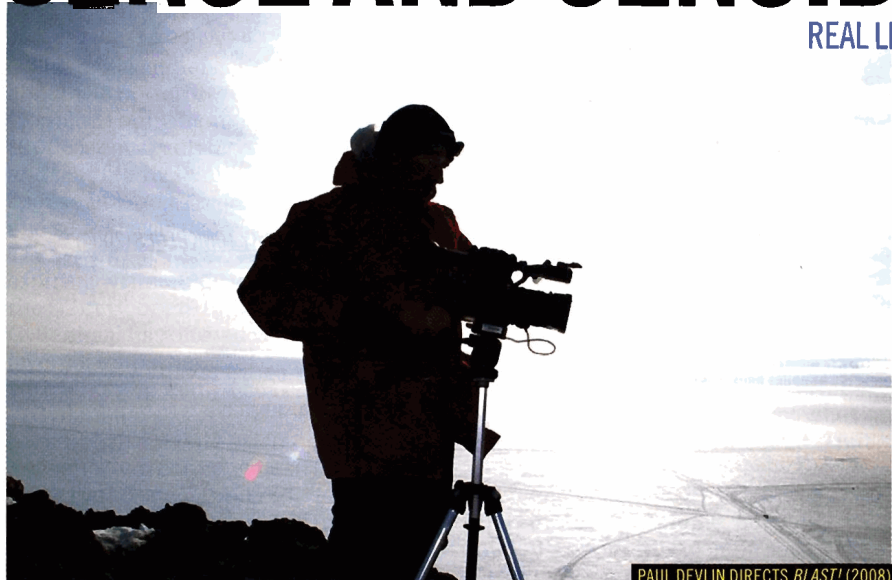


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SENSE AND SENSIBILITY

REAL LESSONS IN INDEPENDENT DISTRIBUTION

PAUL DEVLIN DIRECTS *BLAST!* (2008)

Shot in just one week with an estimated budget of \$15,000, the surprise hit of 2009 was *Paranormal Activity*, a.k.a. the little horror film that could. Picked up by Paramount in 2008, *Paranormal Activity* was distributed in conjunction with an aggressive viral marketing strategy, one that saw the film earn \$7.9 million in one weekend at 160 theaters.

The film's rollout was unconventional, opening via midnight screenings in 13 different college towns. Fueled by positive reviews, tweets, blog posts and word of mouth, this simple horror tale—with little gore and zero stars—captured the imagination of its audience.

Following this limited success, the studio asked its core audience to “demand” screenings of the movie in their cities through a Website called Eventful.com. The more people who demanded it, the more likely Paramount would roll the film out to that particular city.

As interest in the film grew, Paramount tweaked the distribution wider and wider, eventually going head to head with Sony Screen Gems' *The Stepfather* and Lionsgate's *Saw VI*. But the competition was no match. As of press time, the film had earned more than \$150 million worldwide.

Viral campaigns are nothing new, especially when compared to the one that started it all, *The Blair Witch Project*. Nor are they the perfect metric for measuring box office performance. However, with the use of social networking, mobile media and the Internet, a moviemaker's distribution strategy is becoming more critical, cost-effective and potent. While the chances of re-creating a sensation like *Paranormal Activity* or *The Blair Witch Project* are low, the lessons learned from their marketing and distribution techniques can be invaluable.

With that in mind, here are some real distribution stories from some of today's most successful independents.

“YOU'RE DEAD IN THE WATER IF YOU'RE WAITING FOR SOMEONE ELSE TO COME ALONG AND GIVE YOU THAT EXTRA PUSH.”

1. KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE.

For five-time Emmy winner and documentary moviemaker Paul Devlin, the distribution method for *BLAST!* began with an understanding of his unique audience. The film depicts the efforts of Paul's brother, Mark Devlin, and a group of astrophysicists aiming to launch a revolutionary new telescope into the atmosphere for the purpose of tracing how galaxies are formed. Heavy on the science side, the film sold with the BBC, Discovery Canada and

companies in Sweden and Finland, but had a difficult time securing any kind of distribution deal in the U.S.

“I think that science is an obstacle for some,” says Devlin. “One reason is that scientists seem to be stoic. When they go through catastrophic failure, you can feel it, but they're not expressing it in emotional outbursts. The stakes are not life and death, which is often what programmers and festivals are seeking.

“There is an anti-intellectual streak,” Devlin continues, “especially with the gatekeepers who don't trust the intelligence of their audience. When they hear the word ‘science,’ they sort of switch off.”

To reach his core audience, Devlin focused on specific universities, schools, astronomy departments and science publications throughout the country. He also employed a fan-based production company called ArtistShare, a group primarily known for helping fund musicians' work, to get core participants involved in the creative process of his film.

