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Directors' Smorgasbord: Apply to 650 Festivals at Once

By JUSTIN PETERS

OMAR CHAVEZ JR.'S initial marketing plan for his debut short film, "Take Four," was simple: Sundance or bust. But when the gatekeepers in Park City, Utah, said bust, this 29-year-old Miami filmmaker changed course.

With the help of an online database, he began researching other film festivals. "I got on there, and I started getting a little trigger happy," Mr. Chavez said. Eventually he entered "Take Four" in 55 festivals, at a cost of about \$3,300.

Mr. Chavez is one of thousands of independent filmmakers to have discovered Withoutabox (withoutabox.com), a six-year-old company in Los Angeles that has simplified the otherwise confusing world of festivals to the point where anyone with an Internet connection and a credit card can participate.

Withoutabox maintains a database of almost 3,000 festivals in 209 countries. Approximately 650 of them pay the company to manage and solicit their online entries. Withoutabox, in turn, promotes these affiliate festivals to its roughly 100,000 members.

Many in the film industry praise the company for introducing independent filmmakers to a robust, if not necessarily lucrative, alternative distribution system. But Withoutabox has also helped foster low-budget anarchy, contributing to rampant growth in the number of festivals — 181 new ones in the last year alone — and flooding the market with entries from novice filmmakers whose confidence is often matched only by their inexperience.

"It's that whole quantity-versus-quality thing," said Chrisstina Hamilton, former executive director of the Ann Arbor Film Festival. "Just because you get more submissions doesn't mean there's more good work."

The advent of inexpensive digital cameras and desktop editing software has made it easy for aspiring auteurs to channel their inner Cassavetes. But figuring out what to do with the finished product usually proves more difficult.

The founders of Withoutabox, David Straus, 38, the chief executive, and Joe Neulight, 37, the president, "jumped into this because we were frustrated as filmmakers," Mr. Straus said. "We saw the inefficiencies in how the system worked."

Mr. Neulight added that they want their company to become a kind of virtual studio to the

independent-film world. To that end it recently acquired FilmFinders, a rights database company that links filmmakers and distributors and will soon release a proprietary ticketing system to make it easier to arrange independent screenings.

Still, with so many festival options already available, Withoutabox members often act like compulsive eaters at a buffet. “At the beginning I was reading the festivals’ little write-ups, and I thought, ‘Ooh, that sounds good,’ ” said Michelle Goetsch, 35, who has spent, she estimates, \$2,000 to enter her short, “The Pill,” into 60 festivals.

Sean McKnight, a 38-year-old software trainer from suburban Philadelphia, chooses different imagery to describe the hazards. “If you just go and carpet bomb, you’re going to be flushing money down the toilet,” he said. Nonetheless he used Withoutabox to enter his debut feature, “Disturbing Images,” into no fewer than 30 festivals.

Since the company is paid by festivals for each submission they receive, it does not discourage that kind of approach, a policy that concerns some in the independent-film world. “They cast this incredibly wide net where they really aren’t matching up filmmakers with film festivals that really want to look at their work,” Ms. Hamilton said.

The democratization of filmmaking technology, together with the services provided by Withoutabox, has meant more people vying for festival slots than ever before. So programmers from established festivals can afford to be choosy. Many of the world’s best-known film festivals — Cannes, Sundance, Telluride and others — list their information on the Withoutabox site but keep their entry processes separate.

It’s getting tougher to get into some smaller festivals too. At the six-year-old Ashland International Film Festival in Oregon, submissions have doubled since it got involved with Withoutabox in 2004. But the number of films the festival actually shows has remained the same.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the number of film festivals has risen, in part to meet the increased demand for screening opportunities. A search of Withoutabox’s database turns up 437 film festivals that are less than three years old.

Many of these are niche festivals (the International Medical Marijuana Film Festival, the CounterCorp Anti-Corporate Film Festival), while others take place far from the heart of the film industry, in places like Keokuk, Iowa, and Ellensburg, Wash.

These affairs bear little resemblance to Cannes or Sundance: no celebrity-studded parties, no paparazzi, no [Wilmer Valderrama](#). They differ too in the benefits they can confer. The chances of a filmmaker making significant industry contacts, selling a movie or striking development deals at one of the smaller festivals are minuscule.

That doesn’t mean they have no purpose. Mr. Straus, for one, predicts that these smaller events will function more like regional film societies.

Mr. Neulight agrees. “The concept of an overnight box office hit may not be what this process is about,” he said. “It’s about putting your work out into the world over a longer period of time and to a broader population.”

In addition, suggests Tom Olbrich, executive director of the Ashland International Film Festival, the

momentum gained at several small festivals can vault a film into the big league. “You can make a big splash at one of the big film festivals and get signed,” Mr. Olbrich said, “or you can take your film around to smaller festivals and hope, one, to be accepted, and hope, two, for the films to have a good response.”

Others, concerned that the festival industry is becoming a payola racket, are less sanguine: “It doesn’t benefit a filmmaker at all to send their film to a no-account, rinky-dink film festival,” said Ms. Hamilton.

Sometimes, though, that’s all they can get. Out of the 30 festivals he applied to, Sean McKnight was accepted into one: the Big Damn Film Festival, which, he says, literally accepts almost every submission. “As long as it meets their quality standards, and it’s not porn, you’re going to get a slot,” he said.

His experiences with more discriminating festivals, however, left him frustrated. “With some of these festivals, it’s like you’ve got to know God to get into them,” Mr. McKnight said.

As for “Take Four,” it has been shown at 16 festivals, though none of them are beyond what Mr. Chavez calls the second tier. Even so, he has few regrets. “Watching your film in front of an audience teaches you things that you didn’t know,” he said. “That really is an addictive experience.”

And Mr. McKnight, despite his 29 disappointments, is now helping to plan a film festival himself. The Lancaster Film Festival, in Pennsylvania, will have its debut in December. Mr. McKnight said it already plans to register with Withoutabox.