



**SUNDANCE**  
A Festival Virgin's Guide  
Benjamin Craig

Surviving Park City and America's Most Important Film Festival



**Linda Brown-Salomone**

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Linda Brown is a veteran film and television publicist who has successfully represented hundreds of films and television programs, and organized countless industry parties at Sundance and other key events. Linda's career began at the famed PMK Public Relations in Los Angeles where she handled celebrities, films, production companies and television shows. She launched the internationally acclaimed animated TV series, *The Simpsons*, and remained on for the show's first four years. Her celebrity clients included Winona Ryder, Andie MacDowell, Nicolas Cage, Christian Slater, Rosanne Barr, and Richard Pryor. While at PMK, she worked on such critically acclaimed films as *My Left Foot* and *La Femme Nikita*. Later, Linda went on to work as Vice President, Motion Pictures for the West Coast office of Rogers &

Cowan where she worked on such campaigns for a range of Hollywood studio movies including, *The Mask*, *Young Guns II*, *Double Dragon*, and *National Lampoon's Loaded Weapon*.

Linda is now a founding partner of Indie PR. Creating the firm gave Linda a chance to combine her love for the independent film with her talent and know-how and help "the underdog" along the way. Presently, she works with a number of studios including Paramount, Paramount Classics, Artisan, Sony Pictures Entertainment, and Screen Gems, and also continues her plight in the independent world. Indie PR is one of the most sought-after firms in representing both art films and independent films in the festival circuit.

**BC: When did you lose your 'Sundance virginity' and what were your first impressions of the festival?**

**LBS:** I've been doing the festival for about nine years now... To tell you the truth, I don't remember my very first experience at Sundance; I think I went up with a client, it may have been Andie MacDowell for a movie, I'm not quite sure. But I went up as a talent representative, which is a very different experience to going up and representing films as a publicist. I remember my first experience as a talent rep being quite pleasant, but as a publicist it was a little bit more insane. You don't tend to remember any of it when you get home - all you know is that one of your movies won an award, or one of your movies was more successful to a degree than

another... you just kind of forget the process and remember the rewards.

**BC: And what about Park City itself?**

**LBS:** The first time I went there was quite a long time ago and it was a completely different experience to how it is today. The festival was not as crazy as it is now; it was easy to get a reservation for a restaurant, easy to get a hotel, and all that stuff. I think it's become a bit of a "dog and pony" show these days with all this corporate sponsorship and these people running around who have no rhyme or reason for being there film-wise. On my first visit it was more about the independent filmmaker, but it was shortly thereafter that it started to get a little bit more studio and corporate driven. My first experience was a very indie experience because all of the films there were independent... actually I think it was the year that *Sex, Lies and Videotape* broke... that was more than nine years ago wasn't it?

**BC: Yeah, it was 1989.**

**LBS:** [laughs] Well, I'd like to lie about my age and say I was still in grammar school in 1989, but I think that was actually my first festival experience. *Sex, Lies and Videotape* kind of made Soderbergh a star and it was exciting to see all of that stuff going on around me, but it was very much an indie experience. Everybody wanted to know all about independent filmmaking and the sort of questions that were fired at people were along the lines of, "What's it like working on an indie film verses a studio film? How much more rewarding is it?" and so on. Where as now when you go the

festival with a star of some notoriety who's done studio films, it just tends to turn into a junket. The questions aren't as interesting, the interviews are all held for the film's release, and you kind of wonder why they're even happening.

**BC: What sort of preparation do you do these days before you arrive in Park City?**

**LBS:** Well, it really depends on the type of project you are taking to the festival. For example, yesterday I had a screening for the shorts programmers of this film I'm hoping to get into the festival - this short that's been made with the help of a new technology Kodak has developed. On one side I guess I kind of feel like I'm betraying the indie spirit because the project is Kodak-driven, but on the other side the director is a first-timer to the film arena (he's done some TV projects before) so this film is really his baby.

