

30 Sep Developing Successful Outreach Campaigns

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Sharing stories from DPC II 2017: Story 2

At DPC II 2017, **Ben Kempas** (founder of Film & Campaign Ltd, UK) and **Kyveli Short**, line producer on “Dolphin Man”, presented their marketing and distribution model for documentaries.

Ben listed a set of key principles in conducting successful outreach campaigns around documentaries, but firstly he set out to define what we mean by ‘outreach’. “Outreach to me is not limited to partnering up with non-profits, it also can mean the use of innovative technology to people you wouldn’t reach otherwise, it can mean doing big local events that you may be even co-ordinating yourself. It can mean educational work and it can mean the kind of impact work we see in films like *The Venerable W...* it is about not waiting for people to randomly discover our films, because we take the films to the people. We find these kind of niche audiences that docs rely on so much...but every film needs its own campaign approach.”

He started with the example of *7 Songs for a Long Life*, about helping dying patients in a hospice to find comfort through song. People [everybody, patients and nurses alike] simply sang the song they would like to have played at their funeral.

This is based on building communities around film. Storytelling is an essential of building a community. Ben commented. You must have a shared narrative around which the community develops. That is the asset – the material, the protagonists. The other thing is to build lots of individual relationships with people/organisations who will work as satellite ambassadors for the campaign. These satellites will also interactive away from the core. It is essential to put these structures in place for the word to be spread.

The problem with *7 Songs* was that there was no further funding in place to take it beyond the initial nodes, the inner ring of people connected with the hospice. That said, Ben pointed out how it is a very good example of activity “outside the space of the film”.

Another principle is to **Know Your Audience**. Ben asked what the core question should be when targeting people. Aside from obvious questions like age, interests, gender and location, he suggested a key question. Have you seen the film or not? And pointed out how he wants completely different things from people who have seen the film, compared to people who haven’t. “Anything we can use to get an idea about who is actually seeing the film, it is essential to build on that?” Can viewers then imagine being an advocate for the campaign? A fundraiser, maybe a host of a community screening?

Ben uses **campaigning software** called Nation Builder, “which comes from the world of politics and NGOs”, which is packed with contacts gained over the years and can be used for accurate geographical audience targeting. Using that info in combo with what one knows about that person can be useful. “The more you can do to take control of contact data, manage it very carefully and target people really well with a call of action that is relevant to them [is useful]... Also we need to be smart and at the stage where we can carry over people from one project to the next.”

The audience is stakeholder. A typical question is: when do I start? “My answer is, as early as possible as this helps give a clearer vision of how you wish to make the film to be relevant to a core audience. Getting people involved early makes them stakeholders.”

Example of *Time Trial*, the doc about Scots cyclist David Millar which was selected for IDFA Competition in 2017, where advocates and financial stakeholders were garnered early in the production. The producer offered people the chance to invest via the Enterprise Investment Scheme, and many high net worth individuals helped fund the film. The stakeholders believed in the project and really wanted it to succeed. They were not even so keen on getting the money back as for them it was a tax write-off. Ben estimated a couple of thousand investors. Stakeholders can also be word-spreaders and fundraisers – people who can help you get the film out there – and help you screen the film to communities.

Stronger with partners describes the practice of teaming up with organisations that are already working around the subject matter of your film. He used the example of *I am Breathing*, about a man dying of Motor Neurone Disease for which the producers had to come up with ideas to find audiences for what was a difficult subject. The Motor Neurone Disease Society revealed that they had freed ad space donated to them because of their charity status. This was snapped up by the producers as it also coincided with the National Awareness Day. The billboard sites were nationwide on Network Rail in more than 200 locations, and hence very visible. The impact was considerable.

A PR agency was also employed to frame the story in terms of human rights, which worked in promoting the film. What is key as well is **not to forget the core principles of documentary filmmaking**. Proper homework and research. Get to know your subject and to listen. Build a relationship and know your subject before offering the film to an NGO/charity etc.

