

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Navigating Public Television: Fundraising the Traditional Way

Lisa Bowers · Wednesday, September 2nd, 2015

So, your film proposal is strong enough to have convinced a [distributor to make a commitment](#). Now you need to find money to produce it. Funding can be an Achilles heel for both new and established filmmakers. But just as with distribution, many avenues for funding exist. The traditional sources of funding for documentarians and independent filmmakers are described below.

First some hard realities. It is difficult to make a living as a filmmaker. Some successful filmmakers have had to retain their day job in order to fund their passion for filmmaking. Even Ken Burns, the iconic public television documentarian whose award-winning *Civil War* still holds the record for all-time viewership on PBS, says about his *Baseball* documentary: “We get paid after many partners get paid back.” Burns “takes \$125,000 a year in salary. Any profits – which come from sales of DVD’s (Florentine [his production company] ends up with maybe a few cents of every residual revenue dollar) – get reinvested in the next production. Burns supplements his film income with book sales and speeches to universities and businesses. ([Forbes](#), , 8/2/10)



Zay Harding, host of GLOBE TREKKER, a series that transports viewers to unforgettable destinations through its stunning photography, indigenous music and spirit of adventure. APT Exchange.

“In this increasingly crowded field of global documentary filmmakers, the competition for funding can be especially disheartening to a first time filmmaker with no impressive slate of films under their belt or high power name to help in marketing,” says Christine Knowlton, director of the upcoming *Sense the Wind*. “Though doors are open to newbies and the network of documentary creators very supportive, high profile established filmmakers such as Rory Kennedy or Ken Burns are understandably more easily funded.”

Even though most films cost much less to produce than they did a decade ago, [the costs](#) can still be significant, depending on the type of film and production. There are pre-, post-, and production costs, packaging and finishing, distribution, and marketing costs, to name a few. Most experts agree that fundraising for all of these expenses can take a long time.

The general rule of public television fundraising is that filmmakers must either do the fundraising themselves, or hire someone to do it. Working with organizations and freelance individuals that have sold sponsorships for public television before is advantageous. There are not a lot of those organizations or individuals. They typically work on retainer and it takes about a year to secure a

sponsor.

A chicken and egg situation with distribution and funding exists for filmmakers. Funders want to know the distribution details. The brand-value proposition, especially for corporate underwriters, is enhanced when a certain percentage of US TV households is reached (that attractive threshold could be 60% for one brand and 90% for another, depending on a wide variety of factors. In many cases, the coverage will compare very favorably to a cable television network because PBS reaches over 98% of US television viewers). If a filmmaker approaches a station or distributor with a funded program or a track record of funding, it is much easier for a programmer to justify investing in the program.

THE FUNDING POSSIBILITIES

Traditional Program Funding

In some cases, a public media station may be able to provide full or partial funding, sometimes taking ownership or co-producing the production and possibly sharing rights. Ask your distributor about the funding possibilities. For example, [American Public Television \(APT\) Premium Service](#) may fund the finishing budget for strong pledge shows (although this is the only source of funding that APT offers).

There are 4 primary traditional external sources of funding (the next post in this series will speak to less traditional funding paths):

- **Foundations**
- **Corporate Underwriters**
- **Individual Donors**
- **Public Sector/Government Institutions**

Most successful filmmakers diversify their funding sources as much as possible, which mitigates their risk and optimizes their long-term flexibility.

Sponsor benefits vary depending on program and reach, but many companies and foundations see advantages in aligning themselves with public television because of its reputation for high quality and because it ranks significantly higher in public trust than commercial broadcast TV networks, cable TV networks, and even courts of law. ([2015 Caravan ORC Study](#))

Regardless of the type of funder you target, Max Duke, VP, Content & Community Partnerships, [WPBT2](#), believes that your pitch should be different if it is to someone controlling a marketing budget (common for corporate sponsorship) versus someone controlling a foundation budget (common for philanthropic groups). The metrics of your proposal are usually going to be very important to a brand or corporation, often represented by a media agency. While not always the case, one filmmaker's perception that big brands and their agencies "live by the numbers, die by the numbers" is pretty apt. A foundation is more likely to judge your film and the "sponsorship package" on its projected social impact and ties to its mission – is your program going to effect change?



