

Building Better Buzz

BY MARY A.C. FALLON

Have a new film, TV show or radio program that could use a promotional boost? Thanks to the Web, high-tech grassroots marketing isn't an oxymoron anymore. Here's how some women stirred up interest on a budget.

When Web blogs slammed her HBO documentary "Shelter Dogs," director Cynthia Wade knew her Internet-driven marketing strategy was going to attract larger-than-anticipated audiences for festival screenings, broadcasts and DVD sales.

"When some animal welfare and fringe groups became incredibly opposed to the film and proposed a boycott, it was the best thing that ever happened to us," Wade said.

"Shelter Dogs" is an intimate look at ethical life-and-death decisions made at Sue Sternberg's animal shelter in upstate New York. Months before the film's first broadcast in January 2004, some public reaction was so intense that Sternberg received death threats.

"Every time they sent out a rash of hate e-mail, we'd see a spike in the number of hits on our Web site because they embedded our URL in their messages," Wade said. "It let us understand where the buzz was coming from so we could react."

Embracing the Web

Public relations years ago displaced more expensive and less trusted advertising as the marketing tactic most favored by independent movie and radio producers. Today, producers warmly embrace the Web to create awareness about their programs and

sales of their creative works and companion merchandise.

The Internet changed the dynamics of building buzz. Not only can it extend marketing reach worldwide to huge numbers of people who share special interests but it also can do it even when your budget is skimpy.

"The more high-tech the world becomes, the more grassroots marketing becomes," said Debra Zimmerman, executive director of Women Make Movies, the largest North American distributor of films and videos by and about women. "The techniques using the Web are the same type of techniques that worked on a very grassroots level – find a primary audience and their multipliers. The Internet makes it easier and faster."

The Audience Comes First

Still, no amount of Net savvy and guerilla tactics will draw large audiences and drive merchandise sales unless you have a strategic marketing plan with well-thought-through profiles, identifying your program's target audiences.

"Filmmakers should be thinking about who their audiences are before they are in production," Zimmerman said. "Often-times, there isn't a need for a film. If there is no need for the film, it has to be really great. If there is a need for the film, it can be

mediocre and still do fantastic."

Despite the check box marked "general audience" on festival and grant applications, the general audience is a myth. Your program can appeal to hundreds of thousands, even millions, of people all of whom can be categorized into distinct groups with narrowly defined common interests. Every film, TV show and radio program has a distinct audience. The more specifically you can identify your audience, the better job you can do at marketing.

Wade expected "Shelter Dogs" to attract people who work at animal shelters and veterinarians. By analyzing e-mails and Web traffic before broadcast, however, she learned that vets weren't anywhere near as interested in her film's topic as college ethics professors and their students. This insight prompted HBO American Undercover to recast her documentary's tagline to "Who decides their fate?"

Testing the Market

One way to test for your target market is by trying to raise funds for your film or radio project. For 25 years, Otherworld Media CEO Judith Walcott has been raising grant funds for her radio and spoken-word programs such as the Grammy-nominated "50th Anniversary of War of the Worlds."



Cynthia Wade films footage for her HBO documentary "Shelter Dogs."

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DEBRA ZIMMERMAN

To churn buzz, she'll apply for public radio funding grants even when she's doubtful her adventuresome audio programs, such as her latest pilot, "Masters of the Slack Key Guitar," don't actually match up perfectly with funding guidelines.

"I do that because I know the public and community radio decisions makers will start talking about my ideas," Walcott said.

Grants are a good target market litmus test, echoes Katie Cadigan, producer of the award-winning documentary "People Say I'm Crazy" about living life with schizophrenia.

"If I can't sell it upfront to someone with a vested interest in the subject, then I'd better re-think my project," Cadigan said. "The biggest dumb thing to do is to sink your resources into making something that has no audience." Furthermore, using your Web site to reach audiences and gather individual contact information enables you to identify micro markets.

For radio producers, the Internet, new audio streaming and podcasting technologies have drastically changed marketing. Walcott estimates 40 percent of the draw for public and community radio programs

come from the Net. Today, once any station broadcasts your radio program, it can be streamed worldwide. Then you can cross promote everything you do – screenings, performances, conference talks, merchandise, Web blogs and broadcasts – to specific special-interest groups around the world. Often these groups are interlinked, so once you've communicated with a few, they start to spread the word about your movie or radio program, and your reach expands.

"If you think you can just have a radio show, stand in line with the dinosaurs," Walcott said. "It's no longer about listening to my radio show; it's log onto my Web site."

Having a Strategy

Another important aspect of your marketing strategy is timing – planning when you'd like the buzz to peak to benefit a major event such as your program's broadcast premiere.

