

An American Film Market Experience

By JD Freedman

I just got home from a week at the American Film Market. It was a very empowering experience. One that I would highly recommend to anybody who has a film in development or dreams of getting there. It's the world's largest motion picture business event. Over 8,000 industry professionals from across the globe converge on Santa Monica for eight days of conferences, workshops, film-screenings, networking and above all sales.

I consider myself very fortunate on a number of levels. After years of trying I was finally able to option a script that I love and now have a film in development. Thanks to Carol Patton and the fact that I write for IMAGINE Magazine I had a press pass to the show. Most fortunate of all the investor's backing my film are putting together a financial war chest to fund a whole slate of film and TV projects and requested that while at AFM I find them other worthwhile projects to invest in, so I had a "mission".

I've been to many different Film and TV trade shows over the years but this was my first AFM. According to AFM's website "Participants come from more than eighty countries and include acquisition and development executives, agents, attorneys, directors, distributors, festival directors, financiers, film commissioners, producers, writers, and the world's press. More than \$3 billion in deals will be sealed — on completed films and those in every stage of development and production."

The website itself has a wealth of information and is definitely worth visiting, especially if you plan to attend a future market. Like a shopping mall AFM serves as a "central clearinghouse for all things film". For that reason the AFM has traditionally been a great place for filmmakers with a completed package (including script, budget, key players and talent attached) to shop a film around and try to presell the foreign distribution rights. In the past this would provide a cornerstone of financing for their films. With a large enough percentage of the total financing provided through presale of this type and another 20% (or more) guaranteed through their State's film incentive program, filmmakers would obtain "gap financing" through a bank and move forward with their production retaining the valuable US distribution rights to make their production a profitable endeavor. Unfortunately for a number of reasons that type of presale has largely "dried up".



top to bottom:
Every single balcony from top to bottom of the Loews Santa Monica Beach Resort Hotel was filled with Film Commission exhibits from around the world. An IMAGINE Photo.

Writer Scott Thompson pitches his script for BLACK DOG OF FATE at AFM's Pitch Conference to a distinguished panel and five hundred attendees. The film is in development by Paul Boghosian, HarborSide Films, Boston. An IMAGINE Photo.

For a new filmmaker, serves as a great crash course in understanding what's needed to help your film make the jump for concept to reality. There was a schedule of daily conferences that covered the full gamut of relevant topics from film financing, and developing a pitch for your film project, to sales and distribution. The two main take-aways I got from all the conferences I attended are:

- 1) The business is changing so quickly that even the experts don't know what to expect next.
- 2) As a result people are open to new ideas and on the lookout for innovation.

According to Hanny Patel, VP, Video Marketing, AT&T Entertainment Group, "There is a lot of opportunity out there now that wasn't there only 3-4 years ago."

It seems to all boil down to three main factors:

- 1) A great script - that can attract
- 2) Great talent (Director and Cast)
- 3) Access

That third aspect may be the most difficult. To move your film forward you need access to collaborators and decision makers that are the key to financing, distribution and other vital factors. They often find themselves overwhelmed with projects on a daily basis. Being at this market with a "mission" gave me the rare opportunity to see things from their perspective.

My first day there I was lucky enough to find a comfortable chair (a rare commodity in that busy central lounge area) and sat down with my laptop to review my schedule, but, never got to it. It was as if I had sat down in the magic chair. Everybody who sat next to me had a project to pitch and by the end of day I had a stack of business cards and proposals to review and more promised via email. They say the trick in life is to be able to "turn around fast enough to see yourself from the outside". That first day afforded me the opportunity to gain that valuable perspective. Sitting there and listening to one filmmaker after the other pitch their project and then reviewing what they handed out for support materials were very enlightening. It taught me that having...

- 1) A polished, well-practiced short pitch.
- 2) Great confidence and enthusiasm about the inherent value of your project.
- 3) A professional, visually appealing investment package with all the requisite elements.

...is all you really need to make a convincing presentation. Pretty simple. I didn't say easy. But not unattainable. If you can put in the due diligence to come up with that "Trifecta" then you have a decent shot at the winner's circle. But, remember to score a Trifecta each of those three has to be a winner and of the week full of pitches I heard there were only a few that rose to that level. Hopefully this has given you enough of a taste to attend a future AFM. After all you've got at least a full year to prepare.

I'm no expert... just lucky enough to attend but if you have any questions or a great project to pitch feel free to contact me at jd@jdfreedman.net.

For more on AFM visit www.americanfilmmarket.com.