Film festivals: A holistic communication tool for the film industry

Maria Pilar Martínez-Ruiz1*, Ana Isabel Jiménez-Zarco2 and Agustín Álvarez-Herranz3

1Department of Marketing, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Castilla-La Mancha, Spain.
2Faculty of Economics, Open University of Catalonia, Spain.
3Department of Econometrics, Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, University of Castilla-La Mancha, Spain.

Accepted 10 December, 2010

This research proposed a conceptual framework in which film festivals represent a holistic communication tool employed by the film industry. From this perspective, film festivals require careful advance planning pertaining to both general financial outcomes and specific objectives for separate target audiences. This research offered a novel approach to investigations of film festivals. Therefore, it began with a review of pertinent topics analyzed by previous research into film festivals. It next identified target audiences and investigated how film festivals might provide a holistic communication tool for achieving different marketing objectives, such as image creation, communication, and distribution. After examining the benefits to these different target audiences, this study drew interesting conclusions with respect to the relevance of film festivals as a key communication tool.

Key words: Film festivals, holistic communication tool.

INTRODUCTION

Festivals are complex phenomena, with individual value and cultural identities that provide essential cultural attractions by offering access to the arts, increasing the amount of culture available, strengthening a community's identity, and enhancing consumer welfare (Lee et al., 2004). In this sense, festivals are more than an accumulation of art forms but rather entail an active cultural process that remains in constant flux and without any definitive institutional structure (Devesa, 2004). Devesa et al. (2006) argue that merged individual and group experiences therefore grant festivals their own particular identities as cultural manifestations. Furthermore, festivals have financial implications, both for their organizers and for the communities or regions that host them (Lee et al., 2008). Accordingly, from a broader perspective, festivals represent activities with multiple and varied economic, social, and cultural implications.

Several studies have attempted to address their contributions to the economic and cultural development of the site where they take place. For example, Herrero (2002, 2004); Perles (2006); Sacco and Viganó (2006) have considered their impact on tourism industry, often by investigating how the development of a specific type of cultural festival, such as a film festival, influences groups that specialize in offering tourist services, as well as its attractiveness for tourists. When research regards film festivals as closely related to the tourism industry, it traditionally assumes festivals serve as mechanisms to attract visitors and increase economic incomes in areas such as tourism-related services, travel, accommodation, restaurants, and retail, all of which benefit from the event (Litvin and Fetter, 2006; Richards, 2001). It thus should not be surprising that since the 1970s, many European countries have promoted new development strategies that focus on exploiting culture, tourism, and cultural industries to generate economic, social, and urban value (Sacco and Viganó, 2006).

In turn, the number of festivals has grown spectacularly in recent years. From a demand perspective, the main reason for such growth is likely increasing levels of income, education, and leisure time for consumers, which increase consumption of cultural offerings (Collin-Lachaud and Duyck, 2002). From a supply perspective,
the underlying reasons for growth are multifaceted. First, festivals can help compensate for the gap between revenues and expenses for performing arts providers, which requires constant and increasing public sector support—the so-called costs or Baumol’s disease (Baumol and Bowen, 1966). Second, they avoid cultural stagnation, which is often inherent to permanent cultural institutions.

Third, festivals have enjoyed increasing public and private support in recent years (Devesa et al., 2006).

Despite the contributions of prior studies, we note that few works investigate the role of a festival as a holistic communication tool that a cultural industry uses to generate relevant effects among target audiences. This usage seems especially relevant for film festivals, considering the many communication tools associated with a film festival, as well their widely varied target audiences (Figure 1).

Therefore, it would be logical to conduct joint management of the diverse communication tools involved in a film festival, with the goal of achieving general coherence across different target audiences to create an image that also aligns with the location of the event. Therefore, the objectives of each communication tool should accord with the objectives of other tools, as well as with the pursuit of the overall goal of the festival (Figure 1).

Moreover, the awesome growth in the number of film festivals (Gaines, 2008b; Lois and de Valck, 2010) reveals some of the diverse benefits they offer for different target audiences, including image benefits, effective communication, and efficient distribution (Blattberg and Neslin, 1990; Lee et al., 2008; Rothschild and Gaidis, 1981).

Although this proliferation gets expressed differently throughout the world—for example, mega-budget international film festivals in Asia and the Middle East versus a sprawling number of micro-festivals centered on increasing specialized topics in Western countries (Lois and de Valck, 2010)—the consistent factor is the importance of film festivals for the development of general marketing and management strategies by the film industry (Cardinal and Lapierre, 2005).

