



WORKING FILMS

Community Screening Guide

Working Films, a national non-profit based in Wilmington, NC, links independent documentary filmmaking with community organizing and education to support social, economic, and environmental justice.

We encourage media and social justice organizations to use screenings as opportunities to build meaningful community events that call attention to the issues addressed in the film and allows the audience to take direct actions related to the issue at hand.

This handout offers some general guidelines to community organizations and non-profits who do not typically host film screenings. Since every event will be different, we encourage you to adapt this guide to fit your needs.

Defining Your Audience and Establishing Outreach Goals for the Viewing Event

Most of the films we represent address social or environmental justice issues: our goal is to partner with communities, non-profits and activist organizations that are also working on these issues. These strategic partnerships enhance audience and viewers experience and engagement.

Decide your organization's goal for the outcomes of a screening or event, and then plan your outreach accordingly, both in terms of whom you invite to partner with you on the event and how you get the word out.

Do you want to bring people together to take action around the film's issue? Bring new members to your coalition or organization? Find new community allies you can build future collaborations with? Build alliances with the faith community? All of these are excellent goals. (If you're screening a Working Films title, we encourage you to let us know your plans; we have strategies in place for all our films and can help you identify individuals and organizations that might be good partners.)

While films screenings can create opportunities for new community alliances; occasionally a film focused on social justice will raise difficult questions on a contentious issue. If bringing audiences together who might have differences on an issue, work to create a respectful space for those differences to be aired.

SOME GUIDELINES FOR COMMUNITY EVENTS

Providing the Basics:

- ❑ If not in a media space, be sure that good projection is provided.
- ❑ Seating that's comfortable
- ❑ Space for refreshments
- ❑ Sign in for audiences and registration – include name, address, email address, and organizational affiliation (so your organization and your partners can stay in touch with your audience; put them on a mailing list or listserv).
- ❑ Think about accessible parking options and list them on the invitation.
- ❑ Make sure your event is accessible to all people with disabilities, including your site, the promotion materials, presentations and handouts. Invite people to request accommodations. Remember many films can be shown with subtitles. Be sure to inquire about wheelchair accessibility and make that also available on the invitation.
- ❑ Identify a facilitator for the audience discussion or a small panel of “experts”
- ❑ Identify some actions for your audience that will allow them to engage more directly, especially if the subject is on a social justice issue. Community partners can likely provide suggestions for action steps.
- ❑ Offer an additional resources sheet for the audience to take home and learn more about the issue.

Finding a Venue and Securing Equipment

Find a venue and check the audio/visual facilities. Find a space that suits your audience. If using a TV, be sure that the screen is large enough for everyone to see without having to twist around in their seats.

Secure your equipment. If you have never been in the space, check it out before making a commitment. You will need a good DVD or VHS player (many laptops offer DVD players) and a large screen TV or a video projector with computer input. Ask to do a test run to check both image quality and sound. Check for lights or windows that may bleed light onto the screen, check for reflections if using a large TV screen. You should meet with the person that will be handling the equipment during the event at the same time you preview the space as this will allow you to ask them questions about the projection and sound equipment, and to arrange for outside equipment if needed. Discuss who will oversee all technical issues the date of the event, and confirm that all projection equipment and sound systems work properly. Play the film to make sure that it works and check sound quality with spoken words not just opening music. Remember to check for accessibility to the screening room and bathrooms for people with disabilities.

Developing Partnerships

Confirm your partners, including community leaders and organizations, detailing their role and participation. A partnership with local or state organizations will focus your event, split the workload and increase the number and diversity of attendees. Also, your community partners can be vital agents to get word out about the event, include them in your marketing and promotion plans.

Make a plan for hosting a reception and for your sign-in table. Put together a “Take Action Table” where audience members can sign petitions and become members of local organizations partnering with the screening (See Presenting Your Group section). If some suggested actions are online, consider supplementing your film screening or event

with connected computers so that audience members can act immediately on the issues. Increasingly venues are offering wireless connectivity.

Supplement these online efforts with a menu of local and regional actions; check with your allies to find out what people can do now. Be sure these actions are meaningful and not just symbolic.

Many filmmakers are interested in appearing at local events. Contact them, but be prepared to offer an honorarium and to cover their travel expenses. Independent filmmakers are working artists.

Giving People Tools to Act

It is important to provide viewers with educational resources and ways to act on issues presented in the film.

Most films have websites that feature resources and often discussion guides. To find the site for the film you are presenting, search the internet for the name of the film.

Providing ways the audience can take action will allow viewers to commit to getting involved. The best actions are part of an on-going campaign already connected to the issue such as taking a personal inventory; carrying the conversation on to others in your community; developing a petition and gaining signatures; contacting elected officials; signing on to new personal actions and/or participating in upcoming planned events that may have nothing to do with the film but everything to do with the issue.