Changing Seas, in its 8th season, has aired in 90% of markets and over 30 countries worldwide.
©WPBT2

Foundations. There are over 86,000 foundations in the US. They gave over \$52mm in grant money in 2012. (Source: [Foundation Center website](#)) Admittedly, while a very small percentage of this money went to documentarians, there are many foundations who have generously supported documentaries that support their mission. Look at the credit rolls of documentaries airing on public television and you will see credits for foundations like the [Arthur Vinings Davis Foundation](#) and the [MacArthur Foundation](#). To generate a list of foundations who might be interested in your documentary, visit one of the 5 [Foundation Center](#) locations and use their funding resources, purchase a subscription to the [Foundation Directory Online](#), or locate one of the 470 [Funding Information Network](#) organizations that offer Foundation Center resources for free.

Corporate Underwriters. “National corporate sponsors,” or underwriters in public television parlance, are a very common way to pay for a program. They often have big budgets, the proposal might take less time than a foundation proposal, and information about their products and decision makers is easier to locate (sometimes just watching television can give you ideas). Reasons for a company to sponsor a public television program include:

- build brand awareness
- reach an audience that mirrors its existing customer or target
- align with content relevant to its brand, its customers’ preferences, or its corporate social responsibility (CSR) mission
- associate with the prestige and credibility of public television

While corporations can have a lot of money to invest, they are likely to compare the benefits of a public television sponsorship to an advertising buy or a CSR investment. They will scrutinize this investment against the many other proposals they receive, so the price/value equation must be attractive to them. They need specifics such as timing, household reach, number of viewers, pricing, and the length, frequency and number of their “spots” (called underwriting credits in the PBS Guidelines). Think about adding off-air and experiential deliverables that are unique – companies pay more for benefits that they cannot get anywhere else. Is your talent willing to participate in company events? Can you shoot a short video on location that can be used in a corporate marketing campaign?

Try to find out what similar public television properties and properties that target a similar audience are commanding in the commercial marketplace. Your film may be compared to them, as well as to nonprofit sponsorships or cause marketing programs. [IEG](#), which is behind the informative [sponsorship.com](#) website, provides very detailed valuations of each of a property’s assets for a fee.

[Heather Yandow’s 2014 Individual Donor Benchmark Report](#) found that the only correlation between fundraising efforts and fundraising success is whether the organization had a fundraising plan. While respondents to this study were nonprofits, documentarians should take heed. Your plan should include the following steps for corporate underwriter outreach (or “sponsorship sales”):

1. Gather Metrics!

- Summarize past performance in terms of **ratings and carriage** – even if you have to pay for that info. Projecting your audience composition and size is invaluable when seeking the support of

sponsors and advertisers. PBS Research knows how similarly-themed programs have performed in the past in terms of carriage and ratings, and they can produce estimates of who and how many people will be watching when your program hits the air. There is a fee for this service, but the knowledge you gain will help you answer what is quite often the first question asked by marketers: “How many people will see my message?” A media expert can calculate what the projections will mean in terms of eyeballs and impressions and suggest which metrics to use in prospect pitches.

- [GfK Mediamark Research](#) statistics can tell you how PBS viewers or even viewers of select PBS genres or programs index against a variety of behaviors and brands, whether it be using mobile or shopping at Best Buy. This can make your sales materials feel more relevant to your prospects’ needs.

2. Create a professionally designed **overview** that includes hard statistics that brands and advertisers care about, such as timing, projected reach, projected viewership, # of hours, and tonality. A wordy treatment in Word will probably not cut it: be able to describe the sponsorship opportunity in one or two pages. Materials that are easy to consume and that stand out will greatly enhance the probability of a sale and will allow you to compare favorably to the other proposals in prospects’ inboxes.

