Completing the Package

Giant screen filmmakers are going to new lengths to consult end users and provide effective tools supporting their films—and everyone is reaping the benefits.

By Kelly Germain
In the sweltering July sun, the temperature hovers at 90 degrees Fahrenheit, but the high dew point raises the heat index to an uncomfortably sticky 110 degrees. Despite the oppressive heat, the researchers busily record their observations of the primates, documenting body movements, facial expressions and vocalizations, gathering as much data in their notebooks as possible. They put into words the actions they see take place before them, just as Jane Goodall did 40 years before them. These are not Jane’s successors, continuing her research of primates in Tanzania’s Gombe National Park but, rather, a group of worldwide museum educators documenting primates at the Como Zoo in St. Paul, Minnesota, as part of an eight-day institute designed to immerse them in the world of Jane Goodall. After attending the institute, these educators are set to become their organization’s program resource during the run of Jane Goodall’s Wild Chimpanzees at their giant screen theater.

Filmmakers are going to great lengths to provide not only better film product, but to provide theaters with the tools and resources to support their films as well. From conducting pre-release research on education and marketing materials to providing intensive training on a film’s subject matter, these tools help to ensure that the product presented is more attractive and more usable for the institutional audience, which, hopefully, means a more profitable film.
PRE-RELEASE INPUT FROM THE EXPERTS

In July 2000, the Maryland Science Center (MSC) held an education and marketing workshop for *The Human Body*, more than a year before the film was released. “We were looking to bring together a group of people from education and marketing who had the expertise to give us feedback on our tentative plans,” says workshop coordinator Jim O’Leary of MSC.

Participants were shown video segments of the film to get their reaction as potential audience members as to what they thought about the project and the direction the film was headed. The group was then divided into their respective specialties. The marketing group reviewed the early strategies for the film’s marketing materials, and the education group reviewed the preliminary educational materials to accompany the film. Explains O’Leary, “The purpose was to present these materials and get valuable input from people who are working in theaters around the world early enough in the process to change our plans if needed.”

Educational and marketing materials both underwent significant revisions based on information gathered at the workshop. “The feedback was valuable,” said O’Leary, “and had a definite impact on the project. Sometimes the materials provided [with a film] aren’t the kind of materials people need, messages are confusing, or they just aren’t useful. The benefit of these workshops is that they turn out better projects.”

Workshop participant Ann Dowdy, Tampa Museum of Science and Industry, observed that the input provided during the workshop was quite evident in the finished film and supporting educational and marketing materials. “We booked the film,” she says, “based on the finished product and the materials available to our theater.”

A longtime proponent of pre-release research, MacGillivray Freeman Films (MFF) has conducted focus groups prior to the release of many of its films. “For over 17 years we have hired education professionals to help us devise and develop our educational outreach plan, program and materials,” says Alice Cashbara of MFF.

MFF hosted its first marketing and education session for *Dolphins* and did so nearly two years before the film’s release in 2000. “As time passes,” explains Cashbara, “so do methods of teaching and tools for marketing. It was time to evaluate what we were providing theater exhibitors and get their input as to what was most valuable to them.”

Education professionals, museum directors, and marketing and education directors gathered for sessions and activities lead by Simone Bloom-Nathan of Media Education Consultants. Bloom-Nathan’s extensive experience with children’s programming at WGBH-Boston and national educational outreach projects was a perfect fit with MFF’s goal of gaining feedback and brainstorming new ideas to improve educational outreach. One outreach program developed for *Dolphins* as a result of the session was “Scientist on Tour,” which targeted underserved audiences by providing a scientist to museums for 1-2 days during the film’s run at their theater. The program will be offered again with *Coral Reef Adventure*.

“The meetings provided a framework and helped us shape strategies and plan our outreach for teachers, students and for the public,” Cashbara says. “They are our eyes and ears to teachers and to the public, their advice is invaluable. The session was so constructive that we have continued to host yearly seminars for theater clients where a broad range of subjects is discussed.”

