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**THE SEVEN DEADLY
SINS OF FILMMAKING
FOR PROFIT**

By Ted Chalmers for



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If you have already made your film then it is basically too late for you to gear it to market needs. That does not mean you can't sell it. But obviously, if you have not yet made your movie, you can use information about what the market is looking for, to help tailor your film to be more marketable and therefore more successful. In any case, low budget independent filmmaking can only go so far to accommodate the marketplace. But, anything you can do before locking your film will help.

The biggest factor in success these days for indie films is the same factor that drives Hollywood. That is, Star Talent. No one expects you to put a star in your film. But there are other factors that you can control.

While there will always be films that exceed everyone's expectations and break every rule, there are certain foundations that will make a film investment more likely to recoup and become profitable than others. I did not make these rules up, but rather, I have observed their effect in my years of distribution experience.

1. FORMAT

Shoot on FILM - Digital technologies such as DV and HiDef are enticing because they are inexpensive. But, ultimately the buyers are looking for features shot on film, at least 16MM. No matter how much you save with the new digital technology, you are risking much more by not being able to deliver a film quality product. This will change over time. But, for now it is too risky. Before you come to the conclusion that HD is so cost effective, please read the following I received from my Discussion List:

"24p HD is perceived as economical to producers used to the pure film process, because of the savings in intermediate stock and lab costs. Broadcasters have the opposite view. Many indie producers who are aiming for TV distribution find DV quite attractive, and shot correctly (lit well), it can be pretty, indeed.

The caveats with HD are many, due to the proliferation of international framing standards. There are many traps for the unwary. It is very easy to get into a world of trouble shooting 23.976p and trying to edit in 24p, for instance (yes, such nasty "gotchas" exist!). Those that observe and heed the dangers fare well shooting "d-cinema" and burning back to film. Post-production, dailies, and approval processes all benefit from operating within the digital environment. But it is crucial to know that "cheap" is not really on the menu for any quality production, regardless of the efficiency of the format. Careful planning and the willingness to spend what's necessary to ensure success is the best economy."

Finally, THE BLAIR WITCH phenomena was a marketing ploy that was backed by millions and millions of dollars of advertising making sure you heard about it. The fact is that if that film was not successful in making you believe it was scary, then you probably would not have gone to see it. But regardless of whether it was scary or not, people went to go see it because the marketing did its job. I have seen hundreds of films try to emulate this formula for a film and failed miserably. This kind of phenomenon occurs very rarely and it would be unwise (not impossible) for any filmmakers to think they can re-create it.

2. GENRE

We can't tell you what to make, but we can suggest you what is an easier sell. The hardest thing to sell is a "no name drama". Yet, consistently, this is what indie filmmakers produce over and over again. The market simply can not bear these products. With the exception of a few festival winners, these are next to impossible to sell. The next genre to stay away from is comedy. Any kind of comedy... romantic comedy, dark comedy, etc. Comedy is the kiss of death not only in foreign licensing but U.S. as well. The genres that do work include action, thrillers, sci-fi, horror, family, adventure and fantasy. Soft-Erotic used to work but has dried up with the rampant availability of hardcore productions.

Yeah, there are plenty of studio produced comedies that do well. But mostly here in the U.S.. Comedies, even comedies with huge stars, are not well received internationally because the humor simply does not translate into other cultures. But, a comedy with Julia Roberts or Jim Carrey are going to do well because of the stature of their box office appeal. They still don't do as well as SPIDERMAN, however.

3. CAST

While no one expects you to get a star. There are plenty of known actors that are eager to work for quality productions for the right fee. I would recommend that you look into getting at least one recognizable name actor for one of the smaller roles of the project. To get an idea of who these actors might be, look in the market issues for Cannes Market, AFM or MIFED, to see the kinds of names that are being offered at these shows. Another good source is to peruse the local video store and look for the straight-to-video titles and see which name actors are featured.

4. COLOR

Don't make black and white movies. I realize that in film school you get to see a lot of these classic old movies and there is sometimes the desire to pay homage to Welles or Hitchcock. But, a B/W film will simply not sell in the overseas market and most likely will be hard to sell in the U.S., as well.

The reason Black and White does not work is because most TV channels around the world refuse to program Black and White movies. Why? Because they get phone calls from their viewers complaining that something is wrong with the broadcast or their TVs. I am not joking! People pay a lot of money for color TVs around the world (far more than you or I) and they demand color programming. I have a great action film that is black and white starring a well known star and I cannot sell this film for the life of me, purely on the one fact that it is in Black and White. Even in territories where he is a huge star, they get all excited, but when they find out it's Black and White ... they just laugh and shake their head. Even the Coen brothers prepared a color version of THE MAN WHO WASN'T THERE for International. So, if you must go Black and White for artistic reasons, do it in post so you have a color version for economic reasons.

5. SUBJECT

Stay away from political or religious themes in your storylines. These are usually too controversial for many foreign territories. Other themes that are tough include alternative sexuality. People just want to be entertained, not enlightened. So, try to keep the subject matter light.

On a similar note, filmmakers love to make movies about the thing they love the most, i.e. making movies. But, let me warn you against this. Outside of Hollywood, no one can relate to this experience and you are better off with a story that is more universal in its appeal. I know, I loved THE PLAYER as much as the next guy, but how are they going to get it in other parts of the country or the world?

6. RUNNING TIME

Your film should be at around 90 minutes and not longer than 120 minutes. 90 minutes is the ideal because it is ideal for programming a two hour movie slot with commercial breaks. Features sell. Not shorts and not three shorts cut together to make a 90 minute trilogy. They want one continuous story line that is 90 minutes. Features generally range from 81 to 120 min.

7. LANGUAGE

Most films that sell are in English. Even if you have a film idea that merits another language you will be doing yourself harm if you shoot in any language other than English. This applies even if the territory traditional dubs into their own language!

Ok, so LIFE IS BEAUTIFUL and AMELIE were hits and they were not originally in the English language. How many non-English films are actually produced every year? Well, I can tell you the number is far higher than English language films. But, how many of these films do YOU actually hear about beside Academy Award[®]™ nominated films, or a few exceptional breakouts? Hardly any. In fact, when I go overseas, I am amazed at how many great movies are being made in other countries, but no one wants to pick them up for U.S. or for International distribution because they are too risky and have to have the hook of cast, critical success or huge box office in their countries of origin. These are rare exceptions, indeed .

So, there they are... The Seven Deadly Sins. The biggest thing you have to be concerned about with your investors is whether or not your film will get distribution. Without distribution, no one will ever see your film and it will not make money. Unfortunately, the gatekeepers to whether anyone buys a ticket to your film are distributors. Distributors are ruled by these sins for economic reasons. It is a buyers market and they will pick and choose the films that have the best chance of working for them. If they have a good track record with black and white, romantic comedies, than you have a good chance. If these kinds of films have generally done poorly for them (and most have – fact, not opinion) then there is a chance they won't even look at your movie at all! That can be disastrous for you and your investors. Just something to think about.

Anyway, these “sins” should by no means be construed as advice. I am just sharing with you what I have learned. I think everyone should make the film that THEY truly believe in.

If you have specific questions or require advice in the area of Film Distribution, etc., Ted Chalmers is available for individualized consulting. To learn more, please email to movieplan@lycos.com. Thanks.

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