- Provide a short video clip, if possible
- Integrate historical track record, if available, with projections
- Repurpose your program description into promotional copy that is compelling, succinct, and speaks to sponsor benefits
- List exclusive and co-sponsorship deliverables, if applicable
- Think about creating additional “one-sheets” to use in reminder e-mails and to enhance the introductory pitch. These could include research on why the program is essential viewing for its target, why the topic is au courant, or a compilation of viewer/press quotes for a continuing series.

3. **Research corporations** that are potential matches and develop a **sales strategy** and qualified prospect list. Don’t forget about trade associations and nonprofits that may also have budgets for content aligned with their organization’s membership or mission. Use research to customize pitches, using the following information about your prospects:

- Tagline
- CSR areas of focus
- Target market
- Existing sponsorships
- Recent news
- Fiscal year and planning cycle (although some companies are open to reviewing opportunities all year long)
- Names and contact information of decision makers, whose titles could include President, CMO’s, Director or VP of Media, Director or VP of Advertising, Marketing or Product Manager, Foundation Executive Director or Program Officer, or VP or Director of CSR or Sponsorship/Partnerships. Your first point of entry might also be a company’s media or PR agency.
- Consider using databases and industry resources that provide either additional intelligence about potential sponsors or more visibility for your project. [Sellercrowd](#) is an exchange for media sellers in the know about new agency RFP’s and brand and agency contacts. [Sponsorpitch](#) is a

platform that matches sponsorship opportunities with marketers and agencies but it requires some digging and proactiveness to be successful, especially if you are not an event, sports property or accessible, well-known brand. A Sponsorpitch membership can provide mostly up-to-date contact information (much of it provided by either other members or through AdDataExpress) and can save you a lot of time since the reality is that you are probably going to need to pitch to people outside your network (although a strong network of contacts will give you a running start).

4. Start **pitching**!

- **Prioritize** so that you are going out to the prospects with the highest probability of success first. Be strategic. Prospecting takes time and time is money.
- Be prepared to contact a lot of prospects. The higher your price, the narrower the audience niche, the lower the reach, the fewer the eyeballs, the more esoteric your program content, and the less extensive your track record: the longer your prospect list should be.
- Be patient. Even Ken Burns' films take years to produce. "Because he must raise funds in addition to researching and making the films, Burns and his collaborators have to map out projects years in advance." ([LATimes.com](https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/ken-burns-2015-03-26), March 26, 2015)
- Customize the pitch so that the prospective sponsor does not feel like you are just looking for money (even though you are!) and have sent the same pitch to 1,000 companies. Suggest ancillary opportunities that would be important to the sponsor whenever appropriate. What can you offer that is unique or that would be expensive for the sponsor to procure on its own? For example, a cooking series might offer a branded Holiday Entertaining Booklet. If possible, figure out how to offer digital and mobile extensions for sponsors heavily involved in those media. If you haven't gone into production yet, video content can be malleable to the sponsor's needs and offered as a value-add or at little added cost.
- Follow up, follow up, follow up! Use a prospect's assistant to make sure that your pitch has been seen. Try to get an answer, even if it is no. Even declines can give you learning about what is appealing and not so appealing about your offering.

5. Craft an **agreement** that details your requirements, knowing that the agreement will most likely be thoroughly reviewed by sponsor management and their legal counsel. Make sure that what was promised in sale calls is outlined in the agreement. Get someone practiced in media rights to review the agreement. Sometimes a letter of agreement/commitment will be appropriate before a full-blown agreement, especially if you want to go into production immediately.