TOTAL IMMERSION

Taking pre-release efforts a step further, the Science Museum of Minnesota (SMM) and Blue Mountain Film Association, both with the support of the U.S. National Science Foundation, offered intensive, multi-day symposiums before the release of their latest films. SMM held symposiums for *The Greatest Places* and Jane Goodall’s *Wild Chimpanzees*, and Blue Mountain Films for *Lost Worlds: Life in the*
Balance. Each symposium was designed to solicit input from those who would use the educational materials and outreach plans directly and to give the participants the tools to become the program resource when the film was shown at their theater.

According to Lee Schmitt, director of teacher programs at SMM, “The goal of the Greatest Places Leadership Institute was to pool our collective expertise—teachers, museum educators, presenters and SMM staff—to enhance the formal and informal educational impact of the film.”

Throughout the course of the 10-day Greatest Places institute, 22 teams—each consisting of one museum educator and one active classroom geography teacher—from cities throughout North America helped shape strategies for the use of the film’s themes in the classroom. The agenda included a preview of the film, numerous presentations from geography and education experts, field trips during which the participants could apply their newfound geography knowledge and ample time for brainstorming.

Participants created action plans for use in geography classrooms and also developed creative strategies for the film’s teacher guide, family activity guide, museum trunk, web site and teacher institutes.

The Greatest Places institute was considered successful on many fronts. “Of special importance is that for the first time, museum and classroom educator teams had the opportunity to contribute to the educational impact of a giant screen film, and at the same time design and plan creative, relevant curriculum and programs,” Schmitt says. “We have produced a cadre of dedicated educators, excited about this film, who have created a multitude of models for its use with students in the classroom and the general public in museums.”

Not only did the participants gain valuable knowledge from the institute, but the SMM staff did, too. Using what they had learned from the experience of coordinating the Greatest Places institute, as well as information from the post-institute surveys, SMM developed the Jane Goodall Educators Institute, held in July 2001.

Museum educators from North America and the United Kingdom converged in St. Paul for an eight-day immersion into Jane Goodall’s work and the upcoming giant screen film Jane Goodall’s Wild Chimpanzees. The agenda included sessions on the care and conservation of primates, the geography of East Africa, socio-biology, primate observation and the history of chimpanzee research, as well as the opportunity to review the film’s educational materials and web site. Field trips to the Como Zoo and the Lee and Rose Warner Nature Center provided the opportunity to practice wildlife observation firsthand, which participants discovered is harder than it looks.

Participants also spent valuable time with Elizabeth Vinson, the researcher whose work is featured in the film. During an evening barbecue at Schmitt’s home, Vinson shared stories of Gombe with a rapt audience inspired by tales of the chimpanzees they’d come to know on a first-name basis through the institute activities.
Working in groups based on their targeted audience segment, participants formulated and presented action plans that ran the gamut: floor demonstrations and activities, lobby décor, teacher and student workshops and camps, internships, zoo partnerships, traveling packages, lecture series and traveling exhibits.

By the end of the institute, educators were armed with the inspiration, knowledge, resources and an action plan to support and strengthen the connection between the film and institutional programs and exhibits.

Bringing together the right group of people to the institute was of utmost importance. “It’s crucial to have the people who will be doing the work in the institution attend,” says Schmitt. “Not museum directors, CEOs and vice presidents.”

“They [SMM] made it very clear that they didn’t want marketing people, they didn’t want CEOs. They didn’t want managers there. They wanted people who are on the front line and doing this stuff,” adds Franco Mariotti of Science North, which is building a traveling exhibit to accompany the film. “You have like-minded people from numerous institutions. So we were able to share at an equal level, and we gained a lot from each other as a result. It wasn’t me, an exhibit developer, talking to a CEO, who, frankly, I’d have very little in common with because we do different things.”

Adds Mike Day of SMM, “When the right team of people is brought together, it is incredible the motivation and experience that energizes the institute beyond what you had even imagined might come out of it.”

