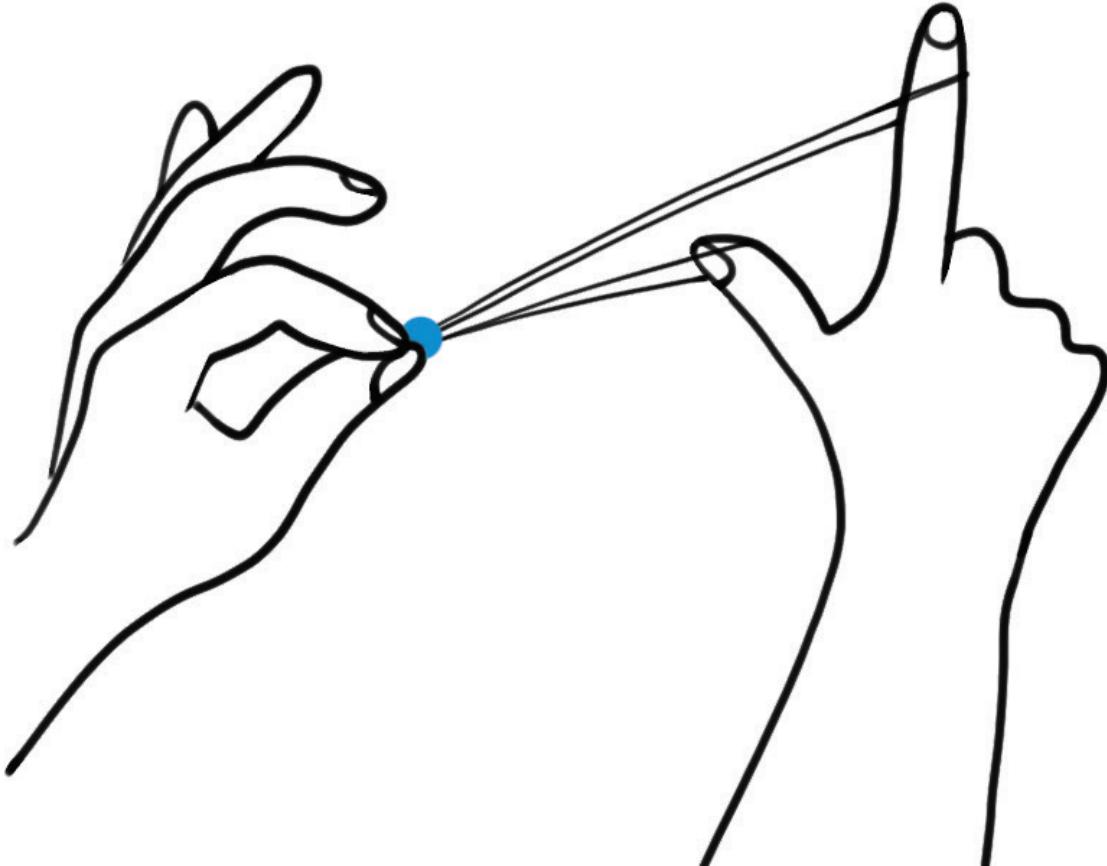


Supercharge Your Distribution

By Keith Ochwat + Peter Broderick



Conferences can make the difference between the success and failure of an independent film.

Making a great film is not enough. Every film needs to build a critical amount of awareness to succeed. Most filmmakers overestimate the importance of festivals and are completely unaware of the power of conferences. While most film festivals are local events, attracting a local audience to a diverse selection of unrelated films, most conferences are national events, bringing leaders together from across the country to focus on a specific topic.

Too many filmmakers spend too much time and money applying to countless festivals. Instead they should target a limited number of festivals and make a substantial conference push. For many documentaries, conferences can have far more impact than festivals. Instead of focusing 100% of your efforts on festivals, I'd recommend allocating 90% to conferences if your film has substantial, well-organized core audiences. Your conference strategy can complement your festival strategy since conferences are considered private events and don't interfere with festival premieres.

I'm very pleased to publish this invaluable guide to making the most of conferences by my teammate Keith Ochwat. He is the guru of using conferences to maximize distribution. His unprecedented success at conferences with *Age of Champions* illustrates their remarkable potential. He also achieved impressive results at very different conferences for Sara Lamm's film *Thank You for Coming*. His step-by-step guide reveals the secrets to using conferences to increase awareness, revenue, and impact.

- Peter Broderick

This report appeared on www.peterbroderick.com as Distribution Bulletin Issue #35.

Supercharge Your Distribution

By Keith Ochwat

Conferences can supercharge your film's distribution. Most filmmakers are completely unaware of this secret weapon but conferences can boost your efforts to identify your core audience, connect with partners, and tap into national networks of potential supporters.