In terms of what I did for this short, at this point we're very much in the beginning stages of the programmers look at the movies. I try to get to the programmers sooner rather than later to set up a very formal screening where they can come along and be educated about what's going on with the film and the technology. In this case, I've been telling them about how Kodak is looking to use Sundance as a platform to launch the new technology, and this may or may not entice them to include it. If the programmers are on the fence about it, maybe this will help push them over the edge, but then maybe it won't. I guess the most important thing is to get to them early, before

all the craziness starts, because as the deadlines get closer they don't have time to get out to a screening.

**BC: Is it common for publicists to arrange screenings for the programmers ahead of the festival?**

**LBS:** Is it common? If you get to them early enough I think it's done, but I don't know if it's so common. I do think it is refreshing for the programmers to hear from a publicist rather than a producer's rep who's trying to sell the movie and therefore has a monetary interest in getting it into the festival; or from a studio who is simply calling because they want to world premiere a film that's being release three weeks later, saying "We'll throw a big junket" etc. I think to get a call from someone like me who's an independent publicist, whose interests are mainly about trying to make a difference for a movie, is more refreshing than someone who is simply interested in selling something.

I get such satisfaction up at the festival when it all works out. Last year we had a movie called *Soldier's Girl* - a true story based on this guy who was in the military who fell in love with a trans-gendered performer. I knew about the story and fell in love with the movie, so I got in touch with Kenny Turan (of the *Los Angeles Times*) early - again, early, that's the key word here - I got to him early and said, "Look Kenny, if you respond to this movie I'd love for you to include something about it in your opening day's story at Sundance," because that really gets the ball rolling with a campaign. Having a movie highlighted in an *LA Times* opening

day story means so much, it perks up the ears of the distributors, it perks up the ears of the critics, and it fills the first screening with everybody. So I try to get to key opinion-makers like Kenny Turan early, and in this case not only did Kenny include it in his opening day story, it ended up getting a feature in the paper on Day 4 of the festival with loads of pictures and interviews. The movie did so well as a result of that.

**BC: How does a typical day in Park City tend to pan out for you during the festival?**

**LBS:** We normally get there the day before the festival to set up our office... and we really do move almost our entire office up to Sundance for the 10 days of the festival. Once we're there, things are pretty much going on non-stop for the entire time. On a typical day, we would wake up, look at the columns and the papers, and also the clipping service to find out what ran, if anything of ours ran. Then we finalise our schedules for the day, and the schedules of the directors and actors we are working with. We try to fill their day with interviews to try and help sell a movie. There's so much press in Park City during the festival and our job is to use them to help get distributors interested in the movie.

**BC: So the publicity is really targeted at the acquisitions people - the buyers - rather than the general public?**

**LBS:** Yes. The generally public will get the publicity at the time of release, so you're really targeting the buyers at this point. At the festival

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there's a huge amount of noise so it's important to scream louder than anyone else, and the more you get into these stories every day, the more loudly you are screaming. It's really important for the distributors to be aware of your movie so that once they arrive in Park City they instantly recognise the title.

My job really starts early on with those opening day stories because people are reading the *LA Times* on the plane to Park City. The local papers are equally important because they're in the front of your hotel when you check in. People somehow think that if it's on the front page of the *Park City Record* and it's mentioned in Kenny Turan's opening day story, if they don't see the film then they're going to miss out on something. So they make sure it's on their schedule of films to see at the festival, and that's most of my job done.

At that point I hand over to the rep and the producer - it's their job to sell the movie. My job is to get the buyers in there, get the press to do good reviews... not that I can actually force the press to do good reviews, but I can concentrate on getting the right critic to the right film so hopefully they can review the film positively. It's then that the acquisitions people come out of the woodwork. So that's really my job, the first stage of sales.

**BC:** If you were going to represent a film at Sundance, what sort of materials would you expect the filmmakers to have produced for you?

