A huge white canvas of imagination often separates film programming and exhibits. How are museums programming their films? What strategies can we all use to narrow the gap between our films and educational programming?

BY JENNIFER ERNISSE
In conjunction with the film *The Greatest Places*, Exploris in Raleigh, North Carolina, installed an exhibit of Tibetan culture, one of the locations featured in the film. The exhibit includes forums on Buddhism, hands-on workshops about Tibetan culture and this 21-foot recycled bottle cap mandala by artist Bryant Holsenbeck.

**TWO.**

When we think about films and programs we often think in twos. Two separate buildings, two separate ideas, two parallel but never intersecting lines of resources and audiences. This article speaks to that gap in process—the gap in Giant screen films and Programming—as a call to action to think about our strategies to bring these schools of thought together for improved audience impact. Museums around the world combine their films with innovative programming to extend the experience for their visitors—just not as frequently as we can. This article will take you to those museums and give you a glimpse of what programming they implement with their films. In addition, we’ll explore a set of strategies for institutions to use as a way of progressively thinking in new ways about how films and programs can coincide in alliances that help visitors have a strong and memorable experience.
THE BACKDROP
When deciding on films at a museum, often the strategy is to combine the power of the content of the film with a traveling exhibition. We use our missions as a strategy, along with an eye for providing a coherent package to our audience. Programming, however, may not factor into this decision. In 2000 Exploris decided to conduct an informal survey of how programs work with films in the industry before our theater opening in November 2001. The responses were similar: there isn’t a tremendous amount of programming beyond cart programs or small demonstrations coinciding with a particular film. We often have previews for constituent groups and some teacher professional development. We use the films to leverage attendance in our theaters. However, the overall picture that Exploris received was clear—as an industry, we can grow and become experts at programs with films because we have only established the baseline of programming.

In the summer 2001 issue of The Big Frame, Bob Russell wrote in “Why are Giant Screen Films Educational?” that films were interactive in and of themselves. His points were that giant screen films are active, support different learning styles and are wonderful tools for schools and families. And they are. But, with programs, that learning can take the film content deeper, tailor it to specific learners and attract new audiences. It is one thing to show a film to educators to drive their attendance for their school; it closes the GAP to provide additional programming, resources, workshops and other innovative techniques to this audience.

BREAKING THE MOLD
Here are some examples of institutions and ideas that are already closing the GAP.

Fernbank Museum: They love a good martini and film in Atlanta, Georgia. The successful evolution of “Martinis and IMAX” offers up the adult market with an option to socialize, see a film, eat great food and otherwise be the Friday night hotspot. The event is free to museum members. “Martinis and IMAX” is not only a fun program, it is a program that develops a core audience—young singles and couples without children who will ultimately become family museum members.

Henry Ford Museum: Taking the school group program to a new level, the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn, Michigan, has elaborated on the film Shackleton’s Antarctic Adventure by creating a four-hour workshop on character development for 5th–9th graders. After seeing the film, students have the opportunity to participate in leadership and character development activities in a small classroom setting. Teachers are assisted by posters and pre- and post-
curriculum for further enhancement.

The Tech: Again, with audience development and local demographics in mind, the Tech Museum of Innovation in San Jose, California, sparked interest by showing *Mexico* during “Diez y Seis de Septiembre” (Mexican Independence Day) festivities in the month of September. *Mexico* is now a regular feature during that time period for several museums thanks to a perpetual leasing agreement through the distributor.

Family Guides: In light of museum programming, family film guides are a great way to extend the opportunity to talk about the film over dinner or in the car ride home. Family guides for films such as *The Greatest Places* and *Shackleton’s Antarctic Adventure* are valuable pieces of free material to give families as they leave the theater. Some also are available online. Providing additional resources for families to enhance and be involved in the education of their children is key to your institution being viewed as a strong resource for learning.

Educator Institutes: Leadership and educator institutes held in support of giant screen films enhance the educational experience theaters are able to provide film audiences [see the spring 2002 issue of *The Big Frame*, Vol. 19, No. 2 for an article on these institutes]. These institutes, some held as much as a year-and-half prior to the film debut, bring together formal educators, content experts, museum partners from science and technology centers and zoos, and external partnering organizations (e.g., Girl Scouts of America). Participants come out of the workshop with an action plan designed to develop innovative programs in conjunction with the film. The investment of time yields more than a collection of hands-on activities—it fosters relationships between institutions, reinforces long-term program planning and its advantages for a film, creates confidence about the film content, and provides a multitude of marketing and promotional resources. The benefits of having a long lead time for film program planning are incalculable. These projects also yield real products for the individual institutions beyond the action plan, including website content.

