

Sponsored film vital

In Alberta, sponsored film is a lifeline. The province's producers aggressively court sponsors with their film ideas. Though the past five years have been difficult, the industry seems to have made it through this dry spell.

A recent survey of the province by the Alberta Motion Picture Industry Association (AMPIA) shows 65% of the provincial industry depends on sponsored film for its bread and butter.

Julian Smithers, AMPIA board member, is compiling the survey results from over 80 responses. "We immediately noticed the prime source of income for over half our members was from sponsored film," he says. AMPIA president Allan Stein agrees. "It's definitely an important cornerstone in regional production."

If sponsored film is so vital, producers have two options: either go after sponsored film for all it's worth, or diversify. The Alberta government has been big on diversification even before the bottom fell off the oil barrel. In film and video too, the government has tried to get companies to diversify. It set up the Alberta Motion Picture Development Corporation (AMPDC) to help develop film for commercial broadcasting and theatrical release, since it saw this as a weak area. Sponsored film, like experimental and documentary, is not eligible for guaranteed loans from AMPDC. In 1980 these were strong areas.

Now the tables have turned. Almost immediately following the 1981 start of AMPDC, the recession hit Alberta and funds for government sponsored film dried up, while feature film still had a \$3-million pool of funds to play in. AMPIA president Stein says, "I think government bureaucrats tried first to cut money in programs that don't obviously put people out of work. A lot of people believe that film is frivolous, a luxury. Before 1982, government departments like Agriculture and Manpower were doing at least one significant film per year."

Fortunately, the economic drought is over. "Business was up 40% last year," says Smithers. It's time to go after sponsored film again, both from the private sector and from government. Only one in five producers received any work from the Alberta government last year. The amount of federal dollars trickling to Alberta is improving, says Stein. "We're doing better on federally sponsored film, but the increase is disproportionate." He says there is more work available from both the provincial and the federal government, but it's a question of lobbying.

That is exactly what's been going on. Individually, producers court whatever people they need to; as a group they go after the provincial government. In short, they promote themselves when and where they can. Take, for example, this year's jury for the AMPIA Awards. Dan Burke manages the federal Sponsor Program Group at the Film and Video Centre, Isme Bennie presides over Paragon International in Toronto, and Frank Irvine edits for Petra Films in Vancouver. The three were invited (and paid) to judge this year's AMPIA awards. Stein explains that AMPIA members had the benefit of a knowledgeable jury. At the same time, people from around the country got to see what Alberta filmmakers are making. That's smart. It advertises Alberta products to a selected target audience within the industry.

This year the judges all attended the 'Sponsored Showcase' to watch an afternoon of sponsored film. This is a new idea in self-promotion for Alberta, giving local producers a chance to show off their wares, and clients a chance to show off to each other.

Attendance was poor—a combination of circumstances—but the Sponsored Showcase had a good trial run. There were wrinkles to be ironed out anyway. For example, every single film clip started at the wrong speed, some of the clips were too long and there was mild disagreement over who to invite.

"The target clientele was precisely those government communications people who decided that film is a luxury, to remind them how effective film and video can be," says Stein. Smithers says the next Sponsored Showcase should include the private sector. "I want to hold some open discussions on tendering, sponsoring and the way proposals are handled to familiarize new clients with the industry."

The industry itself is doing what it can to promote itself. Fortunately it also gets active help from the Alberta government. AMPDC will get another \$7-million in loan money to play with if amendments to the Motion Picture Development Act are passed this summer. Also, the province appoints people who understand the industry to positions that count.

Michele Spak, director of Audio Visual and Exhibition Service for the Alberta Public Service Bureau, has managed to reduce the amount of red tape which typically surrounds government. Smithers says, "Spak personally takes an interest. She has made a real, genuine effort to smooth out procedures."

The government itself is equally flattering about the local industry. As the economy continues to improve, the government too will increase its share of film and video production. "We rely heavily on the private sector," says Dick Steiner, executive director for Communication Services.

Actually, the Public Service Bureau does no in-house production at all. This Conservative government doesn't just want the private sector to grow, it wants it to bloom.

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