

TheObserver

PUBLICATION: THE OBSERVER - SUPPLEMENT
COUNTRY: UK
DATE: OCTOBER 2008

DESCRIPTION: BRANDS BRANCHING INTO
FILMMAKING (ARTICLE)

PICTURE PERFECT PARTNERS

JESS SEARCH, chief executive of the Channel 4 British Documentary Film Foundation, looks at the business of brands branching into filmmaking.

Film is still the most powerful medium for communicating values and emotion to people – making it a highly attractive proposition to sophisticated consumer brands. So it should come as no surprise that Eurostar provided full financing for British filmmaker Shane Meadows' latest film, *Somers Town*, which is set in the area adjacent to St Pancras station – Eurostar's London home. But Meadows is a fiction director (albeit an award-winning one) and in reality it is the documentary film format that has the most to offer brands.

Brands and documentary filmmakers have much in common – they both want to influence the hearts and minds of their target audience. From a corporate social responsibility perspective as well as a marketing one, documentaries are a great way for brands to

communicate what matters to them and what they stand for. This year PUMA supported the world premiere of *The Day After Peace* at the Cannes Film Festival, a documentary following Jeremy Gilley's 10-year journey to establish an officially recognised day of ceasefire and non-violence, while Rockstar Games – publisher of the *Grand Theft Auto* franchise – financed *Sunday Driver*, a documentary exploring California's low rider car culture.

The latest big, ambitious cinema documentaries, such as *Man on Wire* (2008) and *In the Shadow of the Moon* (2007), are also just the kinds of films that brands can and should come and get involved with. But it's not just cinema documentaries that brands can work with, but documentaries of all kinds – shorts, online series, user-generated, TV, documentary art projects, and so on.

At the Channel 4 British Documentary Film Foundation (a non-profit organisation which gives grants to independent documentary filmmakers and facilitates filmmaking partnerships) we work with brands such as Nokia and Stella Artois, enabling new talent to create documentary content that speaks to the brands' specific values.

With Stella Artois, for example, short films that focused on the subject of recycling were created. Hundreds of entries from across the country were narrowed down to four finalists, which included a film charting its director's attempt to collect enough used cans in one day to earn £5 (that's 1,000 cans). The films were shown on Channel 4's 3 Minute Wonder slot before finding their way into various film festivals and appearing on YouTube and MySpace.

Our latest project, *Inspired*, was a partnership with new drinks and media brand Suso. Four short documentaries were made, each by a different young director who was inspired by a different piece of music, from artists including Saint Etienne and Nitin Sawhney. The films feature on Susology, Suso's web presence (suso.co.uk), and underline the brand's commitment to enabling creativity.

Brands have been involved in film for years, but primarily through product placement or marketing deals. Now that the infrastructure barriers to becoming a distributor have fallen to zero, brands are naturally wondering why they shouldn't involve themselves more directly in creating and showing films. Red Bull has been a leader in creating ad-sponsored content for TV programming, such as snowboarding coverage,





Suso presents Inspired: Pockets, directed by James Lees

but the relationship with the broadcaster can be tricky with very little control for the brand. Brands can now go further, becoming content creators and partners as well as content owners. Just as Red Bull has moved beyond sponsoring sports teams to actually buying them, there is now nothing to prevent it from being its own sports channel if it so chooses.

If I had £1 for every person I've met who works in advertising and tells me their dream is to make documentaries, I'd be able to fund a lot more films. I am extremely encouraged too, that so many people want to engage with documentaries and real films. Established documentary filmmakers have much they can learn from new partnerships with those in the marketing and advertising industries – who have a different but complementary

take on how to get messages to resonate with audiences.

It won't be long before Nick Broomfield's next documentary is as likely to be funded by VW (currently sponsoring documentaries on More4) as by Channel 4 itself. Some people throw their hands up in horror at the idea of businesses having a direct involvement in documentaries but their thinking is old fashioned. No one is saying that this is to be the only source of finance for all documentaries. And there are of course important issues of transparency, independence and integrity that need to be managed. No one wants to watch a documentary about a car company that has been paid for by a car company, or a documentary about climate change paid for by an oil company, but most brands wouldn't be so stupid as to

suggest such a thing – they understand only too well the importance of authenticity. But would you value In the Shadow of the Moon, which told the story of the astronauts who have walked on the moon, any more or less if you knew it had been paid for by VW or Expedia?

In recent years many documentary filmmakers are finding the demands of television increasingly onerous. TV documentaries have to be constructed to work for that particular medium. So many of them now have a very familiar voice over, an introduction that explains exactly what to expect, a does-what-it-says-on-the-tin title and seem to start all over again after each part break. TV commissioning editors know exactly what they think works for their stations and how to ask for it. TV is also saddled with

regulations that limit both brand exposure and control how films can be made editorially.

For documentary filmmakers, to trade in the TV commissioning editor for an agency and brand marketing team can be a culture shock at first, but in many ways it can come as a creative liberation. Documentary filmmakers need an independent, creative space to do their best work and I have found that creative agencies totally understand this. Of course, brands have very different concerns and preoccupations from those of television, which can be hard to predict at first and can lead to problems in the short term, but over time these collaborations are going to get easier and easier as brands and documentary filmmakers grow to understand how to get the best from one another.



Suso presents Inspired: Home, directed by Chris Allen & Rob Rainbow