The right conference can be more than just another event in your film's distribution. It can mark the moment your film goes from unknown to must-have. The right conference can spark meaningful partnerships and generate significant revenue from speaking fees and sales. A conference isn't just a gathering where you can show your film—it's a tool for building an authentic connection with the people that will be key to your success.

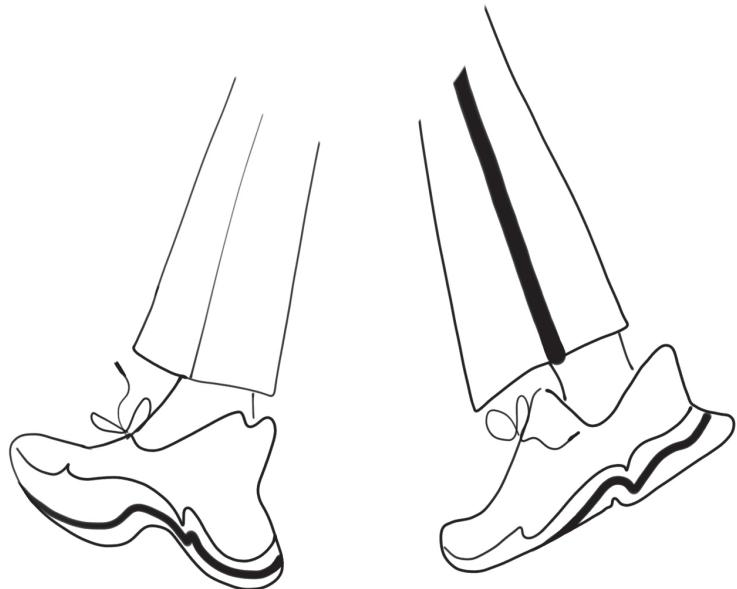
Conferences were crucial to the success of our documentary *Age of Champions*, about athletes competing at the Senior Olympics. We subsequently generated over 3,000 grassroots screening events and \$1.5 million in revenue. At first we took the standard approach to distribution. We premiered at a film festival—AFI Docs in Washington DC—where we received a standing ovation and a glowing Washington Post review. But we ended up leaving town virtually broke and without clarity about how we could successfully distribute our film.

Ten months after our AFI Docs premiere, we returned to Washington DC. This time we had decided to take an unconventional approach that turned out to be a game-changer. We were invited to present a short clip of our film at a conference of 8,000 staff from senior living communities across the country. This event gave us the platform to confirm that senior living professionals were our core audience. It helped us connect with companies that ended up becoming partners. And it connected us with a huge national network of our film's most enthusiastic supporters. The ripple effect from word-of-mouth reverberated for months, generating critical awareness and revenue.

Here are the **six key steps** to make the most of conferences. ►

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If your film can help further an organization's mission, it belongs at its conference.”



Step 1: Find the right conferences

If your film can help further an organization's mission, it belongs at its conference. Identify conferences held by organizations whose mission is linked to the central issues of your film.

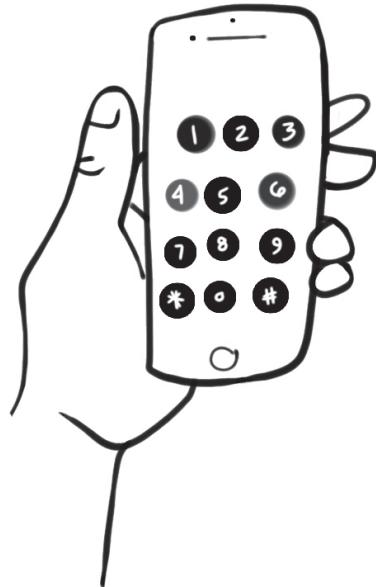
For ***Age of Champions***, our first step was to create a hit list of all the organizations and associations we could think of that would care about a film on the Senior Olympics. The list was sprawling, at first with over 300 organizations including senior living associations, hospital networks, and academic societies on aging. We prioritized the list and identified which organizations put on significant conferences.

Using tools like Associations Unlimited (a digital database of nonprofits that can be accessed through many public libraries) and creative Googling, research the following details:

- The mission of the organization putting on the conference
- When and where the conference takes place. After identifying several, create a calendar of upcoming conferences
- The theme of the conference, which typically changes each year
- How many people come to the conference and details about attendees (i.e. their profession, education, interests, etc.)
- Find the program for a prior year's conference to get a better sense of what to expect at the conference, including how films have been used
- Find contact info for staff that plan the conference. The more senior the better. A few useful tools to track down contact info: Associations Unlimited, Rocket Reach, and LinkedIn

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When you've identified an organization and conference that seems like a good fit, it's time to call”