All the efforts paid off as *BLAST!* premiered at the Hot Docs Canadian International Documentary Festival and received positive reviews in the *New York Times* and *Variety*. More importantly, it found itself on NPR's “Science Friday,” which reaches more than 1.5 million listeners. “Once we got around the gatekeepers and started doing things ourselves, we realized there is a big market for this type of

film,” says Devlin. “Intelligent people really want to see this stuff! And they started coming to us.”

Shortly after appearing on NPR, Mark Devlin was asked to appear on “The Colbert Report,” exposing the film to another 1.5 million viewers. “I think filmmakers have to find their audiences any way possible,” concludes Devlin. “There are a lot more tools out there on the Internet, like social networking sites, that are allowing filmmakers to find their target audiences.”

2. UNDERSTAND THE BUSINESS.

You probably recognize actor Jaime Gomez from his work in films like *Clear and Present Danger* and *Training Day*, or from the long-running series, "Nash Bridges." But in 2005, Gomez turned from actor to multi-faceted moviemaker, writing, directing and producing *In the Blink of an Eye*, about a man at a crossroads after being released from prison.

The film was made for very little money, shot in 23 different locations around the world and screened for many of Hollywood's elite. "I knew going in, with the people we had involved, we were going to make a good film with a great story," says Gomez. "But I wasn't savvy enough to have investors sharing the risk and having a clear-cut goal of what we were going to do with it when we were done."

When the film was complete, Gomez opted for online distribution through a company called Cinsay.com. With the distribution deal intact, *In the Blink of an Eye* was to be released online and made available to millions of iPhones worldwide. But there were many setbacks, including problems with the software, cell phone technology and infrastructure, and no delivery system to support any of it. "The technology caught up to us and we caught up to them," says Gomez.

Technology mishaps aside, Gomez eventually learned the importance of an effective business strategy for distribution—having a clear goal of what you're working toward, who you're trying to sell to and a full understanding of the financial details.

"You have to have enough money at the end of making your film to really have a promotional package to be able to do the festival routes, to be able to do the screenings, to be able to invite the press," urges Gomez. "A lot of films get to the end and run out of money. But you're dead in the water if you're waiting for someone else to come along and give you that extra push. It's where a lot of films are lost—at that last moment before they're really born."

3. MAKE ARTISTIC DECISIONS.

Once you decide on a distribution strategy for your film, certain artistic or aesthetic decisions must be made along the way. For *Stingray Sam*, director Cory McAbee made the decision to distribute via high-definition downloads for computers and smaller

devices like iPods and cell phones

Narrated by David Hyde Pierce, *Stingray Sam* is a space-western-musical about two convicts trying to earn their freedom by rescuing a young girl. It's broken into six serialized parts, each connected by music.

"There were all types of artistic decisions," says McAbee. "First, there was the writing and how to write something that would be enjoyable on screens of any size. Then, how to make it episodic—so it could be broken down and downloaded into small segments—but at the same time work as a full, feature-length film. Another thing was the density of information—something I wanted to keep in mind for someone who was watching it on a small device in transit."

McAbee applied many of the lessons he learned on *Reno*, his short film that was commissioned by the Sundance Institute and mobile phone trade

PLUS

DISTRIBUTION BREAKDOWN

WHAT'S WRONG WITH TRADITIONAL FORMS OF FILM DISTRIBUTION?

"THE FILMMAKER IS INTERESTED IN [HIS OR HER] FILM, THE DISTRIBUTOR IS INTERESTED IN BUILDING A CATALOG. THOSE INTERESTS ARE IN CONFLICT AT TIMES. WHEN YOU COMBINE THOSE THINGS WITH DISTRIBUTORS BEING TOO EXPENSIVE YOU START TO WONDER WHY ANYONE WOULD SIGN WITH ONE."

—PAUL DEVLIN, *BLAST!*

"YOU HAVE SOMEONE WHO COMES AND OFFERS TO REPRESENT YOUR FILM; THEY TAKE 20 PERCENT OFF THE TOP. YOU HAVE YOUR INVESTORS THAT YOU HAVE TO PAY BACK AND EVERY PENNY GOES TO THEM. MEANWHILE, YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT'S HAPPENING IN EUROPE, AUSTRALIA AND THE MIDDLE EAST. AS AN INDEPENDENT FILMMAKER, YOU DON'T HAVE THE RESOURCES TO TRACK THE LAWYERS AND ACCOUNTANTS OR WHERE THE MONEY IS GOING."

—JAIME GOMEZ, *IN THE BLINK OF AN EYE*

"A FILM WILL BE JUDGED ON THE FIRST WEEKEND BOX OFFICE, NOT ITS OWN MERIT. THE OPENING WEEKEND BOX OFFICE CAN ONLY BE PROFITABLE WITH AN ADVERTISING CAMPAIGN, SO YOU'RE UP AGAINST PEOPLE WHO HAVE TONS OF MONEY TO BUY BILLBOARDS. FILMS ARE NOT REALLY GIVEN A CHANCE TO DEVELOP AN AUDIENCE ANYMORE. AS A RESULT, THEY DISAPPEAR LEFT AND RIGHT."

