

How to your planetarium

(without losing your soul)

By Loren Niemi & Craig Sinard

IMAXing is a term coined by Media Content Producer Craig Sinard in 2007 to describe the use of commercially branded or underwritten content created specifically for Planetarium or Science Museum screens.

I. Is IMAXing outside the Mission Statement?

A random sample of Mission Statements for both Science Museums and Planetariums shows remarkable similarities. Keywords and phrases are derived from a common concern for the acquisition of knowledge: spark curiosity, discover, foster understanding, inspiring, stimulating environment for learning, etc. The core of each is to share science-based knowledge with the public.

The presentation of commercially branded or underwritten content would not conflict with these mission statements. In fact, commercial underwriting or branding can provide an additional source of revenue, supporting Science Museum and Planetariums' core missions.

II. Museums, Commercialism and Education

The potential issues that arise are not about the Mission but rather about the perception of commercialism and Mission. As long as the content viewed by the public is consistent with the organization's educational Mission, branded and underwritten science films are simply another teaching mode and model.

The stumbling block for many Museum and Planetarium staff and Boards to increased commercial participation is a strongly internalized feeling that they do not want to be taken advan-

tage of; that the organization will not be an equal partner in determining the content or presentation style. In an appropriate partnership underwriting and support will lead a museum or planetarium to:

1. an influx of [relatively] inexpensive production, leading to the creation of custom material exclusive to your region or facility.
2. a mechanism to increase the frequency of best-available information of exhibitions in response to audience identified or emerging interest areas.
3. the potential for corporations to produce high-quality entertaining materials as a content specific donation for non-profit organizational use.
4. becoming a distributor of content.
5. in-house production capacity for those organizations that want it.

There are good reasons for a corporation to undertake such a partnership as well:

1. to put their services or products on IMAX, Planetarium or other dome screens.
2. an opportunity to reinforce or position themselves as supportive of the educational mission of museums and planetariums with the add-on of repeatability, long run times or an audience that is in a receptive mode.
3. a tax write-off for the donation of the films to their local IMAX non-profit.

III. Will IMAXing help or hurt the organization's fundraising?

The fundamental answer is no, it should not hurt funding.

Many Planetariums and Science Museums are understaffed and under-budgeted. There are three scenarios that can produce viable partnerships:

1. a personal relationship of a non-profit board or staff member with a corporate decision-maker.
2. the use of development staff (or consultants).
3. marketing to corporations by the content producer on behalf of the non-profit organization.

The first two scenarios are consistent with current fundraising models. The third is a departure in that it relieves the organization from directly raising the production or sponsorship costs.

IV. Production of Content

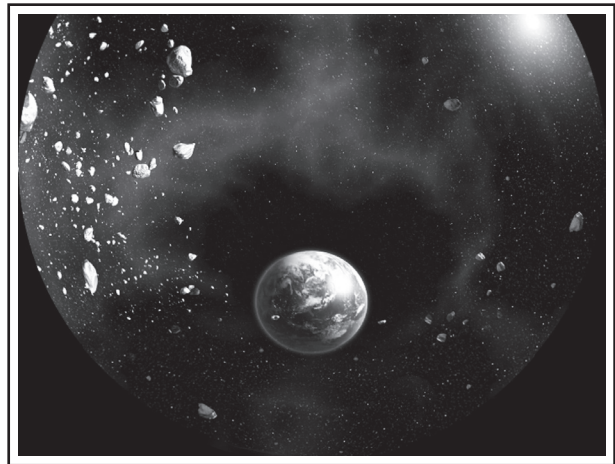
Film is basically silver impregnated on plastic. Videotape and Hard drives are basically rust impregnated on plastic. Silver is much more expensive than rust. IMAX 65mm film, while still a major force, is no longer defining the ultimate in motion picture image technology. RED, Phantom, Sony and Arriflex all now have digital capture cameras and recorders that make image capture of 2k, 4k and more – not only a high definition reality – but a significantly less expensive reality.

Generally speaking, Planetariums and Science Museums have these content production options:

1. Go it alone. The advantage is you have full control of the content and style. The disadvantage is that it is time and resource-intensive.
2. Partner with an unqualified vendor (PBS affiliate, commercial producer without the proper production experience) on the assumption that they can acquire or develop the technical know-

edge and equipment to produce a quality product.

3. Partner with a qualified vendor who is prepared to develop quality content now.
4. Wait for others to develop the content and offer it for sale or rental.



V. VR-MAX

If you think that partnering with a qualified vendor is the way to go, the VR-MAX division of Sinard Inc. has been producing dome content for over a decade. Now, with the introduction of systems such as the Evans and Sutherland DigiStar projection system, IMAX capability has come to Planetariums. If you are ready to move from content consumer to content producer, talk to us about how we can help you IMAX your Planetarium without losing your soul.

www.vr-max.com