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The Film/Exhibit/Program Trilogy at Exploris: Exploris is currently showing *The Greatest Places*, and one of the featured places in the film is Tibet. In conjunction, we have an exhibit of Tibetan culture, portraits and artifacts currently on display. We opened with performances by Tibetan monks, host continuous forums on Tibetan Buddhism, have hands-on workshops on Tibetan culture and commissioned an art installation and residency of a 21-foot recycled bottle cap mandala. Exploris’ philosophy is to continue to enhance our films with external partners. For *Shackleton’s Antarctic Adventure*, we have

Students work with Tibetan monks and artists to create a Tibetan mandala at the Exploris exhibit. Combining films with innovative programming extends the learning experience for audiences.

PHOTO: BOB DIXON
PHOTOS: MICHAEL ZIRKLE
partnered with the North Carolina Maritime Museum for navigational tools, a climb-aboard whaling boat, and have created a special 900-square-foot open classroom called Shackleton’s Research Station which features everything from teamwork rowing to survival kits. For Jane Goodall’s Wild Chimpanzees, we’re planning a partnership with the North Carolina Zoo for a “chimp cam” on our web site.

STRATEGIES FOR BROADER IMPACT
When looking at the key elements of current innovative programming, there are four key strategies that seem to help create successful impact (defined by positive media, a reliable, receptive and return audience, booked programs, and memorability of experience). We are beginning to narrow the GAP in our process, and the following are strategies to continue with those efforts.

Strategy One: Community Partnerships. As illustrated with The Tech, know how your community demographics can benefit your institution’s programming and film selection.

Whether it’s an existing niche market for your institution or a market you’re trying to entice to the museum, understanding your community base and asking them to utilize your institution to highlight and teach about their culture helps you become the direct community resource museums are intended to be.

Strategy Two: Audience-Specific Programming. Audiences fall into two categories: the traditional audience that visits museums and audiences that we want to visit the museum. Exploring those categories further, you see programming at Fernbank for members and the young audience they want to gain as lifelong members of the museum. You see family guides dedicated to expanding the reach of your institution as visitors go home and discuss what memories they have had. You see school group programs expanding at Henry Ford to create a longer, immersive program specifically related to the film. The leverage of your institution’s success relies heavily on how the audience perceives you and your programming specific to their needs. The more programming is tailored to these individual audiences, the more they see your institution as “theirs.”

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Strategy Three: Institutional Interdependence. As a museum community, we can reach out to local, regional and national partners when planning innovative programming for films. At Exploris, it is part of our core programming strategy to partner with our local experts, regional museums, libraries, media and others who bring tremendous resources to the ultimate look and feel of our programs. In addition, hosting leadership and educator institutes continues to imbed partnership, networking and increased capabilities into our toolkit for planning.

Strategy Four: Integration with Programming/Exhibits. Helping define your niche in your community often boils down to the audience expectations and understanding of exactly who you are. As more museums become part of the tapestry in your local environment, the stronger the tie between films, programs and exhibits needs to become. Looking forward several years in your schedule helps this integration become more likely and aids museum teams in their program planning. At Exploris, this combination has worked tremendously well, even in the early stages of our theater opening.

NARROWING THE GAP

Recalling the ad campaign in recent years of The Gap Corporation, their print and television advertising began to rely heavily on “white space.” When doing so, the ads conjured up a sense of a blank canvas; instead of filling up space with their clothes and products, they showed people dancing or famous singers crooning The Gap jingle. This suggests that The Gap Corporation is invested in their audience’s imagination—each of us was to fill the white space with our own sense of style. Their hope is that your individual style is influenced by their current advertisements.

As an industry, we have the largest white space available—the giant screen. The canvas that we create for visitors to our museums is heavily influenced by the imaginings of our museum teams, especially our content experts in education. These are, in essence, the largest opportunity for our visitors to explore and immerse themselves in places far and wide.

Given strategies such as community partnerships, audience specific programming, institutional interdependence and integration between programming, films and exhibits, our outlook for inspiring the imaginations of our audiences is great. It will require us to think differently about our coalescence as a team, in process and in action, expand our resources further and further from our institutions to incorporate the creativity and content others bring, but ultimately can result in aligning and streamlining our message and impact on our community.

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