—CORY MCABEE, *STINGRAY SAM*

"DISTRIBUTION HASN'T CAUGHT UP TO WHAT'S GOING ON. THERE IS SO MUCH OUT THERE FROM CABLE TO THE INTERNET, THE AVERAGE PERSON NEVER HAS A SHORTAGE OF SOMETHING NEW TO WATCH. YOU CAN'T LOOK AT DISTRIBUTION IN A PASSIVE WAY ANYMORE."

—VALERIE WEISS, *LOSING CONTROL*

"[DISTRIBUTORS HAVE] BECOME VERY MONOLITHIC AND COMMERCIALLY-DRIVEN. FOR MANY INDEPENDENT FILMMAKERS, IT SIMPLY GOT HARDER AND HARDER TO GET DISTRIBUTION, EVEN FOR EXTRAORDINARY FILMS. AND THERE'S A LOT OF FEAR BEHIND IT, FROM PRESENTERS TO DISTRIBUTORS, AS TO HOW MUCH MONEY THE FILM IS GOING TO MAKE. ULTIMATELY, IT APPEALS TO THE MASS MARKET RATHER THAN THE MASS MINORITY." —SALLY POTTER, *RAGE*

association GSM for mobile devices.

"When people make things for small screens, they just lean on close-ups and that is not necessary. You don't have to make things black and white. There are other ways of going about it and



CORY MCABEE SHOOTS *STINGRAY SAM* (2009)

achieving a nice looking piece on the small screen."

While *Stingray Sam* is available for download on small devices and on DVD, McAbee warns: "The mobile phone distribution system is not really in a position to handle film yet. There is no pay structure set up. You can't get any information on how things are being distributed."

4. PROMOTE EARLY AND OFTEN.

Director Valerie Weiss recently wrapped her first week of shooting on *Losing Control*, a quirky romantic comedy about a young Bridget Jones-like scientist who conducts a controlled experiment to find proof that her boyfriend is "the one." But unlike many moviemakers who wait until post-production to think through distribution efforts, Weiss is already aggressively pushing her film.

"With *Losing Control*, we wanted people to know about the film before we ever shot it," says Weiss. As the film enters its second week of shooting, it has already been on the cover of the *L.A. Times' Brand X Magazine*, is slated to be on NPR's "Science Friday" and there are ties with the *Wall Street Journal* and *Newsweek* to do future promotions. All are part of the team's ongoing efforts to make as many people aware of the film as possible.

"You have to take as much care in getting it out there as you did in the making of the movie," says Weiss. "You have to think of distribution from the time you're writing your screenplay. Think of something that is unique and something that people are going to want to pay to see."

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5. LEVERAGE NEW TECHNOLOGY.

After experiencing the power and immediacy of the Internet through her own Website and blog, Sally Potter chose to make a movie about the world of fashion and appearances as told through the eyes of a young blogger. Starring Judi Dench and Jude Law, *Rage* was shot as if captured entirely via cell phone, using technology that could be utilized by anyone with a mobile device and a laptop.

"The cell phone has completely become a central part of all cultures now," says Potter. "That little thing in your pocket, which allows you to communicate with the rest of the world, has changed how people see things, how they feel about communication and the possibilities of direct access to information." As it correlates with the film, "I became very interested in the visual angles, the way the camera moves and the way people frame themselves or their friends. So I



SALLY POTTER BREAKS NEW GROUND WITH *RAGE* (2009).

thought it would be interesting to take that and push that aesthetic."

The film transpires over seven days and consists of seven different segments, all of which were distributed online through Babelgum.com.

Shot primarily on green screen with very few special effects and without a large budget or crew, *Rage* exemplifies what Potter calls "naked cinema," where there is very little waste and the form is simply laid bare.

Most importantly, from the film's inception, the intent was to explore new technology and to distribute it in a variety of different formats from mobile to theatrical, online to DVD. "I

hoped that it would always be available in different sizes and forms," says Potter. "That way, people could choose how they came into the film, which portal and which doorway."

Suffice it to say, whether you're working on the next *Paranormal Activity* or not, the decisions you make before, during and after production are critical to the success of your project. Especially when it comes to distribution, an understanding of your audience, the business, the art, the promotion and the technology involved can make all the difference between profit and loss.

As the DIY model gradually replaces the traditional forms of distribution, more and more moviemakers are experimenting with new media and methods to get their films into the public eye. Concludes Gomez, "If you set out to make a great film and Paramount happens to pick it up, you still might not see a penny. And you might not be able to get your next movie made because the overhead costs are so high. So you have to use every angle. Any way you can possibly get your film out there is valid." MM

"WHEN PEOPLE MAKE THINGS FOR SMALL SCREENS THEY JUST LEAN ON CLOSE-UPS AND THAT IS NOT NECESSARY."

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