Another principle is that **screenings become events**. Audiences are less receptive to docs, and the one way to get them to turn out is to make it special. Have a Q and A, get an expert to appear, even better if you feed the audience, or get a band to play. The food/music/discussion axis works very well. The exclusivity aspect appeals to audiences.

VOD can do so much more. Generally VOD is a rental or a download from a subscription service. Ben investigated its wider use. For *Stem Cell Revolutions* the producer offered versions for personal use and education use side by side, which is quite rare. The film was chopped up into 5 chapters, each about 15-20 minutes and hence could be inserted easily into scholastic lessons. Only if you buy the educational package can this method of delivery be applied, alongside a teaching guide to advice on its exploitation within the classroom. The film still sells very well via VOD, despite it being six years old, and the revenue goes straight to the producer.

Pay it Forward is the principle that an initial number of people get to see the film for free, and if they wish to return the favour that they should pay forward, nominating and paying for friends. This was used for a film called *Future My Love*, about life in a world without money. The paradigm-shifting Pay It Forward principle matched the ethos of the film. While the uptake was not enormous, it was still seven times greater than via the general VOD uptake.

The Pay it Forward mechanism needs maintenance, but is better when applied in an automated fashion rather than applying man hours to it. So the principle remains a good one, and Ben is talking to more companies for its use in 2018. He put out the call to the audience for suitable projects for this kind of distribution.

Working Across Borders is another key principle. There is so much stuff that we can do internationally, outside of the general territory by territory mind-set that we have. The Moving Docs Network for example is a European network of small arthouse boutique doc fests and screening organisations which releases films in very de-centralised ways – with a lot of ideas developed and a lot of European synergy achieved. Ben gave the example of a discussion at the end of a refugee film *At Home in the World* which peaked at a Facebook audience of 468,000+.

Virtual Screening Rooms are interesting whereby people watch a film together and then subsequently discuss the issues. A cinema experience that everybody can participate in remotely from home.

Very important is **content marketing**, where the marketers are desperate to invest in stories around a brand. “We have all these stories, we just need to get them out there.” The principle rule in all of this engagement process around the film is that you should only talk about the film 20% of the time. 80% of the time you should talk about the wider subject. It is good to produce platforms or additional content to engage people around a subject matter through which they discover a film, rather than have the film advertised in their face.

Don’t be afraid of the potential impact your film can have in terms of changing minds and people’s behaviour (maybe in terms of their purchasing decisions). Films can even change the structures around you, such as corporations or governments. Docs have done this in the past. Check out the Impact Filed Guide at impactguide.org, put together by the Doc Society for a lot of case studies.

“We need to measure the impact of docs beyond mere box-office and audience numbers, and how we do that is probably one of the biggest challenges we have at the moment,” Ben ended.



Kyveli Short joined Ben to discuss the outreach campaign on *Dolphin Man*, directed by Lefteris Charitos, an environmentalist documentary polemic centring on the life of celebrated diver Jacques Mayol. DPC II delegates watched the film the previous evening in one of the EYE cinemas.

“We were very clear that we didn’t want it to be an activist documentary,” Kyveli underlined, more to stress the wonder and beauty of the sea, and underline the needs for its protection, all the time drawing on the relationship that we all have with water.

The initial target groups were clear from the outset. The diving community, people involved in water sports, people into yoga, spirituality, mindfulness, conservation and environmentalism. Also fans of *The Big Blue* (the biopic of Mayol starring Jean Marc Barr). Barr was a big asset in all this. He narrated *Dolphin Man* and is as strong ambassador for the film.

The biggest move the producers made was to get Arte on board for parts of the outreach campaign – they were also first to back the film. And after the Moving Docs workshop in April, the producers came away deciding they would launch a campaign named #MyBlue with a key quote from Mayol himself at its core: “Conservation only works if you are in love with the sea,” and therefore the core question was “Are you in love with the sea?” They isolated 5 MyBlue brand ambassadors (such as a French free-diving campion) and partnered with WWF Greece plus VisitGreece.gr, launching the campaign at the start of the summer and hooking up with as many tourist outlets as possible via a ‘bureaucratic miracle’ agreement brokered with the Greek Tourist Board. One of the other brand ambassadors was the director of WWF Greece.