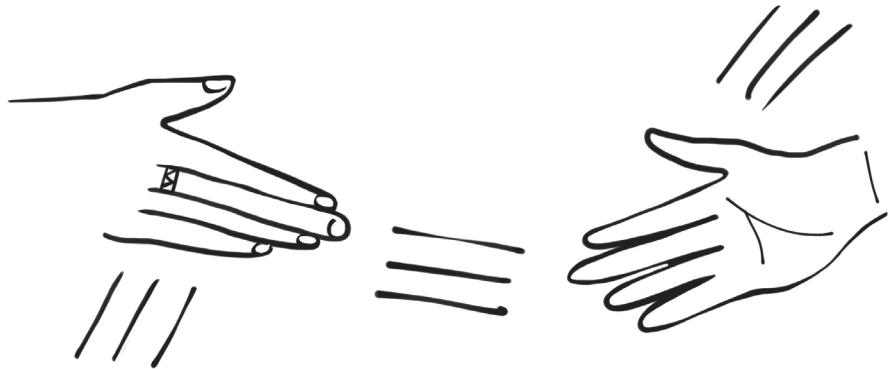
Step 2: Introduce Yourself

Reach out to the contact at the organization you've found. Your goal is to pique their interest so they'll take a look, become an ally within their organization, and invite you to their conference. Start with a short email or phone call. Don't inundate them with too much information—just an introduction to you, your project, and why your film belongs at their conference. A quick conversation can quickly reveal the likelihood of presenting at their conference and if there's potential for a partnership down the road. Whenever possible open doors by getting a referral from someone with a connection to the organization.

After several weeks of research, emails, and calls to the organizations we thought might screen **Age of Champions** at their conference, we whittled down our initial list of 300 organizations to about 45. We then narrowed our hit list further to six major organizations that were excited about our film. We deleted organizations with conferences so small it made no sense to attend. Some let us know they weren't interested. Others just never got back to us. A handful were so excited about our film and how it complemented their conference that our participation was assured after the first conversation. In the process of speaking to conference planners and getting invited to their conferences, we began building relationships. And some of these nascent relationships with organizations would later grow into meaningful partnerships.

When you've identified an organization and conference that seems like a good fit, it's time to call (or email to arrange a call). Begin the conversation like this:

- Concisely explain who you are, describe your film in a compelling way, and explain how your film is relevant to their organization
- Make clear how your film aligns with the organization's mission and why individual members and conference attendees will find it valuable
- If possible, share a positive testimonial from a member who has seen your film
- Once they're interested, share your trailer and details on how you'd like to participate
- Your mission is to make your contact an ally who will shepherd you through the process of getting you scheduled at the conference



Step 3: Negotiate Participation

It's not enough to get invited to a conference. To make a big splash, you need to be specific about how you'd like to participate. Don't settle for screening your film in a backroom at the conference while four other sessions are taking place at the same time.

For the first conference where I presented ***Age of Champions***, I was not clear about how I wanted to participate so they just 'fit me in'. I distinctly remember sitting in a tucked away space during the middle of the screening asking myself: "they told me there are 1,200 people at this conference so why are there only 35 people at the screening?"

To avoid a mishap like that, here are a few key things to request when you attend a conference:

- Top priority: ask for a presentation to a plenary audience (a gathering of all conference attendees) rather than a breakout session
- Show a short clip. It may seem counterintuitive, but showing a short excerpt or even the trailer will give you time to talk about your film and how you'd like the audience to take action. A shorter presentation also makes it easier for the conference planners to give you some valuable plenary time. My most successful conference presentation was seven minutes long during a plenary where I showed the trailer and talked for five minutes
- If you can't get plenary time, suggest presenting during a plenary mealtime. I've found this to be a good Plan B because at some point in the conference, everyone is in the same room eating and people like to watch things while they eat
- Suggest a 'red-carpet' screening of the full film with a filmmaker Q&A as an evening event for attendees. Conference programmers often are looking for fun evening activities and a screening and Q&A are often very appealing
- Ask for a complementary and well-placed booth in their exhibition area
- Request that a postcard with information about your film be included in all attendee tote bags



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Step 4: Get Paid

The most important reason to attend a conference is to build connections and awareness for your film. But it's also possible to get paid while doing so. Don't neglect conference speaking fees—they can become a significant revenue stream.

For ***Age of Champions***, we prioritized getting paid to present. For every conference we requested a standard speaking fee of \$3,000 plus travel. Some said yes, some negotiated us down, and others said no. If we weren't receiving our fee, we'd ask ourselves a few questions like: how much will it cost to attend? Will the presentation lead to more opportunities? What else can they offer to make it worthwhile? If the conference was a good opportunity to network within our core audience or connect with potential partners, we'd go. I gave a presentation at a gathering of local leaders for a large national network of senior housing providers. Although the presentation at the national conference was unpaid, several of the local leaders signed up that day for paid speaking gigs leading to almost \$30,000 in speaking fees.

