The National Media Market, a Buyer's Perspective

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Media, Media Everywhere...

The use of film in the classroom is ubiquitous. Visual theses are on the rise. Interest in documentary studies is growing at an exponential rate. Resultantly, the importance of a rich and varied media resources collection is essential to academic institutions, public libraries, and K-12 media centers. It takes a lot of work, development, and research to maintain and grow a collection like this. Resources that aid this process are invaluable, and the National Media Market (NMM) is one such vital resource (www.nmml.net).

A Brief History...

About four years ago, Philip Hallman from Ambassador Books & Media interviewed Ursula Schwarz, the Executive Director of the National Media Market (NMM) in his Against the Grain column “Media Minder.” The interview offered a great history of the NMM, an overview, and insight into what made this nonprofit organization unique. Readers learned that the NMM was conceived back in 1978 by a group of educational media professionals in Knoxville Tennessee who wanted to bring buyers, users, and sellers together in a professional marketplace, permitting them to deal with film purchasing directly. Notably, the NMM was the first forum to focus its efforts entirely on film, supplanting trade-shows, exhibits, and traditional library conferences existing at that time.

Schwarz went on to explain that one of the things contributing to the initial and continued success of the market is its intentional partnership and collaboration between vendors and buyers. Since its inception, the NMM has elected a Board of Directors comprised of a potent mix of librarians, educational media and film distributors, and filmmakers. This deliberate process ensures a balanced and effective voice in the planning for the market each year, reflecting the needs and interests of all key stakeholders.

Executive Director Schwarz also commented that while much of the focus of the NMM remains on previewing or screening the films, attendees are also able to review related technology support systems, management software, streaming services, captioning and description services, etc. Additionally, the NMM provides a venue for professional development and networking, with a variety of discussion sessions and presentations offered annually.

One Perspective...

This year I am offering a buyer’s perspective of the NMM. As the Media Librarian and Head of the Media Resources Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, I am the principal selector for the media collection including documentary, educational film, and cinemas spanning the curriculum. When I began working at UNC, two colleagues at peer institutions recommended the NMM to me as the venue for purchasing media, keeping abreast of emerging media technologies and copyright issues while networking with fellow film and media librarians. They were also careful not to impart that it was an instrumental part of their jobs. No doubt here. Participation at the NMM combined with active festival involvement and attendance, academic literature review and research, film trades review, and scholarly communications work remains key to my Media Librarian work at UNC.

How I Prepare...

I prepare for the NMM by discussing with faculty their current media research or instruction needs and interests. I review course listings at UNC as well as associated institutions to identify emerging topics. This is extremely important in that the University Library at UNC is part of a thriving consortium known as TRLN or the Triangle Research Library Network, with NC State University, North Carolina Central University, and Duke University. I also check in with students and staff to get their feedback, and I look for gaps or areas needing enhancement in our collection. Everything goes into a spreadsheet by subject, checked with an ongoing list I maintain of documentary and educational films produced within the last couple of years (typically screened at Film festivals within the last two years).

With this starting point, I review the catalogs and new release listings of the vendors participating in the NMM, looking for these specific titles as well as films that embody the identified subjects of interest. I then compile a list of films to preview at the market (the vast majority being recent or emerging releases, with a few older titles that professors express interest in viewing), a list of vendors to meet with, and streaming products to review. Notably, the NMM does a great job of announcing participating vendors early on, making it easier for me to map out who has what and try to estimate the time I will need for previewing films.

Preview is King...

At its heart, I think one of the strongest values of the NMM is the opportunity for previewing media. Attendees can choose to preview portions of the documentaries or screen them in their entirety. Educational and documentary films vary in cost, many often ranging between $295 and $495 per title. The films can also vary in content and production value, making preview invaluable.

Typically, I reach out to vendors for any specific titles I know I want to preview, making sure they’ll have a copy on hand at the NMM (especially with any older titles). My film preview list is usually pretty long, so I have to be careful about how I spend my time each day during the preview sessions. I kind of brood over my list a bit to make sure I am mapping enough time for my previewing but retaining time for needed vendor meetings and product review. Luckily, the NMM added a new resource to the mix last year that helped alleviate some of the stress of making sure absolutely everything was seen during the confines of the NMM. At the end of the NMM, each registered attendee was provided access to a Preview Portal. The Portal contains full streams of all of the materials presented at that NMM.

Many attendees will team up with a colleague or two for tandem previewing or working in small groups. This often elicits useful conversations and helps in the preview process itself. You might see a film that was not on your list or find out about a new resource. And, tandem previewing often promotes more effective time management, keeping folks motivated to stay on track so everyone gets a chance to see their previews.