When Ward finished production on "Shelter Dogs" one year before its scheduled HBO broadcast, she knew her controversial documentary could take off like a thoroughbred on Derby day. But she needed to hold back and pace the buzz build-up so it



Debra Zimmerman, executive director of Women Make Movies.



Suzanne Neidlander's historical documentary beat out 150 other films for a coveted place in the opening of the Clinton Presidential Library last November.

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SUZANNE NEIDLANDER

peaked exactly the day before national broadcast to attract the largest possible TV audience. Her marketing plan included a timeline to participate in certain festivals and talk with certain types of publications. To build an audience, she had visitors to the film's Web site type in their e-mail addresses. Her funders, as well as members of her advisory board of animal rescue and shelter experts, provided e-mail lists of staffs and supporters, all of whom were alerted to news about the film as the controversy around the practices of her main character, Sue Sternberg, boiled on Web blogs, discussion boards and in the media.

Because Web visitors and organizations provided e-mail addresses, Wade had "per-

mission" to regularly contact them. Her e-mails weren't considered spam. She then monitored Web traffic to determine where the buzz came from and what people were saying, and she subscribed to Google Alerts to track Web site hits about her film's topic. All that information helped her tailor her pitch to specific audiences. Her one-year awareness-generation campaign resulted in a database of 250,000 people who essentially had given Wade permission to offer them DVDs six months after the documentary aired.

"Now, as a filmmaker, I am thinking on the outset about audience and marketing," she said. "I see myself as a small-business owner and not as a lone artist."

Good marketing is as important as a good story. University film schools are paying more attention to making sure students know how to market as well as how to shoot and edit. Sandra Dickson, Ph.D., co-director of the University of Florida's Documentary Institute and co-producer of the film "Negroes With Guns," which airs on Independent Lens Feb. 7, advises students not to expect film festivals to do all the promoting.

"Not all film festivals have the same attention to detail," Dickson said. "They are run by well-meaning, hard-working film aficionados who have other jobs. So you need to do some of the work of calling attention to your film."

Filmmaker Cadigan is a former public relations professional, so she knows the value of developing relationships with audiences. While film festivals market to film fans, she spends her energy connecting with special interests groups in every city where "People Say I'm Crazy" screens to help fill festival theater seats with people interested in her film's topic. Cadigan scours directories and the Web for every local professional, religious, charitable, academic and research group with an interest in mental illness and suicide, clicking on "related links" to find associated groups.

"I always think how can I rally as many people to do as much as possible without spending a penny," Cadigan said. "The most important thing is to find allies and let ally organizations do your PR for you. One way to get those organizations to support your film is to customize what you say to them by knowing specifically why their organization would love your film."

Knowing What Sells

Most filmmakers aren't PR pros and should hire a publicity expert, but not until their production is finished, recommends Linda Brown-Salomone, president of Indie PR in Los Angeles. "Put every dollar you can on the screen and make the best movie you can make," she said.

Some PR pros will risk getting paid on the back-end or charge a reduced fee if they believe your film or radio program is a winner. Pros have relationships with reporters and know how to create controversy that gets ink. When Julie Davis' feature film "Amy's Orgasm" was accepted to the 2001 Santa Barbara Film Festival, some daytime

radio shows were reluctant to talk about the “O” word. Brown reacted by contacting *New York Post* columnist Paula Frolick, who headlined her “Page 6” column “Is it ever too early for an orgasm in Santa Barbara?” That got the California community talking. College students flocked to the festival forcing organizers to add a third screening of Davis’ film. “Amy’s Orgasm” won the Audience Appreciation Award, and Davis landed a video deal that paid back investors and left her enough money for her next film.

Although controversy has proven to sell tickets, most gimmicks like hats, T-shirts and buttons usually don’t. Guerilla marketing must-haves include:

- a plan to attract specific audience
- a crisp one-sentence description of your project
- a single, compelling image created by a professional photographer
- digital, electronic or paper news kits with professionally shot images
- a Web site that collects visitor information
- a database of special interest groups e-mail addresses
- collateral such as postcards and business cards

Above all, never sacrifice quality. Cheap or sloppy materials make a lasting bad impression. Expect to budget between \$2,000 and \$10,000 for guerilla marketing.

Still, of all great guerilla marketing tools, nothing sells better than your own passion and personal relationships with audiences. “Good networking and having passion doesn’t cost a dime,” said Suzanne Neidlander, whose historical documentary “Miss Lil’s Camp” about anti-segregationist Lillian Smith beat out 150 other films for a coveted place in the opening of the Clinton Presidential Library last November. “You can’t be afraid of closed doors or rejection,” Neidlander said. “You create your own good luck and your opportunities.”

And always carrying a pocketful of business cards with your Web site address helps, too. 📞

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