ENTRY PROCEDURES FOR FILM AND VIDEO FESTIVALS

There are various types of film festivals – competitive and non-competitive, general and specialised, for world premieres, for first films, for student works, international and regional, FIAPF approved or not. No guide will ever be complete or entirely up-to-date, but a combination of sources can give a reasonable overall picture. Look at the festival websites, subscribe to newsletters, get hold of past festival programs, talk to people who have attended, etc.

Every festival is slightly different.

The entry conditions are different, the categories are different, the rules are different. No guide to festivals will give all the details you need, so get regulations and entry forms – either directly from the festival or online. The web has become the major source of information on festivals but it is very undiscriminating – cross-check and try to find out a bit more about a festival from other sources too.

Read the small print.

Not only is the print usually small, but it can also be in Franglais, Germish or some other variation of English. If you cannot understand what it means, even after creative reconstruction, find someone who can read the regulations in the original language. It is not worth wasting time and money entering a festival for which your work is not eligible.

And do not assume that a festival which calls itself "international" is actually of international importance. Many are local events with a couple of foreign titles to attract the audience.

Try to find out as much as possible about each festival before you enter. A new and unknown festival could be fresh and exciting – or it could be disorganised, amateurish and bring little credit to your film.

Points to look for:

Cut off dates for eligibility

Every festival has different cut-off dates. For example, some accept material produced in the previous two years, some only from the start of the current year.

Acceptable languages

All major and most minor festivals have English as an official language so long as there is a complete dialogue list/post-production script (see “Documentation required” below). They may offer either simultaneous translation into the language of the festival by headphones or by electronic subtitles.

Except for the major festivals like Cannes, Venice or Berlin you will not need to get a film subtitled.

You will need to have a dialogue list – the more detail, the better the results will be. This is used as the basis for a translation into the language of the festival both for selection purposes and for screenings.

Preview material

DVDs can usually be sent through the mail without problems, but don't forget to attach the small green customs declaration form to the envelope. Declare the minimum possible value - $5 for DVD, $10 for Beta SP, $20 for digibeta – and state that the material is “For preview use only – no commercial value”.
For the UK, it is worth adding that, “This material is a temporary import only and will be returned to sender after use.” This *may* save you being charged VAT. If you don’t feel that mail is fast or secure enough, there is the door-to-door courier service run by the postal service, or a commercial courier such as DHL, Fedex or TNT.

You will need around twenty DVDs for preview use. Most festivals do not return submission DVDs but some ask you to pay for the return of preview material. Always compare the cost of replacing this with the cost of return – it is not worth paying for this. N.B. USA, Canada , Japan & Korea use the NTSC video standard rather then the PAL standard in use in Australia and Europe. THIS IS NOT THE SAME AS REGION CODES. Region-free DVDs are still either NTSC or PAL. Nowadays most US festivals accept preview DVDs in either standard, but some do not. Check before sending. And the Beta SP or digibeta screening format will almost always be NTSC.

Entry fees

Most US festivals charge entry fees in US dollars. This means a bank draft and bank charges and a fluctuating exchange rate. Wherever possible, pay by credit card. European festivals rarely charge entry fees, but most Australian festivals now charge.

Length of material submitted

Some festivals classify shorts as anything under 60 minutes, some have 35 minutes as their maximum and others will only accept shorts under 15 minutes. Be sure to check.

Formats accepted

Most festivals now screen short films only on DVD or tape. Check their standards for both submission and exhibition, especially for North America. (See discussion in "Preview material" above.) HD is not yet commonly accepted for short film except at major events but it will be very soon. So will delivery on portable hard disk.

Exclusivity

Major festivals often impose restrictions to ensure that they have some exclusivity and therefore a higher critical standing. Restrictions can include:

* the screening must be a world premiere
* the screening must be a national premiere

* the film or video must not have won a prize in any other festival

If there are a number of festivals in the same region, check that you enter the most prestigious first so that acceptance in a minor one will not prejudice your chances of being accepted into the major event.

Documentation required

As well as the entry form (hard copy completed in black ink in capitals or online), most festivals require some or all of the following:

* a bio-filmography of the director – this should give brief details of your filmmaking background and your career since completing the entry.
* a "personal statement" from the director – this can be anything you like, e.g. why you made the film or video, why you used a particular style, what your aims were, etc.
* photos – festivals now use only digital images so make sure you have high resolution digital images (at least 300dpi). JPEGs are best for sending online but TIFFs are sometimes required for high quality printing. Shoot stills at the highest resolution and reduce for emailing if necessary.
* Images need to have good contrast and little background clutter. Try and take a photo that shows something happening rather than a posed head shot. For a festival selector, a photo is their first visual clue to your film, so make it enticing.
* A photo of the director is usually required too. This can either be posed or show the director on set.
* press kits – some festivals unrealistically ask for 20 or 30 stills and 100s of press kits. This is directed at feature film producers – it is most unlikely that the festivals would publicise a short film to such a wide extent. There is not much point in sending a lot of flyers or postcards unless you are going to be at the festival to hand them out or stick them on to lampposts yourself. Send whatever you have available and include your contact details.
* a copy of the script – usually referred to by festivals as a dialogue list,