6. Don't forget about **account management** and a post-sponsorship review. You need to make sure that everything that was promised is delivered – during production and at launch. After the fact is too late. A media consultant may be best able to do this for you. They can carry out account management activities such as ensuring the advertising spots (referred to as underwriting credits in the public television world) comply with PBS/FCC regulations and optimizing sponsor benefits, such as using screenings as a marketing tool or inviting key constituencies to film events. A sponsorship review post-launch, highlighting what the sponsor received, and including metrics, will increase your chances of their coming on board for your next project!

Individual Donors. Individual donors are behind the funding of many public television programs, in big amounts and small. ([Crowdfunding](#) can be a good platform for individuals contributing smaller amounts. It will be addressed in the next post.) At the beginning stages of the fundraising process, saying that someone has believed enough in your concept to invest in it will be beneficial.

In the later stages, individuals might be able to fill expense gaps for finishing funds, promotion, outreach, and screenings.

Scour the credits on existing public television programs. Research philanthropists, influentials, and high net worth individuals who have ties to the content covered in your program. Attend events at which they are speaking. Use your network for introductions and take a personalized approach that recognizes their passion for the subject matter.

“For niche films such as *Sense The Wind*, fundraising has been successful thanks to generous private donors with deep pockets and big hearts and through hosting special events. Though putting on events is very labor intensive and turnouts unpredictable, the financial gains are immediate and the grass roots connection with audiences key to later distribution. It takes a village to make a documentary successful,” shares Ms. Knowlton.



Sense the Wind Q&A at 2014 fundraiser event in Jamestown, RI.

Public Sector/Government Institutions. Three government organizations that can be very generous with respect to guidance and funding are:

- National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH)
- National Endowment for the Arts (NEA)
- National Science Foundation (NSF)

NEH is one of the largest funders of humanities programs in the United States. It has funded a host of documentaries, many of them distributed on public television. NEH-funded documentaries include *Icebound*, about the race to save Nome from a diphtheria outbreak (awarded a \$695K grant), a documentary about the Chinese game of Go, and American Masters’ *Ralph Ellison: An American Journey* (awarded \$532K). It currently offers [two primary grants for documentaries](#). If you have expertise in the humanities, consider becoming a peer reviewer which will give you an inside look at what is involved in the proposal process. [IDA’s article](#) on writing an NEH grant offers excellent advice.

NEA “funds, promotes, and strengthens the creative capacity of our communities by providing all Americans with diverse opportunities for arts participation.” It awards grants to both individuals and organizations. Documentaries it has funded include *BULLY* and *Mitchell 20*, a project that follows a group of 20 teachers working toward national board certification. NEA also funds outreach. It recently awarded a grant of \$300K for public outreach associated with Ric Burns’ *Debt of Honor* documentary.

NSF’s Advancing Informal STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) Learning (AISL) program has a long history of providing funding to a wide range of institutions such as science centers, afterschool programs, citizen science groups and public television and radio producers, says [Sandra Welch](#), who has been an NSF Program Director for 11 years. Media projects must focus on programs that engage children and the public in STEM learning. Funding ranges from \$150,000 to \$3,000,000, depending on the type of project and scope. AISL is competitive: over 400 proposals were submitted in 2014 and 8% were funded. The total AISL budget for new projects is approximately \$35mm each year. Examples of recent children’s public television and online programs funded include *Peg + Cat*, *SciGirls*, and *Plum Landing*. Recently funded adult audience programs include *NOVA ScienceNOW*, *Time Team America*, *EARTH: The Operator’s*

Manual, and *The Mystery of Matter*. **The deadline for submitting proposals to the current solicitation is November 4, 2015.**

Be prepared to write a substantive proposal and allow a lot of time to write proposals to any of the above. But the benefits are immense and include monetary benefits, expert guidance, and an impressive imprimatur, i.e., instant credibility.

Many other government organizations have a history of sponsoring public television programs. They often are interested in extending documentary content into educational programs or publicity campaigns. Past examples include the Department of the Army's ongoing sponsorship of PBS' *A Capitol Fourth* and *National Memorial Day Concert* and the Department of Energy's sponsorship of *NOVA*.

