How Do You Get Al Jazeera Worldwide to Purchase your Christian Film for Middle East Broadcast? (Or, Can Christians Make Films the Secular World Will Pay Attention To?)

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Abstract

Ask someone what comes to mind when you say, "Christian film." If your experience is anything like mine, the one word you'll hear more than any other is "Cheezy" (along with an eye roll to back it up). My film students and I prefer not to make "Christian" films. We prefer films that are made by Christians. We are Christians. We are film makers. We make films that draw from our perspective and world view and those views strongly shape subject matter and treatment, but we also understand that we are making films, not writing and preaching sermons. So often, "Christian film" fails to see the distinction between preaching and storytelling through the medium of film. When one medium of communication is forced into the other, the result is ... cheezy.

Dordt College is a Christian, mid-sized, four-year college in Iowa. Dordt's college-based production company, Prairie Grass Productions, had the "cheezy" issue in mind when we began production on a feature-length documentary film about slums and the more-than one billion people who inhabit them. Our film, "The Fourth World," goes past statistics like "one in six of us lives in a slum," and "most live on $2 a day or less" and allows an audience to actually meet some of these "statistics" in a very personal way. In the process, the audience quickly realizes that these people have names, jobs, a place to live, and hope for a brighter future.

The vision for this film was born from our faith, from Scripture's commands to help the poor, and from a very deep-seated outrage over the way things are. Our good God never intended for mankind—the crowing jewel of His creation—to live in deplorable squalor, disease and hunger. The corrupting influence of sin and all that goes with it, means generations of people spend their entire lives in survival mode, never able to explore their God-given gifts and contribute to Kingdom growth. Our goal was to tell an entertaining story about this topic in a way that Christians and non-Christians could enjoy and benefit from. If we told it correctly, we could start a global dialogue about this. If we didn't tell it correctly, the film would gather dust and the discussion we longed for would never happen.

We knew from day one that if we made a "Christian film," our audience would be severely limited and our financial return would be almost nil. We set a goal to produce a film made by Christians and see how much of the world we could get to see it. "The Fourth World" has screened at film festivals around the world and taken many top prizes. El Jazeera Worldwide purchased the rights to it for broadcast across the Middle East. As of this writing, we are in negotiations with Discovery Channel Worldwide. The film is regularly downloaded from iTunes, Amazon, Google Play, Hulu and YouTube.

In my presentation, I'll discuss the "Christian Film/Film by a Christian" difference and why it is important. Using "The Fourth World" as our example, we'll discuss what we did right, what we did wrong, and what we'll do differently next time. One absolute non-negotiable for Christians who want their work seen outside the Christian bubble is extensive pre-marketing before the film ever gets into production. Consciously determining audience, message and treatment in advance can create opportunities for penetration into the secular marketplace. Networking and cross-marketing with organizations—both secular and Christian—can be huge advantages to the savvy marketer that wants his story not just told, but seen and heard. Three key marketing strategies—International distribution, digital aggregation and the festival circuit—will also be considered.

With the right planning, subject matter and treatment, Christian filmmakers can avoid the deadly stigma of having a cheezy film, and broadcast their "film made by a Christian" in one of the most Muslim parts of
the world.

Keywords
Christian film, Fourth Day, documentary, film studies, Christianity and films

Disciplines
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Comments
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“How Do You Get *Al Jazeera Worldwide* to Purchase your Christian Film for Middle East Broadcast?

(Or, Can Christians Make Films the Secular World Will Watch?)

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Sioux Center, Iowa
Christian Film vs Film Made by a Christian
One billion people at the bottom of the pile

Goal: Global Audience

The Fourth World
First World, Second World, Third World...Slums

Executive Producer Mark Volkers
Prairie Grass Productions

Producers: Mark Volkers, Haiyang Chen
Camera: Jess Brauning, Peter Hessels, Mike Banks
Editor: Mitchell Hart, Felix Odeh
Featuring: Jewellon Alphonso, Salma Tana Lopes, Paul Collier, Sakenya Ba

Prairie Grass Productions www.FourthWorldFilm.com  Follow Us on Facebook
Goal: Global Audience

Audience: PBS or Discovery
Goal: Global Audience

Audience: PBS or Discovery

What we did Right:
Goal: Global Audience

Audience: PBS or Discovery

What we did Right:

1. 54 Minutes
Goal: Global Audience

Audience: PBS or Discovery

What we did Right:

1. 54 Minutes
2. Global Appeal
Goal: Global Audience

Audience: PBS or Discovery

What we did Right:

1. 54 Minutes
2. Global Appeal
3. No Specific Call to Action
Goal: Global Audience

Audience: PBS or Discovery

What we did Right:

1. 54 Minutes
2. Global Appeal
3. No Specific Call to Action
4. Entertaining
Goal: Global Audience

Audience: PBS or Discovery

What we did Right:

1. 54 Minutes
2. Global Appeal
3. No Specific Call to Action
4. Entertaining
5. Key Art and Web Presence
What we did Wrong:

1. No Partnerships
2. Not enough Press
Distribution

International Distribution

Digital Aggregation

Festival Circuit