



10 Simple Secrets for Saving Money on Film Festival Submissions

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For many filmmakers, the realities of the festival circuit can come as a shock. It's no surprise that finding the right festivals for your film is a bit of a numbers game, but the actual hit rates can be unexpectedly low. A competent filmmaker can submit to a dozen festivals without finding the right match, and the rejections often come without explanation, and (unbeknownst to the filmmaker) for reasons that have nothing to do with the film's merit.

The factor that most limits your ability to play this numbers game is that nearly every submission comes with a fee. Festival fees mean revenue of course, but they are more a barrier to entry – to keep out the folks who aren't really serious – than anything else.

That doesn't mean that those fees don't add up. If you're looking for ways to ease the strain on your festival budget, here are ten things to consider.

#1 - Don't treat festivals as an afterthought when creating your festival budget.

Estimate how much you'll need for submissions fees, travel, and festival miscellany, and include that figure in your film's

budget before production. Knowing you have bills yet to pay – and how big they're likely to be – during your festival run may will allow you to make more informed spending decisions during production.

#2 - Make sure your film is done. Really done.

Nothing wastes money faster than sending out a film that is either half-finished or half the film it **could** be.

How do you find out if your film passes muster? You need to hold some test screenings, ideally with people who don't know you to evaluate the film dispassionately. If you can find people who have experience with watching festival screeners that's a bonus, but hardly required – a good story is a good story, and your film must appeal to (or at least be understood by) audiences of all stripes if you want it to do well on the festival circuit.



Many filmmakers (particularly those with shorts) balk at the idea of organizing a room full of strangers to critique their work, but it is a critical step in the submissions process. You have to find out whether someone besides your friends and family understands and likes your movie. (And if not, why not.)

I have a form I like to use to collect opinions from test screening audience members, and you can download it here: filmfestivalsecrets.com/screeningform

Until this step is done to the best of your ability, the rest of this list hardly matters. (Though of course you should keep reading!)

#3 - Think it through.

One of the phrases I hear most often from filmmakers is "I wish I'd known." They wish they'd known how overwhelming this process is. How many festivals there are, and how different they are from one another. How much it was likely to cost.

It's incredibly important to **have a strategy** and to execute that strategy in a thoughtful submissions campaign. A submission fee spent on a festival that is inappropriate for your film is just money thrown away, but the only way you're

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going to know if a festival is right for you is to do the research.

My friend Lisa V is the director of New York's Cinekink film festival (cinekink.com), which centers around positive portrayals of sex in film. She routinely receives submissions from filmmakers whose entries are inappropriate for her fest.

"Seems like every season we'll get at least one (feature-length!) entry about something as randomly unrelated as environmental devastation of the rain forests," Lisa told me recently. "And several years we've even received films intended for children. C'mon, people... the kink is in our name!"



General research on the submissions process is also required. It's tough to know how much to budget, how many festivals to submit to, or how long you can expect to spend in the submissions process without understanding the scope and process of a typical submission campaign for a film.

Doing research on the web is a great way to start (and that's probably how you found Film Festival Secrets), but **talking to other filmmakers** who have made films like yours and who have been through the process is crucial.

#4 - Submit early.

This one is somehow really easy and really difficult at the same time. It's easy to resolve never to submit to a festival any later than the early deadline, but it's also extremely tempting to see "the perfect festival" for your film and shrug your shoulders at a few extra bucks to submit on the late deadline. Don't do it. Learn more about the whys and why-nots of early submissions in this article on the 3 Fundamental Rules of Festival Submissions (filmfestivalsecrets.com/fundamentals).

#5 - Look for bargains.

While an early submission to a festival you've hand-picked as a good match for your film (based on research, of course) is the best bargain of all, there are additional ways to save on festival submissions.

Seek out specialty festivals that have a particular interest in your film's subject matter, or even a particular interest in **you** –

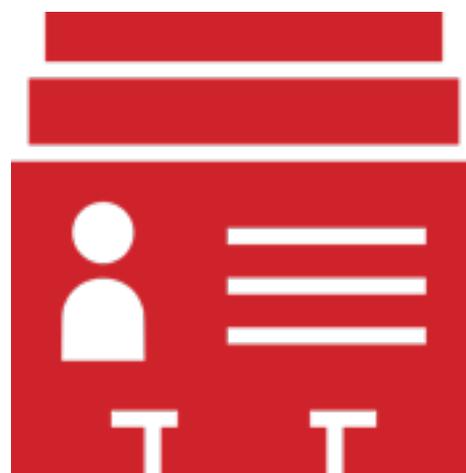
because of your gender, your family origin, your brand of shoe polish, whatever. Festivals that have a laser focus on certain kinds of content often have lower fees or dispense with fees altogether.