**LBS:** It's especially important to have a strong photo, one that really

represents what the movie is about. So many times I see, in the festival programs and things like that, some kind of talking head picture, and then occasionally something will catch my eye because the photo is different. Like everyone says, it's worth a thousand words, and if you've got a great photo that catches the eye then people will notice your movie. When someone is putting together their schedule of movies to see and your photo catches their eye, they're like, "Oh, that looks kind of interesting." So if you have a celebrity in your movie, throw the celebrity's picture in there, but an interesting picture. Even if you don't have a celebrity, just throw in some kind of interesting picture. Ideally you want to have a still photographer on set taking these photos for you, but if you can't afford a photographer (which is usually the first thing to go along with publicity when you're cutting the budget), it is possible to pull a frame off the film. In the world of digital today, you can probably pull something off the Avid and turn it into a photo, but the results are never as good as having a decent photographer take the shot on set.

As far as a press kit goes, you want to have a couple of stills, at least one image that people instantly recognise that you can make into a poster or postcards. Postcards are very important at a festival, postcards which have the time, date, and location of your screening printed on the back. If you run into Roger Ebert at Starbucks on Main Street, get into a really interesting conversation with him about your movie, he's genuinely interested, and then you go, "Oh,

my screening's at blah blah blah at three o'clock..." He's not going to remember that. You need something to hand him, an interesting image, flip it over, and there is the information on how to contact you and when and where your screenings are. At the end of the night, everybody empties their pockets on to their dresser and the next morning they pick up your postcard and it says to them, "I met this interesting person last night and I really want to go to this movie."

In terms of the rest of the press kit, I usually write the press kit for a lot of independent filmmakers because they just don't know how to do it. A press kit at a festival is very different to one you give out to the media during a film's release. The release kits are very intense, with full credits and all that stuff. At Sundance, all they want to know is who directed it and who stars in it, because the chances of getting a feature article about your movie are so minimal unless there's some kind of unique story behind it. You tend to get included in these round-up stories, which are extremely important, but it's always just snippets of information. If the journalist writing these stories has to sift through 25 pages of, "My grandmother lent me the money," "I cashed in my savings bonds," they just don't care. Everybody cashes in their bonds; everybody's grandmother invests in the movie... it's an old story, nobody cares. So I usually interview the filmmaker and try to find an angle that's different, and then I write the press kit based around that.

**BC: You touched on strategies for raising awareness of a film in Park**

**City a little earlier... are there any that tend to work better than others?**

**LBS:** Again, I just think the key is getting to a publicist early - even before you're accepted into a festival. If you wait until after you're accepted it's not too late, but it's always a good idea to give the publicist a heads up that you're submitting to Sundance and have them look at it so that they can hit the ground running so to speak. For example, with this short I'm doing, regardless of whether the movie gets into Sundance or not, this technology is new and Kodak will be announcing it at the festival, so it's not a bad idea for me to start with magazines like *Premiere*, *Res*, and *Filmmaker* to try and get some features on this movie which will break during Sundance. These magazines have a very high profile at the festival, but there is a three month lead time for getting into them. So if the movie ends up getting in, it's icing on the cake because these magazines will be read by people in Park City and that's three more shouts if it's in the festival.

**BC: How much attention does the industry pay to films that are playing in the "alternative festivals" such as Slamdance?**

**LBS:** I think that Slamdance has really grown and come into its own to a certain degree. I had a movie called *Man of the Century* that played in Slamdance a few years ago which won the Audience Award. I think if you go after an award and you actually receive an award at one of these festivals, ears tend to prick

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up and people are like, "Oh, this movie performed at Slamdance, it's probably worth taking a look." In the case of *Man of the Century*, Fine Line ended up acquiring the movie. The film had been turned down by Sundance and we only came onboard three days before the festival. We had to scramble to write a press kit, get the filmmakers together, and put together a campaign to target the Audience Award in the event.