Thus, it becomes necessary to design, implement, and promote a holistic communication strategy. Considering the relative lack of prior research on this topic, along with the relevance and proliferation of film festivals, we aim to determine some managerial implications of an assessment of film festivals as holistic communication tools used by the film industry. Therefore, we structure our work as follows: First, we identify and explore different target audiences of film festivals. Second, from a marketing perspective, we investigate how film festivals can be and are used as holistic communication tools. Third, we explore their main marketing benefits in relation to the previously identified target audiences. Fourth and finally, we outline our main findings and conclusions.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Film festivals’ target audiences

Film festivals are typically annual events, defined by the presentation of films in at least one movie theater or screening venue. They can incorporate major international releases or those made outside a country's established film industry, depending on their focus. This focus might be a specific genre (e.g., documentary) or subject (e.g., women's film), though most film festivals also feature other cultural events, such as filmmaker tributes, industry seminars, and award presentations (Filmfestivals.com, 2008). Thus, beyond the considerable publicity they bring to a destination—which in turn appeals more to visitors—festivals offer significant marketing opportunities for the city and the film industry. This reason probably explains why film festivals have become important and inherent to the film industry's marketing strategy.

However, to organize such an event, a high investment of time and resources is required, so managers look to increase the performance outcomes of film festivals, especially with regard to their potential as powerful, integrated marketing and management communications tools. This effort is complex, because to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of film festivals as tools for marketing communication, managers must: (1) identify the target audiences to whom these events appeal and (2) understand what motivations lead these audiences to participate. With such understanding, the film industry can design festival strategies that satisfy different audiences to whom they are directed (Chang, 2005; Lee et al., 2004). In particular, film festivals play to: (1) film professionals, such as directors, producers, and distributors; (2) a growing audience of moviegoers, aficionados, and other potential film viewers; and (3) public partners. Each group responds to different motives (Lee et al., 2004), so the marketing performance of major film festivals tends to be measured in relation to three main stakeholders (Secor Consulting, 2004):

1. Film professionals: For filmmakers and other industry members (e.g., directors, screenwriters, producers, distributors, broadcasters, performers), festivals may be the only way to show art films as their makers intended, that is, on big screens (Gaines, 2008a).

2. Public and private partners: Agencies support festivals with grants, investments, or sponsorships and demand some form of return.

3. General public: The broad category of all festival-goers includes various segments (e.g., youth, cultural communities).

The motivation embraced by the first two segments is professional. By attending the festival, they can establish contacts or obtain financing for the development of future projects. From this professional standpoint, festivals
seemingly have evolved toward communities that support not only business relations but also social relations, which in turn increase the value of the festival offerings (Finney, 2008). The motivations of the general public are more ample and diverse; Lee et al. (2004) offer an excellent review of studies that explore these motivations (referring to end consumers). In general, socialization, family togetherness, excitement/uniqueness, escape, event novelty, and curiosity represent the most common motivations.

To satisfy these different audiences, the film industry can exploit the benefits of film festivals as integrated communication tools. By satisfying the different objectives of the three target audiences, they then might improve the performance obtained by the film industry (Lee et al., 2008). Therefore, we next identify and describe the different marketing communication profiles that film festivals might adopt.

A holistic communication tool

From a marketing and management perspective, film festivals provide holistic communication tools, which blend advertising, personal selling, sales promotion, publicity, and viral marketing tools. Through these tactics, festivals enhance image creation, communication, and distribution, as performed by different agents involved in the film industry. Certainly film festivals involve different forms of paid, impersonal communication about the films and their related ideas in major media such as newspapers, magazines, billboard posters, television, radio, and theaters. These advertising efforts are intended to persuade and inform diverse target audiences involved in the film industry. Within the personal selling communication category, we include oral communications with potential film buyers (e.g., distributors), because making a sale is a common goal for participants in film festivals. Such personal selling may focus initially on developing a relationship with a potential buyer, but ultimately, it involves an attempt to close the sale of a film.

Film festivals provide many sales promotion incentives (e.g., special bonus to see certain films, special packages, discounts) to different target audiences (e.g., distributors, moviegoers) to stimulate their demand for a film, a set of films, or a specific film genre or topic. Furthermore, any communication about a film festival in various media that does not require payment for the mention represents public relations. As part of the publicity for a film festival, it is often necessary to mention sponsorships received. Therefore, supporting a film festival by providing money or other resources that have value for the festival becomes part of the event’s publicity.

Finally, reviews, word of mouth, and counter-programming might help spread information about the
festival and its events (Gaines, 2008a; 2008b). Especially with the proliferation of the Internet, viral marketing provides a valuable method to encourage people to pass on messages related to the film festival to others, which creates the potential for exponential growth in exposure and influence. All of these elements must be managed jointly to achieve the overall goal.