Blue Mountain Films developed a similar symposium for Lost Worlds: Life in the Balance. JoAnna Baldwin-Mallory, director of public programs for Lost Worlds and director of new ventures at Partners HealthCare System, designed the symposium and project educational plan. Partners’ mission includes providing public education in the biological sciences and has recently made the foray into serving that mission through giant screen film projects. “We drew a great deal of inspiration and help from Lee Schmitt based on his experience on Greatest Places,” explains Baldwin-Mallory. “The inspiration we drew from Greatest Places and the experience we gained from Lost Worlds will help us form further symposiums being mounted in support of giant screen films at Partners HealthCare System.”

The Lost Worlds symposium broadened earlier approaches and fostered multi-institutional programming by bringing together three-person teams from around the U.S and Canada, with each team consisting of a science center or natural history museum educator, a teacher from a local school, and a representative from a community organization. Each team was charged with the goal, says Baldwin-Mallory, “to think across institutions in their community to develop programs that would support biodiversity education when Lost Worlds: Life in the Balance came to their theater. We wanted to give these people a curriculum that would help them in their thinking, both in terms of giving them scientific background in all of the disciplines related to biodiversity, and also to give them a better idea of what other people were doing in other organizations across North America.

“We basically had two goals for the symposium,” she continues. “One goal was to help people think about bringing several institutions together to create new types of programs in their own communities that could educationally support the film. The other was to give us some guiding principles for the educational materials we would be developing.”

Hosted on-site in May 2000 at the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH), a Lost Worlds project partner, the week-long
symposium agenda included the opportunity to view film footage and speak with the film’s director, Bayley Silleck. Participants heard presentations by leading biodiversity and science education experts and took part in varied field trips, including one to New York’s Central Park to learn about sampling techniques, after which they returned to the AMNH labs to conduct microscopic examinations on the flora and fauna samples collected.

Participants also conferred with their colleagues for two full days to create their own action plans for implementing cross-institutional biodiversity education programs in their own communities.

In addition to giving them ideas for activities to bring back to their own institutions, “it was a lot of fun for people,” says Baldwin-Mallory. “Symposia can be a very top-down experience. Our goal was to create a rich educational program while also ensuring a participant-driven experience.”

The other goal of the symposium was to get participants’ input in developing an educational design for the activities and print materials as components of the project. “From the beginning,” says Baldwin-Mallory, “we queried people on what kind of materials they use and don’t use, what’s helpful and what’s not helpful. They were absolutely essential in the critique of the guide in both the formative stage and the final edited piece. We went into it with guiding principles derived from consulting with end users.”

Invitations were extended only to those who actually develop the programs at the institutions. “It was wonderful that the people who are on the ground doing education programs were the people invited,” Baldwin-Mallory says. “These people rarely have the opportunity, fully paid, to attend a convocation and have the luxury of five days to dig into a topic and talk to their peers around the country. It was a rich and varied experience for them.”

**BENEFITS TO THE PARTICIPANTS AND THEIR INSTITUTIONS**

From the museum educator to the institution to the film’s producer/distributor, such intensive prerelease efforts offer something for everyone. The list of benefits to the educator and symposium participant is a lengthy one. Foremost of those benefits may be the opportunity to build an extensive network of resources. “It certainly helped us a lot in making further contacts for further information for the exhibit,” says Mariotti of the Goodall institute. “We’ll use a lot of that in the exhibit, but we’ll also be using a lot of that in the Goodall camps-ins and programs we develop.”

“I found meeting the scientists who are doing the research the most valuable,” says Mike Levad of Philadelphia’s Franklin Institute and a participant in

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three symposiums. “You really get a sense of the passion these people have for their work and the ability they have to change our perceptions of ourselves and the world around us in fundamental ways.”

Jennifer Ernisse of Exploris agrees: “The most valuable was exposure to Elizabeth Vinson and the first-hand accounts of her work and the politics of being a chimpanzee researcher at Gombe in this day and age. It meant to what can seem far off and in the past, even though Dr. Goodall’s work is overwhelmingly famous. She brought immediacy and currency to the film content.”

However, the network of resources gained through an institute extends beyond the topic-related experts. Meeting people in similar positions at other institutions results in continued partnerships that extend beyond the run of the film. “One powerful outcome of the institutes,” observes Schmitt, “is the continued collaborative programs that result from educators working together.”