Even so, nobody [of any industry importance] came to the screenings in Park City. One of the downsides of Slamdance is that it's a little hard to watch a movie there because of the conditions of the screening rooms. There are folding chairs, you're often sandwiched in a hot room, and people are making lots of noise. I think the studios know that they don't need to go to events like Slamdance; they maybe send a third or fourth tier person to check out a movie they might be interested in because they know for the most part, nobody's going to be acquired at those festivals. And if something does end up performing, or if they read a really good review or hear buzz about a film, they'll simply send for it when they get back to LA. The people who actually write the cheques are way too busy at Sundance to worry about any of the ancillary festivals.

**BC:** Yeah. There are so many films in the official programs it's not really surprising that the studios don't have time a lot of time for other films showing in Park City?

**LBS:** Absolutely. And sometimes even screening at Sundance itself perhaps

isn't the best idea. I saw a movie a couple of nights ago and said to the filmmaker, "You know what? I'd question whether Sundance is the best festival for this movie. I think it would possibly do better in a smaller festival where it can be heard a little louder, like SXSW, LAFF, or the Hollywood Film Festival." Of course the filmmaker was, "But I want to go to Sundance!"

I do wonder sometimes whether it's a mistake for a film to be in Sundance just because it's Sundance - it's so hard to get people's attention. I knew a journalist who was a well-known film writer for a major national newspaper who said to me last year, "I'm just going to Park City to ski." And I said, "Well how do I get anything into your paper?" And they were like, "I'm just going up and skiing. I might see a couple of movies, but I'm just coming to ski." That can be very frustrating because we're sitting there trying to get some play and this person is worrying about which days they're going to ski and which parties they're going to. They're more interested in my party list than my films!

I also find it frustrating that, compared to years gone by, there seems to have been a cut in magazine space across the board. When I handled *Bloody Sunday* in 2002 we did so much press, but two months later when the magazines came out with their festival coverage, there was almost nothing on the film. *Bloody Sunday* won the World Cinema Audience Award that year and *Premiere* magazine did two back-to-back Sundance issues where they highlighted the festival for six pages

in each, and *Bloody Sunday* wasn't even mentioned. And when I tell you we did loads of publicity, we did! I had everyone from the magazine see the movie, and they loved it. They photographed the film's star James Nesbitt, they photographed the director Paul Greengrass... yet nothing got in.

Do you know what *did* get in? Anything gay, anything gritty and weird (and quite frankly, unwatchable), and big stars. It's like, "Ok. You're *Premiere* magazine - you're a film magazine. I don't understand why I'm not getting anything you magazine about an audience award winner." Then of course you open the magazine and Brittany Spears' appearance on Main Street gets a photo. That's really how the festival has changed: you get people up there who have no reason being there, like J.Lo and Ben Affleck. Ok, Ben has Project Greenlight, but suddenly it's all about J.Lo and there's a three page spread in every magazine and you're just sitting there wondering, "What about the winner of the festival?"

**BC: Yeah. I know that this "ambush marketing" has really started to become a real problem.**

**LBS:** It just makes my job impossible. In the beginning of my career at Sundance I was doing a lot of indie movies; I took them on, I was passionate. We killed ourselves trying to get press for the movies and filmmakers we loved. And now nothing runs because Brittany Spears is in town. It can be really frustrating. And you know what the sad result of this is? People like myself watch a

movie and we find ourselves thinking, "Well there's no stars so what can we really do at Sundance?" I try not to think like that and I usually don't, but sometimes you can't help but have it in the back of your mind when you're watching a movie. It shouldn't be that way.

**BC: Do you have an anecdote that you're fond of recounting over the dinner table when the topic of Sundance comes up?**

**LBS:** I remember kidnapping Roger Ebert - literally kidnapping him and dragging him to a screening one time. He was going, "I don't have time... I've got to go... I've got to file..." and I was like, "No, you have to come." That was actually for *Man of the Century* and he ended up really getting behind the film, so much so that he mentioned it in his column and that's how Fine Line heard about it.

