

# **PRODUCING FILMS WITH NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS: HOW TO CREATE WIN-WIN PARTNERSHIPS**

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If you are an independent filmmaker, working with nonprofits is both good and necessary. While there are “red flags” to be alert to (more on that in a moment), working with nonprofits is a wise and worthwhile tactic.

## **Changing the World**

Documentaries are made to change the world in some way. Public engagement and outreach – the engines of change – are fundamental to successful filmmaking. Working with nonprofits, whose mission is often to engage the public to make change, is one important way to help you achieve greater influence and success with your film.

## **Connecting to the Environmental Movement**

Connecting your film to a social movement, and partnering with a nonprofit active in that movement, is one way to align your film with forces that can help you achieve your mission of creating social change. A nonprofit partner can help you organize events around your film to raise money, to celebrate grassroots activists, and to thank donors and investors.

A nonprofit can also help you with many other opportunities for what film marketing guru Steve Michelson (founder of Lobitos Creek Ranch and Specialty Studios) calls “piggyback marketing,” such as events on Capitol Hill for legislators, or press events resulting in “free” coverage. A nonprofit can bestow a level of credibility on your socially responsible message that your film might not have on its own.

## **Marketing and Promotion**

One of Steve Michelson's films is *Oil On Ice*, produced by Dale Djerassi and Bo Boudart. Steve created 14 partnerships with various nonprofits to help promote and market the film.

In particular, Steve worked with the Sierra Club and its 750,000 members to host house parties (2,500 in all) around the country, posters, educational guides, DVDs and a “grassroots action” tool kit.

Both Steve Michelson and the Sierra Club were delighted by this win-win partnership. The film helped the Sierra Club achieve its mission of helping to stop drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

### **Raising Money**

Nonprofits can also help you raise money for your film by giving you legitimacy, credibility and standing. Many funders, including foundations, prefer to give grants to nonprofits (as opposed to for-profits or individuals).

As fiscal agent, the non-profit has a 501-C3 license and can accept money for the producer. The nonprofit deducts about five percent as an administrative fee and then turn the rest over to the producer. The big benefit is for the donor who can now categorize their contribution as a “donation” and get a 100 percent tax write off.

Here are three case studies that illustrate some of the benefits of working with nonprofits:

#### **First Case Study: Saving the Cahow**

Deirdre Brennan, producer of the film *Bermuda's Treasure Island*, recognized the benefit of partnering with a nonprofit in order to find funding for her film. Her research revealed that the Bermuda Audubon Society was a perfect match because of their active involvement in the efforts to save Bermuda's legendary seabird, the Cahow. Deirdre's film tells the story of the rediscovery of the Cahow, thought to have been extinct for over 300 years and one man's incredible journey to save the bird.

The president of the Bermuda Audubon Society, Andrew Dobson, who wrote the definitive book on Bermuda's birdlife, was a tireless fundraiser for the film. As part of the Society's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration, the film premiered in Bermuda last February. Recently it won two awards at the International Wildlife Film Festival (IWFF) in Missoula, Montana.

#### **Second Case Study: Saving Sperm Whales**

The second case study involves film producer Kelly O'Brien who lives in Seward, Alaska. Kelly realized that non-profit organizations tend to have limited funding committed towards film production. However, she also knew that many organizations and government agencies support grant-funded scientific research projects that require public outreach and education components. These goals can often be achieved by the production of a documentary film, and a resourceful wildlife film producer may be able to glean small amounts of funding from multiple organizations that share a common interest.

Kelly and her co-producer, Michael Illenberg, capitalized on this tactic in the development of SEASWAP: Southeast Alaska Sperm Whale Avoidance Project, a

documentary film on the research of sperm whale interactions with longline fishing vessels.

To develop the film, the North Pacific Research Board (NPRB) and Alaska SeaLife Center (ASLC) partnered and combined resources with fishermen from the Alaska Longline Fisherman's Association (ALFA) and researchers from Scripps Institution of Oceanography and the University of Alaska Southeast. (Sorry for all the initials and acronyms!) NPRB provided funding for travel, salaries and materials, while ASLC donated production and post-production equipment and facilities.

Filming took place on fishing vessels during fishing and research sessions, so building a trusting relationship with ALFA fishermen and university scientists was key to gaining location access, housing for on-site shooting, and content advice.

In return for their support, the SEASWAP film crew assisted the scientific research team and fishing crew whenever the production schedule allowed. The success of the film, which recently received a finalist award at IWFF, demonstrates the positive partnerships that were developed between the nonprofit organizations, film crew, researchers and fishermen.

### **Third Case Study: Saving Robert Greenwald**

The third case study comes from film producer Robert Greenwald who has profitably and effectively worked with non-profits. Greenwald has produced a series of documentaries for several liberal political groups, including Move-on.org, that focus on topics such as misinformation related to the lead up to the war in Iraq (*Uncovered*) and a critique of the Fox News network (*Outfoxed*).

The nonprofits sell the films to their large memberships and feature them in viewing parties that members hold in communities around the country. The films have been completely funded by the nonprofits through this mechanism and have generated good buzz by word-of-mouth and through the press. DVDs are also sold on the internet in huge numbers.

