

Inside Outreach

The Ins and Outs of MediaRights.org

by Christine Murray

Call it outreach, call it creative distribution, call it community partnering. It's all about getting your film out there in the world, reaching your audience, making an impact.

Finding people who will watch, advocate for, learn from, talk about, act on, and direct others to your work. I'm not talking about a big distribution deal with Artisan Entertainment or Docurama or The History Channel. I'm talking self-service, ground-up connections, the kind that former Speaker of the House Tip O'Neill referred to when he said "All politics is local." I'm talking the Teen Pregnancy Center on the corner, the Alliance for Human Rights in your neighborhood, the local chapter of PFLAG. I'm talking MediaRights.org.

Type those words into your Internet browser and you will be glad you did. MediaRights.org is a virtual (and virtually free) treasure trove of distribution information and outreach guidance. Designed largely for social-issue documentaries, MediaRights.org provides a step-by-step guide to designing and carrying out a grassroots distribution campaign. Launched two years ago by filmmakers Julia Pimsleur (INNOCENT UNTIL PROVEN GUILTY) and Nicole Betancourt (BEFORE YOU GO), the easy-to-use site is infinitely searchable and full of practical how-to information on a variety of pertinent subjects.

Becoming a member is free and requires merely registering online with MediaRights.org. This no-cost version gives filmmakers access to four searchable databases, case studies, work samples, online salons, and filmmaker-written articles on everything from cheap gear to how to land a grant for those vital but unglamorous needs—like conducting an outreach campaign. For a modest fee (\$125, with a \$10 discount for Film Arts' members), filmmakers get unlimited access to the Independent Producers' Outreach Toolkit, which includes a one-on-one consultation for up to two hours with Working Films' distribution guru Robert West, a hard-copy resource binder (developed in conjunction with AIVF and also available online) covering everything from "How to Put Together a Team" to "Using the Web Effectively," and—my favorite resource—an interactive budget worksheet that helps you strategize and cost-out the best grassroots campaign for your film.

"Documentary filmmakers are great about sharing information with one another," comments MediaRights.org's creative director Betancourt, "but [comprehensive information] is still hard to get at—you have to attend seminars, dig up relevant articles to read, meet with other filmmakers. And you have to know the right person who has had the right experience to help you with what you are struggling with at that moment. It's very time-consuming. Our Web site democratizes the process."

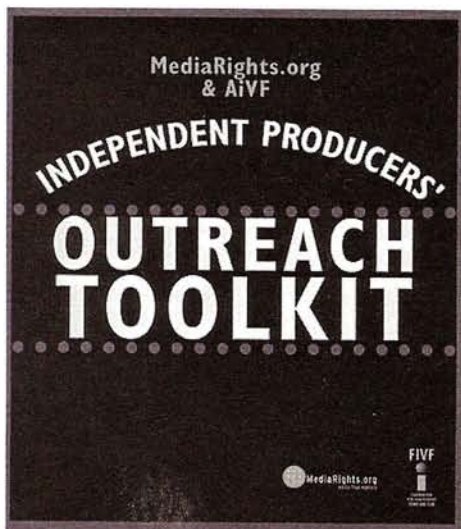
Over the years, I have seen many of my filmmaker friends wait until they were utterly exhausted, broke, and tapped of all their resources before they even started thinking about distribution. Yet mobilizing audiences and affecting change is often why we make our films in the first place. "It's never too early to be thinking about outreach," says Betancourt. "You can't overestimate how beneficial it is to partner with community organizations early on. If they feel connected to your work, they will help when the time comes to get it out there. One of the biggest mistakes I see filmmakers make is not

budgeting for these activities." MediaRights.org offers this kind of no-nonsense guidance in each aspect of its Web site. And that advice is not just that you *should* budget for an outreach campaign, but *how*. Many of us could crank out an Excel spreadsheet for production expenses in our sleep, but how do you figure out how much to spend on study guides? Or a Web ring?

Type the number \$3,000 into the bottom line of the Toolkit's interactive budget, and you'll find out instantly. The worksheet automatically breaks your bottom line figure into various expense categories: \$450 for VHS dupes, \$900 for a color brochure, \$300 for study guides, \$300 to set up a Web site, and so on. The worksheet is flexible and continually recalculates as you tailor the numbers for your project. It also peppers the cost estimates with practical money-saving tips like "Don't spend anything on hiring a cover designer, just send your tapes in a simple sleeve. Or, for a slightly better effect, create a simple black and white photocopy cover and slip it into the window jacket."

The Producers' Toolkit also features a series of interactive worksheets designed to keep filmmakers from falling into the "general audience" trap—as in, "My film will appeal to everyone; I don't need to be specific." The worksheets pose questions such as: "Are you trying to motivate people already working on your cause, or are you trying to reach people who know nothing about it? Are you interested in bringing together disparate groups working on the same issue? Are you hoping to influence lawmakers? Congress?" These questions are designed to help you determine the kind of impact you want to make and how to apply your time and money most effectively.

I first entered the MediaRights.org Web site curious to see how a filmmaker can find and approach the right nonprofit partner and what exactly the filmmaker can ask the nonprofit to do. In poking around, I found numerous answers to my questions in a variety of forms, from overall case histories of successful films to actual sample letters I could download for my own use. I could also use a bulletin board to post my query to other filmmakers. "I like referring to it when I



The Independent Producers' Outreach Toolkit offered by MediaRights.org can be purchased for \$115 by Film Arts' members.



