, which most will

request, but some printed versions on hand to give out at the screening of your film. The printed version should be contained within a folder.

- 2. Cover Sheet** - this is what will grab someone's attention and should have a film still or the image of the movie's poster, as well as any important contact information and film information, i.e., running time, director's name, etc.
- 3. A two-line pitch.**
- 4. Synopsis** - the most important part of your kit as this will be used to interest the right people to come and see your film. This should be well-written in an engaging tone. One or two paragraphs should suffice.
- 5. Stills** - have at least four good still photos of the film.
- 6. Credits and Bios** - information about the filmmakers, cast and crew. Include

headshots, especially of important cast members.

7. Anecdotes and Mission Statement -

The director's mission statement about why they made the film as well as any interesting stories pertinent to the production are welcome insights behind the scenes.

8. Reviews and Awards - If the film has been viewed prior to submission, include blurbs of positive reviews and note any awards received, such as in other festivals.



Social Media (Facebook, Instagram, etc) will have a limited impact on any festival committee or director of programming. However, while it might help you to create buzz around a particular screening in a festival, social media is more useful to spread word of mouth about your film should it win festival prizes and when publicly released.

Conclusion

With the right strategy and fortunate timing, submitting to film festivals may be just what your short film needs to launch it to success and open your career to the next stage. Never rush to submit your film to a key festival. Don't take the risk of being rejected when you know that a year later it might be a different story. So spend a few hours thinking about the best strategy for your film.



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