### **The Dark Side of Working with Nonprofits**

The three case studies above illustrate some of the advantages of working with nonprofits. Less well known is why you need to be alert to the dark side of working with them. You will find that most nonprofits suffer from the following five “red flags”:

**First, don’t judge a book by its cover or a nonprofit by its name:** Just because a nonprofit has, say, “global warming” in its name, doesn’t mean that global warming is its top priority. Name recognition, branding and marketing often trump mission. Nonprofits understandably are focused on their need to outshine rival organizations with similar missions who compete for public and financial support. And by “outshine,” I mean develop a more powerful brand. Nonprofits will often measure the success of your film

not by its effectiveness in fulfilling their mission, but rather by how much exposure your film gives to their name and logo. This may sound overly harsh and there are heroic exceptions. For example, I remember that former National Wildlife Federation President and CEO Mark Van Putten turned down a \$1 million gift from a big auto company to help fund one of our IMAX films because the company produced big gas guzzling SUVs.

**Second, working with nonprofits can be exhausting:** Nonprofits often demand total control. They are bureaucracies which mean torrents of paperwork and sitting in endless rounds of tedious meetings. When I was head of television at the National Wildlife Federation (NWF), a large nonprofit organization, filmmaker John DeGraaf and I began working together on his film, *Buyer Be Fair*. John realized that consumers are a sleeping giant, and – with their purchasing power – they can radically change the world for the better. This insight led him to develop *Buyer Be Fair*, a film about eco-labeling – a system of certifying products so consumers can make wise buying decisions. Although John DeGraaf was instrumental in bringing \$300,000 from the Ford Foundation to NWF to pay for *Buyer Be Fair*, his efforts were largely taken for granted by NWF and underappreciated. Nonprofits also want to control the content of your film. They want to ensure – understandably – that your film adheres exactly to their policy positions and philosophy. *Buyer Be Fair*, for example, talks about civil disobedience to achieve social goals, but NWF wanted to cut this segment because they were not comfortable with this message.

**Third, nonprofits are not always integrated units working as a team:** Nonprofits involve lots of different people, including lawyers, accountants, branding managers, fundraisers and issue experts, each with their own agendas and goals. Because they are human, they do not always get along, agree or coordinate their actions. For example, instead of pursuing the nonprofit's altruistic mission, the staff may get distracted by conflicts and rivalries between competing departments.

**Fourth, public broadcasting often sees nonprofits as a problem:** Public broadcasting views all nonprofits suspiciously. It does not distinguish the National Audubon Society from the National Rifle Association. In other words, public broadcasting views all nonprofits as having tunnel vision and a particular position they want to foist on the public. If a powerful Senator dislikes the nonprofit you are working with, then PBS – afraid of having its budget cut on Capitol Hill – may take a dim view of you and your film. In *Buyer Be Fair*, NWF had to choose between having its experts featured *in* the film or being listed as a co-producer *of* the film. We knew PBS would not allow NWF to have both because it would give NWF too big a role in the film and make the film look like NWF propaganda. NWF chose to give up its co-producer role.

**Fifth and finally, nonprofits will support your film only if it brings in revenue:** Don't look for funding from a nonprofit; money is a constant worry for most of these organizations. They want your film to bring them revenue – not the other way around. Having said that, remember how a nonprofit – through its expertise and credibility – can sometimes leverage third party funding.

## **Building Trusting Relationships**

One way to surmount these disadvantages is to get to know the nonprofit well and establish a trusting relationship with key staff members. John Shepard, a film and multimedia producer who is the Assistant Director of Hamline University's Center for Global Environmental Education, vividly remembers an incident that brought this lesson home.

He was very close to completion of a land-stewardship film he was producing with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources when the project coordinator within the agency – a seasoned and smart bureaucrat – brought in the agency's enforcement arm that hadn't been in any previous meetings to review the film. They were all packing side arms and wearing reflective sunglasses - and, recalls John, they were not smiling.

After viewing the near-final version of the film, the ranking member of the group let it be known that he did not like the film's content, nor its tone. John was crushed, thinking that he would now face pressure to redo work that had taken months to complete. But, amazingly, the agency project coordinator smoothly handled the feedback, and thanked the critics for their input. John was able to finish the film without too much trouble.

## **Having an Advocate within the Organization**

The lesson John learned from this was that he was fortunate to have an advocate within the agency who knew the political landscape, and how and when to involve various people. At the start of the film, his advisor even went so far as to devote an entire day to personally walk the contract through every agency office where a signature was required, thereby avoiding weeks of glacially paced bureaucratic process.

Having such a strong ally or a small group of content advisors with the power to handle dissension and processes within the organization AND who are aligned with each other and with your vision as a producer is very important to making things work.

## **Patience, Persistence and Tenacity**

Even if you can find a strong advocate for your film within the nonprofit, you will still need a lot of patience, persistence and tenacity. But if you are a filmmaker who wants to make a difference in the world with your films, it is important for you to reach out to nonprofits and find ways to work with them because they can leverage your film to give it a far greater and more enduring impact.