

## What is a distribution executive?



Troy Lum, distribution executive, addressing the Australian International Movie Convention

Film distribution companies range in size from the majors to the independents. In Australia, the major distributors are Australian-based companies who represent the Hollywood studios and whose film releases are mainly made by the studios.

Independent distributors license the rights to release a range of local and international films into Australian cinemas. These films come from all over the world and are usually made by smaller, independent production companies. Indie distributors often outsource some sales and marketing roles film by film and bring on people to work on a freelance or project basis.

Distributors earn their money from a percentage of the revenue from the box office ticket sales at cinemas. Distributors sometimes share in other revenue streams – such as DVD or Blu-ray sales or rental, television broadcast, online sales or even from sales of the film to airlines and hotels.

The managing director is responsible for the overall campaigns of the films a distribution company releases. Essentially, he oversees the distribution strategy for the film, which involves an exhibition strategy devised with the sales department and a marketing strategy devised with the marketing department.

Managing directors generally work their way up the ranks through sales or marketing and have particular skills or expertise in one of those areas. Some are really hands-on, ideas people and some are leaders who delegate responsibility to their senior executives.

The role of managing director includes:

- corporate governance of the organisation, e.g. making sure the company complies with its duties and obligations
- maintaining relationships and regular communication with the senior executives and studio heads at their parent company or studio headquarters, which are mostly based in Los Angeles, or with film sales agents around the world.
- maintaining relationships with the producers and filmmakers whose films they release
- finding films to distribute
- finalising the marketing budget for each film release, which determines how much money can be spent on the campaign
- setting the release date for films.

While major distributors get their films from the studios, independent distribution companies need to acquire films to release. They may travel to film markets and festivals looking to buy the Australian distribution rights to films. Business

takes place at festivals and markets like Cannes or the American Film Market where filmmakers are looking for the best distributor for their project, and distributors are looking for the best films for their local territory.

At some markets, bidding wars take place where a number of distributors are interested in a particular script or finished film. This will drive up the cost of acquiring the rights to distribute the film.

Distributors may also do deals with local filmmakers to distribute their finished films or to co-produce the film, which means they put up some of the capital required to fund the film as well as managing the distribution of the film.

The ideal scenario for a filmmaker is to secure a distributor at the earliest stages of development. When a film is unable to secure a distributor, its chances of securing a theatrical release are diminished. Few filmmakers have the leverage to negotiate a multi-screen release on favourable terms with an exhibitor. Fewer still have the funds to finance a marketing campaign that might bring audiences to the cinema.

Attaching a distributor during development will also assist the producer to raise other finance for the film. Having a distributor attached is an essential criterion for securing Australian government funding.

Distributors want to be attached to potentially successful films and the managing director is at the forefront, reading scripts and looking for what they hope will be the next big hit in the cinema. When a distributor finds a film they want to distribute, they work closely with the producer and director to ensure that the film is developed, written and produced with the target audience in mind and to a budget that might allow revenue to be returned to all the participants - the bigger the film budget, the more money needs to be taken at the box office and via all other revenue streams, such as DVDs and TV sales.

The role of the distributor during the making of the film will vary, depending on the personalities of the producer, the managing director and the director. Some distributors may be engaged in the production process, guiding and supporting the film to be the best it can be, while also making sure that it remains appropriate for the intended audience. For example,

the managing director might request removing language that might raise the classification rating for the film and block a large portion of the potential audience from seeing it in the cinema. Other distributors take a more hands-off approach, becoming more involved during the editing process.

The distributor may visit the set during filming and view the assembled footage and scenes in the edit room through all the edit stages. Distributor approval of the final edit of the film is sometimes a contractual obligation for the producer.

The managing director works closely with the sales team to determine the best date for a film's release and its optimal exhibition strategy, which includes how many screens, which locations and how many sessions they would ideally like the film to play. They arrange for exhibitors to see the film when it is finished. Screenings are often held in private theatrettes at the distributors' offices.

When the cinema release is determined, the distributor liaises with each exhibitor about the release strategy in the hope of achieving the best exposure for the film in cinema foyers and the screening of trailers.

Depending on the type of film, the size of the marketing budget and the availability of the actors, the film may premiere in key cities across the world, generating buzz and publicity and, hopefully, raising the audience's awareness. The managing director will need to consider whether film premieres and talent tours will be part of the local distribution strategy, weighing up the significant costs against the potential benefits.

The distribution company must submit the film to the Classification Board so it can be given a rating. An operations manager is responsible for managing the delivery of the film and the trailer to cinemas for every screening of the film in Australia.

[Click here to view interview with distribution executive Troy Lum](#)

#### Useful resources:

- [Wikipedia: Film distributor](#)

Creative Content Australia is a not-for-profit organisation committed to raising awareness of the significance of copyright, the value of screen content and the impact that downloading and streaming pirated films and TV programs has on the creative industries: [www.creativecontentaustralia.org.au](http://www.creativecontentaustralia.org.au)

Creative Content Australia develops and distributes free online education resources to schools throughout Australia to stimulate classroom discussion about copyright and promote the value of creative content and good digital citizenship online [www.nothingbeatstherealthing.info](http://www.nothingbeatstherealthing.info)