Additionally, some fests have **lowered rates for local filmmakers or students**. There's legwork to be done here – you have to spend time researching these fests and really thinking about the target audience for your film. This effort will be rewarded, however, in both your festival acceptance rate and in your campaign to market and distribute the film afterward.

#6 - Network at festivals to find visiting programmers looking for films like yours.

This can be a bit daunting at first, but as your films play more festivals, it will become easier to seek out the people who want to show your work.

Every festival has at least one or two visiting programmers from other events scoping out the screening



schedule and approaching the filmmakers whose work seems right for their audience back at home. You can actually **reverse the process** and approach them about playing your film at their fest. It's a little tricky to find and approach people like this if you've never done it before (and if your film isn't playing in the festival you're attending), but if you can make that connection and ask them to look at your film, it usually works. **It's very difficult to say no to someone in person**, especially in a social situation.

If your film **is** playing at the festival (or has played other festivals in the past), your hand is stronger because your work comes pre-approved. **Programmers are always on the hunt for leads to quality content** and are very likely to grant waivers to films that have already been vetted by other fests, particularly if you ask nicely and in person -- after a bit of small talk first, of course. Flattery always helps.

#7 - Offer something of value.

If you must send email to festival programmers to beg for fee waivers (and I don't recommend it), **beg well and make a good case for your work**. Pleading poverty is not helpful, nor is over-confident boasting of your own work's quality. Validation from outside sources always helps, as does demonstrating a connection to the festival or to subject matter

that the festival's audience holds dear. **Convince the reader of the email that they're doing themselves a favor** by considering your work in addition to doing you a favor by waiving the fee. Oh, and include a link to your festival screener in your very first message.

#8 - Turn yesterday's festival success into today's festival invitations.

That means keeping a running list of your festival screenings on your web site and social media pages. In communication with festivals through email or cover letters, you needn't include every single fest you've played, but prominently mentioning a few of your favorites can be helpful in getting a programmer's attention.

This doesn't just apply to your current film. If you or your cast/crew worked on other films that have played festivals, mention them in passing. **A pedigree of any sort is better than none** at all, so long as you don't seem overly desperate.

#9 - Put your marketing house in order. (For a number of reasons.)

No cobwebbed Facebook pages that haven't been updated in weeks or web sites with under construction signs. Festival directors who visit your site should be able to learn everything they need to know about your and your film, and it shouldn't look as if you put the site up and abandoned it.

Additionally, said festival organizer should get the impression that you'd be a good marketing partner who fill your screening at the event. I've seen a number of close decisions between one film or the other come down to how the filmmaker presents himself online. Professionalism counts when you want to maximize the return on your submission dollar.

#10 - Decide ahead of time when you're going to stop paying to submit.

Figure out what factors in a festival campaign are important to you, and what event will signal that you should either stop submitting or keep going. This can be a calendar date or a

threshold of a certain number of rejections/acceptances, but it's important to write this down (even if you change your mind later) and tell someone else on your team about it. Most filmmakers make this decision passively when their gut tells them it's time, or when the inquiries from festivals are coming without the need to submit, or when they run out of money. I find it's helpful to think about what that milestone is before you reach it -- or before you leave it behind, only to realize what it was several months (and hundreds of dollars) later. You can always change your mind when you reach the milestone, but the milestone exists to remind you to stop and evaluate.

All of this barely scratches the surface of what there is to know about the festival circuit, but hopefully you're armed with a bit more confidence at this point. Turn the page for the steps to take next.

– Chris Holland, Film Festival Secrets



Thanks for reading!

Here is what you should do next:

1. Check out my book, **Film Festival Secrets** (filmfestivalsecrets.com). It's mostly for filmmakers but festival directors have told me it has been useful to them too.
2. Read **The Better Festival Submissions Toolkit** (<https://gumroad.com/l/fftoolkit>), my quick-and-dirty guide for filmmakers who want to improve their submissions. (**It's free**, or pay what you want for it if you're feeling generous.)
3. Follow [@ffsecrets](https://twitter.com/ffsecrets) on Twitter.
4. Send an email to chris@filmfestivalsecrets.com with any feedback or questions you might have.

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