Your group should invest some time to develop these both before the screening and amend them according to input you gain during the discussion or in later meetings.

Planning the Agenda for the Event

A viewing event is an excellent opportunity to learn and teach. Although the agenda for most viewings probably shouldn't be very long, a lot can be said in a few minutes, and a well-planned agenda gives you the opportunity to let others know about struggles in their very own community that previously they may only have been casually aware of, and learn how they can become involved to make positive change.

How your agenda is planned will depend on what you want and whom you're inviting. Of course, it should be designed with your audience in mind. Will there be filmmakers present? Who will speak first and for how long? Will there be a panel of "experts?" Who will they be, and will they represent a diversity of opinions/interests? Will there be community announcements? Who is going to ask audience members to support the local struggle? This type of call to action changes the typically passive experience of just watching media into an interactive event in which your audience members are encouraged to take immediate direct actions. Strategic consideration of what happens when the lights come up may be your most crucial decision.

This is a suggested framework for you to use to tailor a viewing event for your needs.

Suggested Agenda

Start on time (no later than 10 minutes from posted time)

Post a screening time: then give latecomers time to get there.

Brief introduction to the film (10-15 minutes)

Introduce the film and make a brief introduction of local issues. Introduce special guests. If the group is small enough, ask the audience to make very brief individual introductions. Ask everyone to stay for the discussion, tell them an ending time (“Please stay after the film is over, we are planning a 30 minute discussion.”)

Viewing

Discussion and Wrap up (15 minutes – 1 hour)

Have a good facilitator or panel of “experts” ready to help the audience discuss the film. Try to keep the group on schedule for wrapping up. If folks want to stay past the official discussion period, remind them that it’s time to close and encourage them to keep talking in smaller groups or suggest that the group hold a follow-up meeting

Getting the Word Out to your audience through membership and general community mass mailings, flyer postings, community calendar postings, newsletters, newspapers and radio public service announcements. Organize press relations, including preparing a press release and securing contacts in the press.

Decide what types of press you want to contact to advertise the screening and highlight the local / state issue. Consider all reporters, not just entertainment or film/video reviewers. Options include health reporters, city beat reporters, lifestyle reporters, political reporters and columnists, and of course film/arts reporters. Another option is to ask for a meeting with your local editorial board to explain the local connection.

Presenting Your Group at the Event

If you’ve invited more than the regular members of your group, chances are you have people in attendance who will want to know more about your group – what you stand for, your accomplishments, and your most important goals. Be sure to have information on hand – either to pass out, or on the sign-in table with the registration sheet. Some information you might include are copies of news stories that mention your group, letters you’ve sent to public officials, or fact sheets about local issues.

Facilitating Discussion

The issues raised in the film you screen may touch deeply held beliefs, fears, and passions. It is natural to want others to affirm those beliefs and emotions. In the process, we can become so engrossed in making sure that we are heard and understood, that we forget to listen to others.

Make sure that everyone understands that the purpose of the event is to explore the issues and increase understanding, not to settle the conflicts or come to complete agreement. Encourage participants to focus on possibilities for the future rather than on coming to consensus about the past. The following strategies can be used to encourage meaningful discussion:

- Remind the group of the difference between “debate” and “dialogue.” In a debate participants try to convince others that their position is right. In a dialogue, participants try to understand one another and expand their thinking by sharing viewpoints and listening. Remind participants that your event is about dialogue.

- Ask the group to think of the event as being about listening, as well as discussing. Ask the audience to “actively” listen, without interrupting the speaker. The facilitator should rephrase statements made by audience members to be sure they are understood. Ask people to listen for things that challenge their ideas or cause them to reconsider their assumptions, in addition to listening for comments that reinforce their beliefs.
- Remind the group that dialogue allows all participants a respectful environment to share their ideas, concerns and opinions. Respectful dialogue may sometimes be difficult, but it is possible.

Documenting the Event

Document the event by taking photos and recording stories you hear from attendees; Survey attendees about how they liked the event and what they'd like to see next; document which press attended and who printed or aired stories, and save your print stories.

We have evaluation forms that can help you assess your success. Numbers are not all important; many powerful community screenings have had small audiences but great discussions or group commitment to follow-up and take “next steps”. Please let us know how your screening goes and share press or audience responses with Working Films.

We hope that these tips are a helpful in the planning of your screening. Remember, the most important thing is to get people to come together, be engaged by the film and take part in constructive discussions and actions around the issues. By planning things in advance, collaborating with other organizations and taking care of any technical concerns, you will be able to ensure a smooth-running event that will lead to positive change in your community. If you have any other questions or would like to be placed in contact with others who have held successful screenings, call Working Films at (910) 342-9000. Good luck!

Working Films
602 South Fifth Avenue
Wilmington NC 28401
910 342-9000
www.workingfilms.org