although more accurately it is a post-production script. This must be a word accurate copy of the final film, **not** an early draft or the shooting script. Whilst a fully timed post-production script is by far the best, any script that is easy to read and includes a brief description of the action in each scene will do if necessary. Any Australian colloquialisms or local references should be

explained in footnotes. Think hard about this – phrases which are unique to Australia are not immediately obvious to Australians.
* Don't forget that the purpose of this script is to enable the festival to provide its patrons with a comprehensible translation of your work into another language, so even unscripted documentaries etc, will need to have all the spoken or written content accurately transcribed. This is a boring job and there are people who will do it for you (for a price). So try to keep a record of dialogue and scene changes, etc. as they are made to make the job easier.

Awards

Some festivals are non-competitive but very prestigious, some are competitive but not prestigious. Check the details of prizes on offer. Cash is good but may be reduced by taxes in the country of origin and country of receipt. You will need to have an ABN to minimise Australian and overseas tax deductions. Goods or services "in kind" may turn out to be useless. Access to editing facilities in New York, Los Angeles or Melbourne are no use in Sydney. Always consider the value of the prizes to *yourself*.

Freight

Outward

The entrant is always liable for the initial cost of sending an entry to a festival. Most festivals will pay the freight for selected films, but some do not. The cheapest way to send a preview tape is to use Australia Post. Airmail takes about a week and is relatively cheap. Courier is very fast and safe but pricey. Any parcel sent by airmail will need the small green Customs Declaration sticker and photo ID. And an airmail sticker. If your parcel weighs more than 2kg, it will need another form, a multi-part form which combines a customs declaration with an address label.

With preview material, in every case state that the contents are film festival previews, for cultural use only with no commercial value. If you use a courier, you will need to prepare a combined customs declaration/pro–forma invoice (attach original plus two copies, keep one for reference) and the consignment note. A courier service is definitely advisable when transporting material to countries where you think that the postal service may not be very secure or where you think that Customs restrictions may delay your parcel. Always declare a minimum value for customs – AUD10 for Beta SP, AUD20 for digibeta. The festival should insure the print for its full value while in their care but if you put this value on the shipment, you may well be up for VAT charges or other import duties and delays.

Return

Festivals should always pay for the return of invited films but a few do not. If these festivals ask how you want the entry returned, always opt for the cheapest method, and tell them NEVER to use airfreight, only door-to-door couriers.

Final advice

Check the entry form –

* Is your writing (block letters) legible
* Have you added "Australia" to your address
* Have you given (+61) as the country code with your phone/fax numbers (including mobiles)
* Have you given a street address for the return of materials rather than a post number (couriers can't deliver to a box number)
* Have you given all the details asked for

Check your submission material –

* Does the DVD play in a variety of machines
* Does it have the right material on it
* Does it say whether it is PAL or NTSC
* Is the DVD labelled as well as the case – with the title, director's name, length of program
* Does it have your name and return address on it

Check the festival address –

* Have you used the correct address.
* Some festivals have one address for correspondence and another for the entries. Some festivals use a customs or freight agent to handle customs clearances for airfreight arrivals and require entries to be sent to a different address.

It is a good idea to make an information sheet for your film that sets out all the information clearly and to include a copy with every entry. It will repeat the information you have just given on the entry form but it looks efficient and it makes it easier for the festival to be sure they have the spelling of names correct. Most forms are very poorly designed and so this overcomes the problems of trying to cram lots of details into the tiny spaces provided for previous festival screenings, full list of cast & crew, etc. Keep this on file and you can add to it every time your film is accepted for festivals, bought by television or screened theatrically.

Even if the entry is made on-line, this sheet is still useful to send with the preview tape and screening copy – it can help customs decide what the content is (should they decide to check the shipment) and who the sender is, etc.

The basic information you should include is:

TITLE

Copyright date Format Col/B&W Aspect ratio Sound format Running time
Original language/Language of subtitles

Director
Writer
Producer
Cinematographer
Sound designer
Production designer
Editor
Composer
Any other major role, i.e. digital artist, compositor
Production company

Cast (Character/Actor)

Awards

Festival screenings

Exhibition

Director's statement

Bio-filmography

Distributor &/or filmmaker's contact details

Withoutabox (www.withoutabox.com) provides a centralised point for on-line entry and this is fast becoming US film festivals' preferred mode of entry. The basic service is free but there is an annual registration fee with more options but it is almost certainly worth it for ease of entry and discounts on entry fees.

RUTH SAUNDERS
AUSTRALIAN FILM TELEVISION AND RADIO SCHOOL, DECEMBER 2009