

MARKET INTELLIGENCE: HOW CAN WE FIND THE BUZZ AGAIN?

By Kaleem Aftab



Dennis Ruh



Marit van den Elshout



Sten-Kristian Saluveer

The film marketplace is very different today to what it was 12 months ago. The speed of change may be mind-boggling as a business that was organised around people meeting in person suddenly had to go digital.

"At first, the question was, can digital replace the physical interaction at all?" says Sten-Kristian Saluveer, Head of Programming NEXT at Marche du Film Cannes. "Do we have the technologies and so forth? Are there stable technologies to make this transition?"

He adds, "In the case of Cannes, we realised there was quite a big technological challenge to replicate the Cannes experience online. You had to deal with workflows, people's habits and finding the right technologies and integrating them in a semi-workable package."

The Cannes team put on more than 400 events involving about 10,000 people. Industry events such as Cannes Marche or CPH:DOX (where Saluveer is also an advisor) demonstrated that a virtual or hybrid format could work. It also had other advantages. "Virtual Cannes was quite democratising; people came to 'Cannes' who don't usually participate for monetary reasons."

But that was six months ago. "Right now we are in a situation where being constantly online is the new normal," adds Saluveer. "It was the luck of Cannes and CPH:DOX that the audience was racing to events. People don't behave the same anymore. Where we are at now in the discussion is that online is not enough."

Marit van den Elshout, Head, IFFR PRO and Cinemart at Rotterdam, and Dennis Ruh, the new head of Berlin's European Film Market, are now planning their events, bearing in mind the limitations of online. However, as Ruh acknowledges, it's not always a choice as rules and regulations change on a daily basis. "One of the major lessons of the pandemic has been: it's always good to have different plans," he says.

Given the situation, van den Elshout saw certainty as the advantage of committing to a digital event months in advance, avoiding the kind of last-minute changes seen at other festivals and markets. "We'd rather do something really well online and efficient than throw things around last minute," says van den Elshout.

EFM's Ruh has taken note of the unexpected advantages seen at online events this year, explaining, "The sales business at an online market was a much better experience than expected. Meetings worked. Online screenings were attended by more or less the same number of clients as on-site." There were time and money savings in not having to travel. And he says, "Sales agents were forced to develop forward-looking market strategies."

Van den Elshout was also enthusiastic about labs, workshops and niche industry programmes. "Locarno and Vision du Réel managed to create a sense of community and closeness. I haven't liked the places where I haven't felt like being part of something."

The disadvantages, according to Ruh, have been, "Online markets are missing the buzz about new arthouse films, which is considered an absolute prerequisite to sell those films. It transpired that online markets mostly worked for films more suited for home entertainment. Sales agents have been missing the feeling of competition against each other and the distributors. Buyers have been very selective and cautious when it comes to minimum guarantees and we have seen a marked downturn in sales volume."

These are problems that need addressing as no festival plans to ditch digital entirely in the future, ensuring hybrid markets are here to stay. Throw in competition from streamers, new platforms, the disrupted markets and arguments over release patterns, and the questions go beyond where and how to deliver festivals.

"There needs to be a new understanding, compromise and consensus on the value chain," suggests Saluveer. "We are in a position like between 2007 and 2009 where DCP replaced 35mm, and it was a no man's land."

Markets have to deliver on their core value, whether it's a digital or physical event. "The core of the film festival market is surely the sales business," says Ruh. "Markets are also a driving force for the film industry. We need to talk about the future of film production and distribution, especially in these challenging times. Markets should also be a place of networking that give newcomers the chance to get a foot in the door and provide platforms for cutting-edge topics and trends."

Such thinking is at the heart of van den Elshout's plans in Rotterdam, which will run its IFFR Pro Days online in early February: "Our goal is to make filmmakers feel connected to the audience and industry. What's possible with a smaller event, with less films, is that we will be able to deliver that kind of personal approach."

But is being a sales facilitator and market driver too much to ask in these uncertain times? Saluveer says, "That fact that a festival is suddenly responsible for providing the highest security standards, doing all the marketing, doing all the audience engagement, bringing in all the money to the stakeholders is a bit ridiculous."

Saluveer points out that markets need to re-establish their importance in the value chain. Questions have to be asked about, "What are the different scenarios of consensus that might happen." Once we have some idea, "We need to get all these different players together and find solutions. Then we need to be good matchmakers to make those deals happen."