If you've been invited to present at a conference and do a Q&A presentation, it's important to ask for a speaking fee. Organizations often have a substantial budget for people providing exciting content at their event. They bring in high-profile keynote speakers, provide tote bags with goodies, and arrange evening events with food and open bar. If they can't pay you, figure out what in-kind benefits they can offer. An organization can send an email to their members promoting your film, highlight your film on their website, and provide free ad space in their magazine.

Step 5: Make the Most of the Conference

A conference is a regional, national, or international gathering of people who share a common interest. If you have been invited to present at a conference, it is because the planners feel that your film aligns with that shared interest and is something attendees would like to see. So make an impression on as many attendees as possible!

In addition to your presentation there are several other ways you can make your presence felt at a conference. One of the best things to do is set up meetings in advance.

Before heading to a conference presentation of ***Age of Champions***, I learned from the attendee list that an executive for Cigna Health was going to be there. I tracked his email down, introduced myself, and asked for a meeting. The backstory is for several months I had been trying to get Cigna to sponsor our PBS broadcast. Nothing. After he saw my presentation at the conference and a brief but positive meeting where I let him know about the PBS broadcast, he connected me with a decision maker. A few weeks later, that decision maker gave the green light to buying a \$75,000 underwriting spot for our broadcast.

Make the most of your time at a conference by doing the following:

- Prioritize your goals for the conference. You'll want to be specific, e.g., 'I want to sell as many educational license versions of my film as possible,' and/or 'I want to set up meetings with as many potential partners as possible'
- Make your goal known by including a call to action in your presentation and on any promotional materials, i.e. 'If you'd like to bring the film to your community, please sign up to host a screening at our booth in the expo hall,' or 'sign up to learn more about our grassroots screening campaign'
- Reach out before the conference and set up as many meetings as possible. Review the program and attendee list. A few weeks before the event, your contact should be able to share the list with you. Go through it looking for potential partners, funders, and important people
- Process payments by downloading the Square app and bringing a credit card reader (Square offers a simple reader for free and a chip reader for \$49). This way you'll be able to take payments on the spot
- Bring an email signup sheet to collect contact information from people who express interest in your film
- Hand out promotional materials like postcards
- Collect quotes or testimonials from attendees

Step 6: Build on Your Momentum

You gave a great presentation, got a bunch of people in your core audience excited about your film, and made some promising contacts. The organization that put on the conference received positive feedback about your film from their members. You're poised to parlay a successful conference into a successful partnership.

At a gerontology (the study of aging) conference, I presented ***Age of Champions*** to about 200 university department heads and professors. 75 attendees ended up buying the educational version of our film at the conference. As part of the next stage of our partnership, I asked the organization to send a series of emails to their entire membership—over 2,500 people—with a link to our trailer, a ‘buy now’ button, and an exclusive member discount. Another 90 members bought our film. This one conference and our ensuing partnership ended up fueling over half of our educational sales.

There are several ways to build on the excitement and goodwill from your conference presentation:

- Reach out to your contact and share how positive the reception was for your presentation, including glowing quotes from attendees. You want your contact to know that inviting you to participate was a good decision
- Ask your contact to send a follow up email to the organization’s entire membership. Even the biggest conference will only attract a portion of an organization’s members but an email will reach everyone. The message can contain a call to action asking people to: buy your film, host a screening, or sign-up to your email list
- Organize a virtual screening where your partner invites members to a page on your website with an extended clip of your film and email capture for anyone who wants to watch. Then at a specific date and time, do a Facebook Live interactive Q&A
- Ask for contacts at your organization’s regional or local chapters that may want you to present
- Consider attending the same conference the following year. Explore the possibilities with your contact. You’ll likely be able to capitalize on buzz and word of mouth from your first presentation to make a bigger impression the second time around



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Conferences are a powerful tool that can help you learn how to position your film and connect with your audience.”

The conferences we attended with **Age of Champions** opened the door to innovative ways to bring our film into the world. Partnerships with companies we connected with at conferences brought funding and promotional support. Tapping into the national network of senior living communities brought our film to thousands of communities. If we had stuck to the conventional distribution playbook, I’m convinced that we would have missed these opportunities and our distribution would have been mediocre at best.

Conferences are more than an event. They’re a powerful tool that can help you learn how to position your film and connect with your audience. Ultimately, you don’t want to just be good at presenting at conferences. You want to be good at building relationships, raising awareness, and creating partnerships that will extend your reach to your core audiences and beyond. Conferences are an effective way to meet the influential people and organizations that can help.

Prioritizing conferences was the driving force in our unconventional road to success. We used conferences to supercharge our distribution and you can, too.

- Keith Ochwat

Show &Tell

Keith is the Founder of Show&Tell, a virtual screening platform.

Learn more fundraising, distribution, partnerships, virtual events, and more by joining a free webinar.

Learn more about hosting a virtual event.

www.showandtell.film