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Organising Effective Video Film Screenings: Some Practical Tips from TVE Asia Pacific

A video film screening is one of the most effective methods of catalysing discussion and debate on a given topic, theme, subject or issue. It's also an entertaining way of communicating useful information and/or getting a discussion started.

But to ensure an effective and entertaining experience, proper screening facilities and the right ambience need to be in place. Making this happen is not expensive -- but it does require careful planning and some attention to detail.



*A small group screening in progress in rural Nepal.
Image courtesy NEFEJ, Nepal.*

In this note, we share insights from TVE Asia Pacific (TVEAP)'s many years of experience in organising video/DVD film screenings to various audiences in countries across Asia Pacific and beyond.

We hope this information will help you to organise better screening events. If you mind the little details that make up the whole, your film screening event can engage, entertain, inform and inspire your audience!

In this note, we have used the term 'film' generically to mean any moving images product whether on cine, tape, DVD or other digital format.

Screening material

There are different options in terms of format.

Professional Tape

- You will get the best projection quality if you use a professional tape format to screen from. This can be DigiBeta, DVCAM, DVC Pro, Mini DV or Betacam. These are different technical formats used by professional TV/video people.
- In order to use any of these tape formats, you will need to ensure that the corresponding playback machine is available (some Mini DV players can also play a small DVCAM tape - but all other formats need their own, separate, playback machine).

- All these professional tape format machines can be connected to a Plasma Screen or a LCD projector

For more information on professional tape formats:

<http://www.cybercollege.com/tpv048.htm>

DVD & Digital Formats

- If you cannot find or hire a professional tape player (or if your film is not available in any professional tape format) you can always use DVD.
- But do ensure that the DVD has been made in a high quality: we recommend the bit rate 7 or higher.
- It is much better (and safer!) to use a DVD player (machine) than to playback from the DVD drive in a laptop or desktop computer.
- Entirely digital files of videos are also becoming more common now. File types with extensions such as .mpeg, .mpg, .mp2, .mp3, .mpa, .mpe, .mlv and .m3u are all included in a format standard developed by The Moving Picture Experts Group to encode audio, video or both together. Among these, .mpeg and .mpg file extensions indicate common types of video files.
- Projecting directly from digital video files is technically possible, but you will need to ensure they are of sufficiently high picture quality. Some files are too compressed that they can pixellate badly when projected on to a large screen.

For more information on DVDs and digital video file formats, see:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dvd>

<http://www.videohelp.com/dvd>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_file_formats#Video

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pixelation>

Screening Rights

All TVEAP films come with no restrictions on their screenings. They may be shown to any kind of audience in private or public settings, and no specific permission is required. Many others who produce development related films also have similarly non-restrictive policies.

However, some producers and/or distributors restrict the rights, so it is advisable to check from the source whether you have the rights to screen their video film. Restrictions are usually (but not always) marked on the film's case or in promotional print/web materials.

Screening Room and Seating

- Ensure that the room can be fully darkened for the film screening (i.e. be able to block out all natural light, and switch off all artificial lights)
- If there is a choice in the seating arrangement, theatre-style seating is best. Avoid a horseshoe or completely circular arrangement, as someone somewhere will then not be able to see the full screen, or will see a distorted visual due to the angle of viewing.

Film Projection

Plasma Screens

- The ideal is to use a plasma screen (if a large room, consider using 2 screens, positioned on two ends of the front of the room)
- But check on the screen ratio when hiring a plasma screen. If the film has been shot on 4:3 aspect ratio, try and hire a 4:3 plasma screen (the width of the screen being 4 parts long and 3 parts high -- this gives you a rectangular screen); if the film has been shot on 16:9 wide-screen ratio, select the compatible Plasma screen (The width of the screen being 16 parts long and 9 parts high). The most popular and widely available plasma screens are in the 16:9 ratio.
- 42" and 50" plasma screens from any manufacturer can be connected to a computer and video recorder/TV/satellite system. And you can switch between the different media with ease.
- When choosing a plasma screen, please bear in mind that largest is not always best - 42" and 50" have got better reviews than the 60" and 63" for picture quality and definition.

LCD Projector

- If a plasma is not available, or is not within your budget, then use a LCD Projector to project the video onto a large white screen.
- Ensure the LCD Projector has a high brightness - we recommend ANSI Lumens 4,000 or higher (Projectors are currently available up to 12,000 ANSI Lumens)
- You will also need to arrange a large white screen to project the image. These screens are usually provided by companies which hire LCD projectors.
- Never use a white, bare wall as your screen. If you must use a wall, cover the screening area with a plain, untextured, white cloth and project on to the cloth.

LCD TV or other large-screen TV

- If your audience is small, involving less than 10 people, then a large-screen TV is another low-cost option for screening.
- If using a rounded (tube) TV, seat people in 2 rows in front of the TV.
- If it's a flat screen or LCD TV, you can seat people in a semi-circle (horseshoe shape) as they can see the picture from the sides without any distortion.

More information on plasma screen and projectors:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Video_projector

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plasma_screen

Audio amplification

Sound is frequently neglected by those who arrange video screenings. Yet sound is a vital part of an audio-visual experience and needs careful preparation.

- You need to ensure separate audio equipment for a film screening. Never plan to use the tiny, feeble speakers that are part of a desk-top or laptop computer.
- Dolby speakers with amplifiers are the best for film screenings, if they are within your budget.
- If not, standard speakers with amplifiers are also suitable.

- Ensure that you can control the volume and sound quality of the equipment, by having an audio mixer and a sound technician to control the sound.

Other practical tips for good film screenings

- It's always good to check the tapes or DVDs in advance by having them run on normal playback mode. While these are robust items, damages can creep in during transport (e.g. if exposed to heat, strong magnetic fields, etc.)
- Such advance testing will also show if there are any incompatibility problems with different broadcast standards. The world is divided along three major standards: PAL, NTSC, SECAM. Unfortunately, these systems are not compatible. More information at: <http://www.kropla.com/tv.htm>
- Similarly, DVDs are also encoded to what are called DVD regions, denoted by number 1 to 8. The DVD coding 0 (zero) is free of regional coding and can be played on any machine anywhere in the world. It is important to get the right kind of DVD for your screening. More information at: <http://www.hometheaterinfo.com/dvd3.htm>
- Finally, never underestimate the technical demands of a video screening. A good screening event can be spoilt by technical problems. It is strongly recommended to have a technically knowledgeable and competent person standing by for the entire duration of the screening. S/he can't leave the room when the screening gets going!



People watching video screening at an outdoor night screening in Siam Reap, Cambodia, Nov 2005 - Photo by TVE Asia Pacific