In the Know...

I may often run into vendors at film festivals or library conferences, but no other professional symposium has offered the opportunity to interact with them like the NMM does. At the NMM, I spend considerable time with the vendors discussing documentaries and educational media currently available in their catalogs as well as upcoming productions or new films under consideration. This forecasting and dialogue often yields much more content specific to topics and themes needed for research and instruction in our collection, beyond my lists and their catalogs. Meeting with vendors is extremely valuable, not only in discussing subjects and content of the documentaries, but I am able to get a better understanding of public performance options for their titles, talk about format concerns, and provide feedback on streaming media package and tech products. This interaction is enormously helpful, it seems, to both the vendors and the buyers. And, beyond the previews, selecting, buying, and selling — the NMM engenders an open and ongoing dialogue (sometimes debate) between all of the participants on a myriad of media related topics important to the field.

Best Practices, Guidelines, and More...

While the NMM’s primary focus for me is collection development, it also provides a notable venue for interacting with media colleagues, professional development, and education. There is ample time to promote new ideas...
That’s unlike anything applicable to print books. It would be as if someone asked you to create a price index for cars, and to take into account buying new and buying used, leasing, renting, taxi rides, car sharing, and whatever else is out there. I doubt it would take long for any of us to think of academic libraries using all the above methods at once, and no time at all to think of libraries using more than one of them. If a library, say, bought one eBook at a certain price; bought another following several short-term loans whose fees were apart from the sale price; subscribed to several dozen titles in a publisher subject package for the year; bought a few dozen titles outright in another subject package; and licensed an aggregator package too, what was the average price they paid for an eBook? 

Beats me. Unless we decide to make the print book transaction a lot more complicated than it’s been in the past, it looks as if eBooks and print books, which as we know sometimes are as alike as twins but sometimes are more like first cousins, here are starting to resemble more distant relations, part monograph, part serial, part database, and even part inter-library loan. The ways we’ve become used to thinking about book prices no longer work in the world we’re all moving into.

In fact, the ways we’ve become used to looking at a lot of things don’t seem to fit so well any longer. Libraries have time-tested ways to buy print books, but what not long ago seemed routine — firm orders, approval plans — now can seem reckless, like gambling. This book will leap off the shelf, will beat the odds. Won’t it? Each one is ordered and received in that hope, anyway, as card and slot players know there’s hope for them to beat the house in a casino. For library selectors, while at least it’s not their own money, comfort levels were considerably higher before their odds were published so regularly.

Today bets are often hedged with “pilots,” programs to test out a new way of doing things, or in my dictionary’s definition, “serving as a tentative model for future experiment or development.” That “tentative” for more “experiment” part is a pretty good description of where we are. Libraries, vendors, aggregators, publishers — we all know eBooks will keep growing, we’re just not sure exactly how. We try this, and we try that. So many pilot programs have been launched we need an air traffic control tower.

Without one, we’re in danger. Not the danger you might think, though, that without air traffic controllers our pilots will collide and fall to earth. We have a different problem. We’re at risk that our pilot programs will not collide, that instead they’ll buzz about in the sky indefinitely, flying loops around one another, each on their own course, a thousand non-intersecting flight plans leaving majestic vapor trails that soar toward the sun. And then vanish.

We need some collisions. We need signals from air traffic control directing us toward contact. That means that publishers, aggregators, vendors, and libraries can’t fly past each other. We need pilots aiming for destinations beyond conference presentations or someone’s goals and objectives for the year. If this aggregator and that library run a pilot, or if that consortia and this publisher have one, of if this vendor and that aggregator work out a flight plan, we are all going to stay up in the sky.

This isn’t to knock pilot programs. Pilots are good, we learn from them. It is to say, though, that they aren’t an end in themselves. Publishers, libraries, aggregators, and vendors each have their own realities, realities not altogether unknown to the others, but too often unacknowledged. Publishers have concerns over piracy, and librarians want the best possible user experience for their patrons. Libraries want aggregated workflows with vendors, and publishers want direct sales channels. Everyone wants eBooks to grow, and many library users still want print. Aggregators and vendors want attractive pricing models for libraries, and publishers want to protect their revenue.

We can all wish things were easier, but a good first step might be to agree that it’s not easy, that all of these issues are real, real to someone who matters, and that if we all want altitude, we need to acknowledge this in going about our business. The Wright Brothers invented an airplane, but they didn’t invent aviation. Until we invent ours, what we have is more than a highwire act, but it’s still an air show.