Moreover, modern film professionals have a wide variety of ways to reach audiences, but Web-based methods appear particularly important, considering the extension of the Internet into people's everyday lives worldwide. Thus, the Internet might help film professionals design and implement communication tools, as well as obtain feedback from targets. Finally, film festivals can constitute either push or pull marketing. For example, through advertising, sales promotions, and publicity targeted directly to moviegoers, film festivals try to ensure that customers pull content to themselves, because they want to learn more about the promoted films. These pull-marketing actions often entail active communication about a highly visible film, which encourages customers to seek out the event as a means to address their needs. The most common methods for such pull marketing include media interviews, conferences, syndication of film festival content, and word of mouth (Harrison et al., 2003).

In contrast, film festivals can use advertising, sales promotions, publicity, and personal selling targeted toward film professionals to push films toward an audience that may or may not be aware of them. Such push marketing attempts to engage a target market through advertising on relevant Web sites, trade journals, or e-mail marketing, for example. The festival therefore focuses more on the features of the event to evoke a direct response from the targeted audience (Harrison et al., 2003).

**BENEFITS OF FILM FESTIVALS FOR FILM INDUSTRY TARGET AUDIENCES**

As integrated marketing and management communications tools, film festivals can offer diverse benefits to the various target audiences (Secor Consulting, 2004). By obtaining these benefits, the different receivers respond in ways that enable the festivals to increase their own efficiency and effectiveness, as well as the performance of the film industry. In relation to film professionals, film festivals provide an ideal platform on which film distributors interact with directors, screenwriters, and performers. Although most deal-making takes place outside festivals, filmmakers can meet and negotiate with screenwriters, performers, sales agents, or acquisition executives and discuss upcoming projects. Clearly film festivals provide a means for professional target audiences to catch up with other film professionals and generally increase their contact networks, which might be useful to them in the future.

Film festivals also might represent an alternative channel for distributors to make deals. Moreover, they provide film distributors with an opportunity to gain a first-mover advantage with regard to potential film deals, because they can observe films before making a purchase decision. Consequently, film distributors might enter into deals with other film professionals, after having evaluated pertinent information about the films or the film makers. Moreover, film festivals provide filmmakers with a wide variety of public relations, advertising, and promotions campaigns that they can target toward end consumers. For example, graphic design and merchandising are widely encouraged by film festivals.

Finally, film festivals improve the vitality of the film industry and enhance public partners’ images and relationships. In this sense, festivals help maximize the exposure of industry players to various films, and diverse target audiences receive additional information from festivals about the films they present. In Table 1, we summarize the main marketing benefits that film festivals provide to different film professionals.

The general public, including film aficionados and other potential film viewers, receive information from the communication media regarding the films showcased during the festival. Consequently, film festivals give them a reason to see the showcased films, particularly if they offer several utilitarian (monetary) and/or hedonistic (pleasurable) incentives for a specific period of time. Beyond offering special bonuses, discounts, or gifts, film festivals usually feature other cultural events, such as filmmaker tributes, industry seminars, galas, and award presentations during the event. In this sense, they constitute celebrations that can be promoted locally, regionally, and nationally. For moviegoers, film festivals are thus excellent opportunities to enjoy, understand, and appreciate a film movement that draws from various concepts (e.g., genres such as thrillers, comedy, documentary; subjects such as social, national, cultural) and has followers worldwide. These events serve as a point of differentiation that can help a film, a set of films, or a specific genre stand out in end consumers’ minds. Accordingly, in Table 2 we summarize the main marketing benefits of film festivals for moviegoers, film aficionados, and other potential viewers.

Finally, film festivals help validate the film industry, though the contribution of a particular festival to specific public objectives or to the film industry depends on the motivations of each segment presents, as well as the benefits that each festival offers them. For example, despite benefits provided to the general public, success at film festivals does not always carry over into box office sales. Therefore, most festivals receive significant public and private financial and media support (European Commission, 2007), beyond box office sales. Public partners aim to determine how to support film festivals and contribute to the vitality of the film industry and the host area, while also ensuring a diverse offering for the
Table 1. Main benefits of film festivals for film professionals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Firm department</th>
<th>Communication tool</th>
<th>End target</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sales and acquisitions</td>
<td>Sales promotions: Invitation to see a new film</td>
<td>Other film professionals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>General public: moviegoers, film aficionados, other potential film viewers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship marketing</td>
<td>Public relationships: Meetings, networking, and</td>
<td>Other film professionals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>relationship establishment</td>
<td>Public and private partners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales and acquisitions</td>
<td>Personal selling: Oral communications with</td>
<td>Other film professionals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>potential buyers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financing</td>
<td>Public relationships: New projects development</td>
<td>Other film professionals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Public and private partners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing communications</td>
<td>Advertising: Communication of the film offer</td>
<td>Other film professionals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>General public: Moviegoers, film aficionados, and other potential film viewers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Public and private partners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distribution and sales</td>
<td>Sales promotion: Maximize exposure for films in the</td>
<td>Other film professionals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>short-term</td>
<td>General public: Moviegoers, film aficionados, and other potential film viewers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Own elaboration, based on Secor Consulting (2004).

