

Filmart 2015: US falls for appeal

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Filmart offers US sellers the chance to establish and maintain relationships with Asian buyers outside the frenzy of the bigger markets in the calendar.

One of the more commonly heard refrains from international sales companies at Berlin's European Film Market in February was how few Asian distributors were walking the halls of the Martin-Gropius-Bau and nearby hotels.

This is nothing new - Berlin's chilly embrace and proximity to the Chinese New Year holiday has seldom drawn hordes of buyers from China, Japan, South Korea and Southeast Asia.

Yet such is the allure of Asia, and in particular the promise of China as a potentially game-changing commercial prospect, that US sellers were concerned by the absence of many of the region's buyers.

The arrival of Filmart just five weeks after the conclusion of business in Germany offers a chance to redress the balance and a healthy delegation of US sales companies will make the trip to Hong Kong, as they have done for many years.

US sellers have long seen value in Filmart, which offers a change of pace from Berlin and a more focused environment in which to forge or consolidate relationships with the Asian industry.

"Filmart is a great opportunity for our Beijing-based sales executives to get in front of Asian buyers, many of whom don't attend Berlin a few weeks earlier," says Stuart Ford, whose IM Global opened a Beijing

office in 2013. "We use the IFTA [Independent Film & Television Alliance] pavilion — it's well organised and the spirit of Filmart doesn't require elaborate office set-ups."

The "spirit" Ford refers to is the common practice among attendees of sending small teams of representatives, which means Filmart is largely a pavilion-based event.

This is the fifth year IFTA has operated an umbrella stand, although for the first time it will not be dedicated solely to US companies and is open to the organisation's global membership.

"Most companies who are not based in Asia find they only need to send one person, maybe two," says IFTA executive vice-president and AFM managing director Jonathan Wolf. "If you are only sending one person you don't need more than the space we provide."

Wolf first visited Filmart eight years ago and recalls being impressed by what he saw. "All in one place, easy to move around and well organised," he says. "You didn't have to be there for more than three days to get business done — and it was easy to travel to."

Discussions with membership made it clear to Wolf and IFTA president and CEO Jean Prewitt it was time to establish an on-site presence. Wolf had heard about a programme run by the US Department of Commerce and secured a partial underwrite from the government for IFTA's first American Pavilion.

"Non-US members were right next door to us and could take advantage," says Wolf. "That deal sunset last year and now we'll attend with the IFTA pavilion [for members of all nationalities]."

Some US companies inevitably opt out of the pavilion's suite of administrative services, preferring to attend under their own steam, while non-participating IFTA members of other nationalities who operate their own stand include the Hong Kong contingent.

IFTA says there will be 50-55 IFTA members exhibiting in Hong Kong, of which roughly half will be on the IFTA pavilion.

For IM Global, which has benefited from the pavilion for several years, Filmart presents an opportunity among other things to sell premium Chinese-language content via its Anthem label.

"Filmart is an important trading post for that content," says Ford. "I personally attend Filmart too because it's a good chance to put in face time with senior figures from the Chinese industry."

IM Global is hoping to tempt buyers with *The Ghouls*, which is financed by Wanda and Enlight, and close Asian deals on its slate of US titles including Mel Gibson's upcoming Second World War drama *Hacksaw Ridge*, which is set to star Andrew Garfield.

Filmart is not the place where US sellers tend to launch sales and, Prewitt notes, neither is it a forum for screenings. This gives rise to a specific profile to the type of business activity that happens in Hong Kong.

"Filmart is a great follow-up market because there are noticeably fewer Asian buyers in Berlin than there are at Cannes or AFM or Toronto," says Katie Irwin, Fortitude International's Los Angeles-based vice-president of international and a fluent Mandarin speaker. She points out a Hong Kong trip offers several strategic benefits not found at larger markets on the circuit.

"There's more access to Asian buyers because there are fewer US companies attending Filmart, although that's changing," Irwin acknowledges. "It's been a good place to get in front of people, get to know each other, find out how they do business and get to know other Asian companies they work with."

Unique access

As business with the leading Asian theatrical buyers can take place at Cannes and AFM, this creates a worthwhile entry point to other types of buyers. "There are several distributors," says Irwin, "who started out as sub-distributors for the major buyers and would not [initially] buy off us directly. They know the TV and home-video space and are looking to get into the theatrical or all-rights side of things very early.

"They have been around for ages and none of us know them and they use Filmart to acquire content directly. This has been happening for the last several years and [now] they're getting more access to us. They're getting into the market more directly."

For those buyers at Filmart who do not specialise in theatrical releasing and show no interest in broadening their skillset, Hong Kong can be useful for a certain type of deal.

"It's good for companies selling libraries," says one US executive. "There are a handful of all-rights distributors in Thailand who might be good to sell to."

For Sam Eigen, executive vice-president of Shoreline Entertainment, the market is ripe with possibility and enables access to virtually every Asian territory. "China, of course, and a good sampling from all other Asian markets," Eigen explains. "We have mostly done TV and/or VoD deals as the theatrical distributors from the region generally attend other markets such as Berlin and Cannes."

Filmart's key strength, believes IFTA's Wolf, is as a place to make new contacts. "It's hard to do a productive sales trip in Asia. Filmart offers a somewhat unique opportunity to connect to these emerging markets and people are making use of that opportunity."

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