Adds Day, “The educator becomes part of an international team, an affinity group that supports the momentum of their work.”

Alex Patrick, British Film Institute and Science Museum London, participated in both the Goodall and Human Body institutes. Patrick extols the benefits of having access to colleagues she otherwise may not have the opportunity to meet: “One of the best things about it is being with people because you start bouncing ideas off each other. It gives you case histories to work from. It also means you get to validate your own ideas and makes you more confident in thinking about more ambitious and diverse things to do. Quite a lot of partnerships were built just from being there.”

The list of benefits to museums is rich as well. The museum now has a content expert and program resource. “The educators walk away with an array of finished goods,” says Day, “but more importantly, they walk away with a bundle of raw materials to create educational enhancement materials and programs of their own design that work best in their own setting.”

“Your institution sees you as a kind of expert,” says Patrick. “They’ll come to you and ask questions. Lots of people have been directed to me for information about the film and what we can do with it because I’ve been to the institute. I’m more useful, and the film is more useful.”

As a result of sending their educators to the institutes, museums also have the lead time to develop more comprehensive programs to accompany the film. Says Patrick, “Normally, we hear a film is coming just a few weeks before it arrives, and it doesn’t give you time to do anything. If you do these things far in advance of the film coming out, it gives you lots of time to plan and to start feeding information to everyone in your institution. It meant we could have a much more institution-wide approach to the subject.”

The result is a more attractive package for the museum and, ultimately, the public. Also, with educator input, the film delivers the educational content that drives school group attendance, and supporting educational materials are more valuable and more likely to be used.

“You can save time and money,” says Patrick, “by not producing something that isn’t going to be used by anybody. The more research you can do with people who will be using the materials before they are produced, the better. Something that looks really great but doesn’t directly benefit what’s going on in the classroom isn’t going to be used. Also, just because something is factual doesn’t make it educational. It’s beneficial to consult people from different backgrounds as well to make sure the materials are useful to as broad an audience as possible. The
The majority of educational materials are geared solely towards North American audiences, but there are subtle changes that can make the materials more globally relevant and useful."

"A consistent message in the distribution of Lost Worlds," says Baldwin-Mallory, "is that most museums are interested in not just the film, but also in what else you are able to deliver with the film to make it a more complete experience. The fact that we created an educational event that 11 institutions were able to participate in, and developed a very mature web site and educational materials, made it a more engaging project, a much more interesting project, and a much more usable project. Institutions are looking for this kind of comprehensive project. It only makes it more attractive to them."

**BENEFITS TO FILMMAKERS**

While the advantages to educators and museums may seem more obvious, the filmmaker also reaps benefits from offering a more complete package, some of which can affect the bottom line.

"The film producers/distributors," says Day, "get a venue that has more than a casual attachment to their work. The venue develops an emotional attachment that supercedes the seller/buyer relationship and becomes more of a partnership."

Cashara adds, "It is a win-win situation for everyone. Theaters benefit by acquiring programs and materials that are desirable and can be customized and easily implemented. And we are excited to see the learning of our films being extended beyond the theater environment."

"If they are open to this kind of input," says Baldwin-Mallory, "it can be of great service to filmmakers. For Lost Worlds, Bayley Silleck [the film's director] is very receptive to feedback about how the film is working and not working. If a filmmaker is open to thinking strategically and to listening and hearing what an educator or the general public has to say, it can only improve the film."

Of course, such intensive prerelease efforts cost money, and depending on the extent of those efforts, the amount can quickly add up. The symposiums for The Human Body, Dolphins, The Greatest Places, Jane Goodall's Wild Chimpanzees and Lost Worlds: Life in the Balance all were supported by the U.S. National Science Foundation.

As Cashara sees it, however, there's no alternative. "It does take some effort and expense to continually evaluate, but it is well worth it," she says. "This research is a cost of doing business—if you want to remain on the right track, you must continually listen to your customer. Our museum/theater clients know their market and what works—and they are keeping the pulse on our audience."

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