

how to start a film festival

1. why to start a film festival

The film festival is a lovely tradition. It's an accepted institution wherein the community is invited to come, sit and watch films chosen by a small committee of hosts. In this tradition, the purposeful host committee vets films, discusses them, and then screens the films in order to launch local conversations relevant to the purpose of the festival. Meanwhile, the viewers of the films are provided with a venue and echo chamber for considering topics relevant to their community. Everyone benefits from the cultural content of the films, human contact at the event, and the lasting resonance of the discussions. Films are made to be screened, enjoyed and discussed.

2. what it takes to start a film festival

At the minimum: It takes a white wall, a DVD, a projector, some chairs, a Xerox machine, a coordinator to set up, press play, work the door and facilitate conversation following the screening.

At the maximum: it takes a screening license, a reel, a film projectionist, a budget, a cinema, a director for Q+A, someone to work the door, publicity, popcorn, clean up crew, panelists, a facilitator, a celebrity kick-off, and event insurance.

3. If you think you want to start a film festival

Here are a few of the logical steps you would take to achieve success:

conception: What does your community need? (ie. better food, bicycle lanes, a land-use planning initiative)

themes: Choose films that lead to conversations compelling enough to incite action on this issue. Read up on the films as much as possible.

graphic design: Design a compelling poster that advertises your chosen films and puts them into a logical order. Be sure to include the location, the name of the films with director and a short description, screening dates, and ticket price. Include contact information for queries that may arise.

rights: In order to show films in your festival you must get the permission of the filmmaker and/or distributor. Generally speaking, if you have a DVD you paid \$19.95 for, you probably do NOT have the necessary public performance rights to show that film in public, let alone charge admission. Many educational film distributors will not ask for an additional fee, if you decide not to charge admission but to have instead a suggested donation rate. If you do plan on charging admission be prepared to spend twice the regular rental rate as a minimum vs. 35% of your receipts from the admission fee, whichever is the eater. If money is a real problem, call the distributor or filmmaker and see if you can make a deal.

4. publicity & outreach

If you are in a town, try to get a community foundation to support the festival. If you are on a campus, try to get the campus activity board to issue funding. You could even start a student group to get funding or find an existing group and convince them to take on the film festival as a sub-project.

Use email lists, school lists, church lists to spread the word about your festival. Post the posters in shops around town or campus. Hand out flyers at events with a similar topic; gather emails at such events by setting up a table with food/colorful literature to attract interested people. Advertise your film festival on community/ campus radio, in the local newspaper and on blogs. Set up a table of free goodies at church or community events with an email list and information about your specific cause and the supporting films.

5. useful resources

There are many media libraries around the country that serve as 'research ground' for your film festival project. Public and university libraries, online media archives and educational film distribution companies are all good places to start your research. You can also scan the film festivals to find new films. Once you've identified the films you want to show check your local libraries to see if any of the local colleges or public libraries own the title. If they bought the film with public performance rights, you can then show it for nothing provided you only take donations. For a fairly complete listing of educational distributors, with descriptions of the kinds of films they distribute, check www.nmm.net under **Exhibitors**. Also check www.docuseek.com which lists the complete collections of eight different distributors of independent films. For independently-produced, environmental DVDs & videos check out www.bullfrogfilms.com. For filmographies on lots of different subjects, try www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC.

5. the screening

Sleep well the night before. Set up a nice table with an email list at the door

Test your equipment. Briefly introduce the film, thank the people for coming and remind them of the next screening.

Play the film. Follow it with a discussion.

6. NEVER give up.