State-funded Film and Arts Organizations. Mr. Duke, Vice President, Content and Community Partnerships at WPBT2 South Florida Public Media, recommends talking to the Film Commission in your community. For one example, look at the attractive incentives that [Virginia's Film Office](#) offers to resident filmmakers. Mr. Duke also suggests contacting the Arts & Humanities Council in your state. To name just two, the California Council on the Humanities has sponsored both *POV* and *American Masters* and the Wisconsin Humanities Council has sponsored *American Masters* and *Independent Lens* programs.

Think about the different topics in your film and which organizations have a stake in those topics at the national, state, county, and city levels. It is possible that the Department of Education will fund your program if it can enhance its curriculum and you are willing to license your film for free to schools. The Children and Families Commission of Orange County provided KCET-distributed *A Place of Our Own* with \$350,000 to conduct 35 caregiver workshops.

PBS and its Film-Commissioning Organizations. PBS, and its signature series like *NOVA*, will also commission films and provide partial funding. Michael Rosenfeld, who reviewed many submissions when he was President of National Geographic Television, advises that the commissioning body will ask the following 3 questions:

1. What is the story and what makes it compelling?
2. Does this filmmaker have the chops to pull this off?
3. Can this film get funded?

If \$100K is committed to a project that will cost \$400K, this will go a long way towards pre-production and procuring additional sources of funding. Mr. Rosenfeld also suggests that it helps to have an understanding of what the commissioning editor is looking for: the themes and tonality of *NOVA* vary greatly from the programming of National Geographic Channel. It also doesn't hurt to have a track record of filmmaking success, or at least a strong case for your ability to produce a marketable film that will attract viewers.

Viewers may associate you with your funding sources, whether it is a corporate sponsor, foundation, individual, or co-production partner. The public will let you, or the [PBS Ombudsman](#), know how they feel about that alliance if there appears to be improper influence.

Public Television Funding Guidelines. The [FCC](#) requires that all funders be identified on the program (but not IN the program!). The entire sponsorship fee (less any fees due an agent) is kept by the producers. In terms of media value, one of the biggest sponsor benefits is the "underwriting

credits,” similar to advertising spots, that come with a public television sponsorship. Sponsors are required to be identified at the top and the tail of the program, a requirement that could confer tremendous value, depending on reach and viewership. The standard length is 15 seconds, but :30’s are allowable at specified investment levels. Sponsors can also be mentioned in tune-in ads as the “proud sponsor of X,” be promoted on the program website with a link to their website, and receive added value in online and off-air benefits like events. APT’s standard is, “We welcome the sponsor to promote the program, as long as the program is not promoting the sponsor.”

Hopefully you are now encouraged by the many sources of funding available for strong projects. Where do you begin? First, determine your resources. Most of the above avenues can take time and you may need to hire someone to be successful. You can invest a lot of time in proposals and not get a grant. Think about where your project has the best chances for success. Do not put all of your eggs in one basket. Write a plan that includes more than one avenue to explore.

The producers of the thousands of hours of great programming and films found funding and so can you. Be patient, believe in what you have to offer, be willing to fine-tune, and good luck! I look forward to seeing the finished product!

Resources:

Comprehensive lists of funding resources worth consulting:

- [POV List of Funding Resources](#):
- [IDA List of Funding Sources](#)

Foundation Information:

- NSF projects that have been funded in the past, as well as helpful information for preparing a proposal: informal.science.org
- [Inside Philanthropy](#) allows you to search their directory of 700 program officers and foundation executives by name or funding area.
- [WIFV/Docs in Progress Documentary Roundtable](#) Great information about the submission process share by NEA and NEH program officers.

Where to Get Metrics:

- PBS Research: Contact Bill Merkel, Director, at wrmerkel@pbs.org or (703) 739-5250

Top image: Point and Shoot by two-time Oscar nominee Marshall Curry, celebrating 10 years with POV. © American Documentary, Inc.

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