Table 2. Main marketing benefits of film festivals for general viewing public.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefit</th>
<th>Communication tool</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Information</td>
<td>Advertising</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sales promotion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Publicity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Viral marketing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Advertising</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sales promotion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Publicity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Viral marketing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incentives</td>
<td>Sales promotion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Viral marketing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Own elaboration, based on Secor Consulting (2004).

movie going public. In return, film festivals can enhance public partners’ images and relations, as described in Table 3.

STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FILM INDUSTRY

The multiple benefits offered by a film festival to the film industry have encouraged increasing numbers of film festivals. For example, a festival tends to attract more tourists to the host city, and accordingly, abundant research has tried to quantify the impact of festivals on financial income and tourist levels. Yet we must consider more than just the marketing of the city or place when considering the effects of festivals. For example, film festivals also might have positive communication effects on the different target audiences affiliated with the film industry.

The development of a film festival demands, from all
involved parties, a high investment of time and resources, and they tend to attain significant (often international) coverage, which suggests the inclusion of different public objectives. In this sense, using film festivals as a holistic communication tool is convenient: They offer a tool that, when promoted efficiently, provides companies in this sector the possibility of presenting products and services, facilitating distribution of those offerings, and obtaining financing to develop future projects, among other outcomes. However, their actual contribution to different involved parties, a high investment of time and resources, and they tend to attain significant (often international) coverage, which suggests the inclusion of different public objectives. In this sense, using film festivals as a holistic communication tool is convenient: They offer a tool that, when promoted efficiently, provides companies in this sector the possibility of presenting products and services, facilitating distribution of those offerings, and obtaining financing to develop future projects, among other outcomes. However, their actual contribution to different public objectives depends on the motivations of each interested segment, as well as the benefits that a festival offers them.

The motivations that prompt the general public to participate in a film festival distinguishes them clearly from industry professionals and public and private members. Industry professionals adopt economic motivations and look to festivals to provide opportunities to establish contact with other agents, as well as discover new business opportunities. The segment comprising end consumers or the general public instead looks for the fulfillment of their playful and novelty needs, so their motivations tend to be more social and hedonistic. These profiles suggest that managers should promote specific communicative abilities of festivals for each audience. That is, film festivals blend advertising, public relations, personal selling, and sales promotion tools; promotion using of one (or several) of these methods will help increase the benefits and the satisfaction that each target segment obtains.

For both film professionals and public and private members, managers should exploit all the communication dimensions that the festivals offer within an integrated marketing tool. For these audiences, film festivals should provide an ideal platform for establishing contacts, negotiating, and defining future projects, as well as identifying financing sources and opportunities. In other economic sectors, exhibitions, fairs, and samples offer a similar means to showcase products; for the film industry, festivals provide an alternate communication and distribution system that gives professionals an opportunity to view films before making purchase decisions, as well as a means to design and develop a wide variety of public relations, advertising, and promotions campaigns for end consumers.

In relation to the general public, festival managers must increase the impact of their film festival as an advertising, sales promotion, publicity, and viral marketing tool. By suggesting the possibility of exclusive viewings or price benefits to see certain films, these tactics offer both utilitarian (monetary) and hedonistic (pleasurable) incentives that permit filmgoers to satisfy various motives: socialization, family togetherness, excitement/uniqueness, escape, event novelty, or curiosity.

**Conclusion**

We note the importance of information and communication technologies, particularly the Internet, as foundations for a proper design, development, implementation, and performance of a holistic marketing and management communication strategy by film festivals. The Internet has facilitated the development of film festival planning; it also has increased the access of different target audiences to information about festivals. The continually increasing exploitation of online tools by marketing and management communication strategy makers can allow them to coordinate their different objectives across diverse communication tools, as well as achieve the overall goal, coherent with the desired image for the festival as a whole.

**REFERENCES**


Lois S, de Valck M (2010). Film Festivals/Film Festival Research: Thematic, Annotated Bibliography, 2d ed. Compiled for the Film Festival Research Network. Available at http://www1.uni-hamburg.de/Medien/berichte/Arbeiten/0091_08.html#space.