The Greek Travel pages informed everybody within their network about this campaign and anybody who wanted to help promote it could be featured as a MyBlue highlight. They also organised a Greek-based photo competition, featuring pics that illustrated photographers’ relationship with the water.

The role of Moving Docs was explained in linking myriad smaller doc fests and events across the world. The idea is to have a 2-fold de-centralised network between all these institutions where on the one hand they jointly decide on the number of films that everybody wants to show (making it attractive to licence holders to offer the film to entities that otherwise may not be worth dealing with) but also enable access to higher profile films. Two years ago Moving Docs introduced an additional focus on outreach and the need to develop campaigns around a number of core titles during the Moving Docs Outreach Workshop. Then everybody goes back to their home territories to try and implement as much as what was agreed during the days of the workshop as possible.

Kyveli and the producers of *Dolphin Man* got dive-clothes designer/manufacturer Cressi on board for the MyBlue Europe part of the campaign and photo competition. The big prize on offer is a unique diving experience in Greece, including flight, hotel and freediving course. And Cressi dive gear as extra prizes. Yoga guru Sarah Campbell is offering an online course, plus cinema tickets can be won too.

With the photo competition they want to engage with the general public, and every week on the *Dolphin Man* webpage (and regularly on the website of Moving Docs and partners) they feature the photo of the week. Kyveli highlighted how the Slovenian partnership in Moving Docs suggested they adopted a dolphin via a marine society in the Adriatic Sea, which worked as good publicity both for the organisation and for the film/campaign.

They also connected with those professional underwater photographers who have a large following online which upped the ante in terms of great visuals, especially on Instagram. They are known as the MyBlue photographers. Kyveli posts about them and they in turn support the film.

How did this convert into audience numbers? Too early to say as in Greece, where most activity is centred, the film won’t be released until February 2018.

Marketeers like A/B testing, exposing different audiences to different messages to see which ones end up buying more, said Ben. This approach is not possible on a film like *Dolphin Man*. “We are not in a position to release the film separately to two different groups, one subjected to outreach activity and another that isn’t. Budget-wise and logistically, that is not feasible. So, the question will always remain. How many people would see this film anyway without all that outreach activity? We want to focus more at Moving Docs next year on ways of tracking these activities, from the invisible advertising pixel to interviews with people who come and see these films.”

How has Kyveli thus far balanced outreach activities and work on the film? Does outreach have priority? Right now the release is the top priority, she answered, but prior to that the split was 50/50. “What we have seen with Moving Docs – whenever we have chosen a film for an outreach campaign that the producer and director decides to become involved heavily with, the impact has been much greater, such as on *Free Lunch Society*, where director Christian Tod was very involved, as was the sales agent Autlook, and that greatly helped in everything we achieved on that film,” she added.

Ben pointed out however that there is a general European reticence to linking with brands on a documentary for fear of the film seeming like a corporate film, but it is an area that he feels should be explored more. Did Kyveli feel odd about having a commercial brand like Cressi connected to the campaign? Not at all, as she wanted to be able to offer great prizes to the competition entrants. Was it useful in terms of spreading the word? Yes, but not as much as she would have hoped, although Cressi have said they want to organise screenings of the film on the beaches of the Caribbean.

Arte has already screened the film, but people are still going to see the film in cinemas as part of a collective experience. “Arte commissioned a *Dolphin Man* VR also, 3 x 5-mins films in 360 that completely immerse the viewer in the ocean, each with a different character,” said Kyveli. One is about a deep dive, another is about the relationship between yoga and breath-hold diving (courtesy of international yoga guru Sara Campbell) and the third is a film on the relationships between underwater mammals.

The audience at DPC II was given the opportunity to wear VR headgear and watch these films.