I have another story... it was a short called *Angry Men*, which was also in *Slamdance*. The producer had created a whole bunch of fake parking tickets with an invite and the film's screening times printed on the back. He stuck them on cars along Main Street and around town, and the Park City officials went crazy. This was the first year they started seriously cracking down on the noise on Main Street. They got hold of one of his tickets, hunted him down and threatened to arrest him for impersonating an officer. He called me and asked, "What do I do?" I said, "Let them arrest you. I'm going to have *Page Six* [of the *New York Post*] down there and we're going to get coverage on this." So he let them



arrest him and *Page Six* were there to cover it and they ran an item. Off the back of the *Page Six* article he got a call from MTV who wanted to have a meeting to discuss making *Angry Men* into a series. It never did quite come to fruition, but it's that sort of experience that makes my job fun.

I want to tell you one more... I was there in 1998 with *20 Dates*, again this is a *Slamdance* story because with those you need to be so much more creative. Myles Berkowitz was the director and Tia Carrere had maybe a minute of screen time in the film. I said to Myles, "I need Tia to come up and do some publicity," and he was like, "There's other things that we could probably do." I insisted that "I just need Tia up there to do the big stuff, and we can figure out the rest." So Myles came up with this idea to bribe every single cab driver in Park City to put up postcards of the movie all over the cabs and to talk about it as if they'd seen it and loved it. He was like, "Here's a hundred bucks, talk about my movie." And they did. We would hear back from press people who would say, "I heard about this great movie from this cab driver..." We also sprinkled people on the shuttle busses to talk about the movie and just say, "I saw that movie *20 Dates* at *Slamdance* man... it's so much fun." And you know, there's Roger Ebert or the *Premiere* magazine writer, or there's the critic from *The Times*, and they're like, "Which movie did you love?" Because they like to hear from people what they liked.

**BC: Do you have any favourite places you like to eat where you're in Park City?**

**LBS:** My condo. When I tell you that I simply go from the office to my room at the end of the day - that's exactly it. It's almost like downloading on to a diskette - I just need to download my brain during that dinner hour, unless I'm working something.

There's also a Chinese restaurant downstairs on Main Street that I like, but I don't want to tell people about it because then all of a sudden it will be crowded and I won't be able to get a reservation. That's already a problem: one year we went down there and we wanted to eat, we were starving and didn't have a lot of time, but the restaurant was fully-booked. There were six of us so one of us went down and managed to glance at the reservation list and there was a reservation for six at 8 o'clock. It was about 7:45 at this time so we called the restaurant and said, "We have a reservation in the name of... " you know, the name that was on the list, "and we're not going to be able to make it." And then the restaurant gave our group the table. That's what you have to do sometimes to get a reservation in Park City!

**BC: What about networking and socialising? Are there any places that are better for that sort of thing than others?**

**LBS:** I just think you need to go to the parties. Not so much the Sundance-sponsored parties, but the hot parties like the *Daily Variety* "10 Directors to Watch" party, which is always filled with the people that you should be talking to. The Showtime party is always a staple; the Miramax party is also always hard to get into, but

if you can, everyone's there. The magazine parties, like *Entertainment Weekly* and *Premiere* are always really fun, although you'll probably see more celebrities there than anything. The real networking parties are the ones that are held every year, like *Daily Variety*, Showtime, Miramax, those kinds of parties.

**BC: Do you have any general advice for future "Sundance virgins", particularly filmmakers?**

**LBS:** Come prepared. You have one shot so you better be prepared. It's like a big audition - you've got one shot - because if your movie falls on deaf ears at Sundance for whatever reason, six months down the line when you're in the Hollywood Film Festival, the studios are going to hear about your movie and go, "Hasn't that been around for a while?" The movie starts to feel old in the eyes of the buyers. So go out big, go out with somebody who knows how to make noise about your movie - a really creative producer's rep if you can't afford a publicist, or a publicist that knows that the hell they're doing. It will probably be the best money you'll spend at the festival. I'm sure anybody who gets hired for whatever reason will say that, but I really believe it because I've seen how I've made a difference in a sale by what I've done.