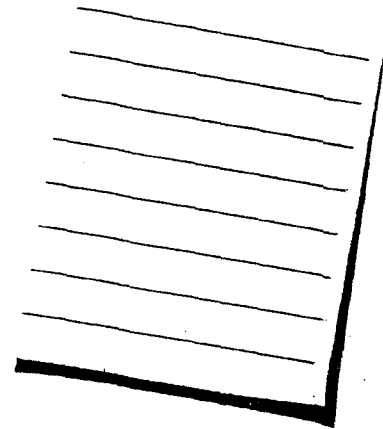




FYI



Receiving professional recognition in the form of an award can provide a useful tool for promoting your business. Author Mark Freeman takes a look at how film and video competitions are judged. His analysis may help give you the inside track with your next festival entry.

In the Dark

by Mark Freeman

I feel like I've just run a marathon: Along with my fellow judges, I viewed more than 100 entries in the 23rd Annual Humboldt Film and Video Festival. The experience took stamina and determination and left me bleary-eyed — and 10 pounds heavier.

The Humboldt Festival is held at the Minor Theater in Arcata, Calif., in the heart of the Redwood Empire. Unfortunately for the visiting judges, we spent four days in dark screening rooms and had only a brief opportunity to glimpse the towering redwoods and get a whiff of ocean breezes.

Judging the festival was a new experience for me: I'm an independent producer and am more familiar with entering festivals than judging them.

Festivals come in all types and sizes. Some are for students only, others feature corporate productions. A few specialize by genre: experimental (Ann Arbor), documentary (Global Village) or narrative (New York). Some accept only film, not video. For others, running time is a crucial consideration.

My advice is to enter festivals selectively. It's a waste of resources to take a shotgun approach: Pick the type of festival most appropriate to your work.

I was surprised, for example, to see that one major distributor submitted six or seven entries, none of which met the Humboldt Festival's criteria of "providing a forum for personal expression and innovative, exciting contemporary work." The conventional themes and treatments of the entries would have been more appropriate for an educational festival such as the National Educational Film and Video Festival or the American Film and Video Festival.

Once you've chosen an appropriate festival, submit your best stuff. At this year's Humboldt competition, it seemed as if some independent producers submitted every tape they've ever completed. When I received five submissions from a single source, I couldn't help thinking he was asking me to decide which was the best. (None was chosen for the festival.)

A great number of entries were technically well-crafted, highly polished and, nevertheless, ultimately unsatisfactory. Sample story lines of such works included a road movie in which the hero killed his girlfriend, stowed her in the back seat of his car and headed out across the desert, engaging in endless soliloquies. Another was a dark, deliberate, angst-filled story that turned out to be about pig-shaped

packaging for a new, pressed-pork food product. One of the most tasteless entries was a series of anti-Semitic sketches set in a mortuary.

Some festival entries seemed to be competing for special awards for vapidly and stupidity. No amount of production value can compensate for the absence of a coherent concept. A misplaced emphasis on form rather than content marked much unsuccessful work. Trading clever camera angles and lush musical scores for compelling writing and convincing acting is self-defeating.

On the other hand, artfully crafted whimsy and playfulness give a submission a distinct competitive advantage. After I'd watched dozens of ponderous, self-conscious and often pretentious entries, comic relief proved irresistible. Two memorable examples come to mind: "Every Day is a Beautiful Day,"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Mark Freeman is an independent producer whose films and tapes have been featured in many festivals, including the Chicago International Film Festival, Melbourne International Film Festival, Festival dei Popoli and the National Education Film and Video Festival.