Working Films' Robert West at this year's Sundance Film Festival with MediaRights.org executive director Julia Pimsleur (center) and creative director Nicole Betancourt.

get the feeling I'm reinventing the wheel on my own," writes Bill Kavanagh, producer and director of *BRICK BY BRICK: A CIVIL RIGHTS STORY*. "There's usually a story on the site somewhere that I can draw an 'A-ha' from."

In my opinion, the searchable databases, which are available with the free membership, are the cornerstone of MediaRights.org's effectiveness. Even for a project like mine, which is a stretch to classify as a "social-issue" documentary (it's a portrait of a 72-year-old Roller Derby Queen), the databases turned out to be extraordinarily helpful. At the time I visited MediaRights.org, I had two upcoming screenings at the Santa Barbara International Film Festival. I knew from past experience that I couldn't rely solely on a festival organization to help me get the word out. With no particular contacts on the Central Coast—unlike Chicago or Philadelphia, Santa Barbara isn't exactly a huge roller derby hotspot—my usual network of fans and nostalgia buffs was not that useful. Starting with some basics, I contacted media centers, film classes, and cinema societies; I hunted for skating rinks and skate shops in the local phone book. However, this search didn't get me very far. I needed to think more creatively. I got two ideas off the top of my head: 1) my subject is a feisty senior citizen extremely proud of her age, and 2) she was a pioneering female athlete in the 1950s. So, I went to the MediaRights.org nonprofit/activist database (containing some 850,000 organizations nationwide) and conducted a search under the keyword "Senior" in "Santa Barbara, CA" with an income range of "\$0 to Unlimited." Up popped a list of twelve organizations, groups such as Vistas Lifelong Learning and Senior Programs of Santa Barbara. Next, I searched under the category "Sports and Recreation" with the keyword "Woman" and got a list of 35 organizations. I read their descriptions, and found one whose mission is "to promote participation, recognition, and celebration of women in sports." The next day, I called them, and their activity director was so excited to hear about my film that she organized a group of 20 teenage girls to come to the Sunday screening. This entire process took me ten minutes from start to finish.

In this short time-frame, I had a printout of 50 organizations in one city, along with brief descriptions of their work, phone numbers, addresses, and contact people to call. MediaRights.org equipped me with everything I needed to set up discussion groups, additional screenings, Q&A's, workshops, and other events. Then it hit me: You could do this for *any city* your film played in. Just heard from a library in Cleveland that wants to screen your documentary on Tibetan Buddhism? Type in four words and out come 47 potential community partners, from the Zen Society of Cleveland to the Crosscurrents International Institute of Ohio.

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Filmmakers are not the only ones using these databases. Nonprofits, festival programmers, television broadcasters, and educators also log on to search for films about specific issues when they are programming around a certain cause. "We found seven films, all of which we are airing on DUTV Community Cultural Educational Television," remarks Program Director Deborah Rudman. Barbara Abrash from the Center for Media and History at New York University concurs, "It used to be so hard to find these documentaries. With MediaRights.org, I no longer have to track down distributors from all over the country to get their catalogs."

I did encounter a few bumps along the way, though I would characterize them as fairly minor. The site is so chock full of information that it can sometimes be slow-going and a bit difficult to navigate, unless you know exactly what you are looking for. Stick to the header boxes to steer your way through ("My Membership," "News,"

"Workshops," "On TV," "Festival," "Search"). Avoid using the unfiltered "quick search" function, as it can render overwhelming results. (For example, I searched for the film *BRICK BY BRICK* by its title and got 1,470 listings). Use the more focused databases for your searches, which you will find under the previously-mentioned "Search" header box. Also, the link to the Producers' Toolkit is not easy to spot on the home page. You need to scroll down and find the brief sentence that mentions a link to the free page, which then has a link to purchase the Toolkit. You can also find its logo displayed in the sidebar of the "Membership" and "Workshop" sections. Finally, as someone who already has a working knowledge of outreach and distribution, I found the Toolkit to be a bit basic. Even so, it felt good to have my instincts and experience reinforced by the information I found there. But like me, you may find that the free membership is all you really need.

The site contains other features as well: a limited distributor database (which lists titles each distributor carries), an online film festival, television broadcast schedules, and calls to action, to name just a few. But don't feel intimidated by all of the options. The key to a successful outreach campaign is pretty straightforward, according to Nicole Betancourt. "You just have to not stop working when the film is finished."

By providing filmmakers with an online crash course in self-distribution and easy-to-use tools for community organizing, MediaRights.org makes it much easier to follow her advice. "The most important thing to remember," Betancourt asserts, "is that people want to see your film. Just because broadcasters or programmers don't realize it, doesn't mean they're not out there. There is always an audience, guaranteed." □

Christine Murray is a documentary filmmaker and freelance writer. She wrote about Sandi Simcha DuBowski's TREMBLING BEFORE G-D in the February 2002 issue of Release Print. Her film DEMON OF THE DERBY: THE ANN CALVELLO STORY screens at the Roxie Cinema this month.