

SOLO FILMS

SOLO LAB · THE SHELF · DIGITAL PRODUCTS

A MARKET FIELD GUIDE

The AFM *Playbook*

How to work a film market, from a distribution career: choosing targets, the meeting math, what to say in the room, and the follow-up discipline that decides whether the market turns into offers.

The calendar fills before the market does. So does the verdict.

What a market actually *is*

A film market is not a festival. Nobody is there to discover art. A market is a trade fair where finished films, packages, and rights change hands on a schedule — and every person in the building is working a list.

The American Film Market runs each November in Los Angeles, and it is the working example for everything in this playbook — but the mechanics here apply at any serious market. Buyers attend to fill slates: a distributor needs a certain number of titles, in certain genres, at certain budget levels, for certain release windows, across the next year or two. They arrive with slots. Sellers arrive with product. The market is the week where slots and products get matched — or don't.

Three facts follow from that, and they organize everything else in this book:

- **Buyers are rationing attention, not hunting.** A buyer may screen dozens of titles and sit in scores of meetings in a week. Your job is not to be the most artistic seller in the building. It is to be the easiest yes on their list: clear shelf, right size, clean paperwork, professional follow-through.
- **The market starts weeks before the doors open.** Meetings are booked in advance, screeners are requested in advance, and the buyers' shortlists are substantially built before anyone lands. Sellers who "start" at the market have started late.
- **The market is decided after it ends.** Most offers do not happen in the room. They happen in the follow-up — in the six weeks of disciplined, specific, well-timed contact that separates sellers who close from sellers who "had great meetings."

Two different jobs: a film, or a package

What you bring determines what you're doing there. With a **finished film**, you are selling: screeners, rights, territories, delivery. Your materials prove the product exists and can be delivered. With a **package** — a script with elements attached, at any stage before completion — you are building: pre-sales in some cases, more often partners, financing interest, and distributor feedback on what the market will bear. Package meetings are conversations about value and risk; film meetings are conversations about price and terms. Confusing the two — pitching a package like a finished product, or a finished film like a dream — is the most expensive beginner error there is. Decide which job you have before you book a single meeting.

Choosing *targets*

The amateur works the room. The professional works a list — built in advance, ranked, and matched to the product. Your target list is the highest-leverage document you will make for the market, because every hour at the market is spent against it.

Build the list from the shelf out

Start with the product's honest placement: genre, budget class, audience, stage. Then find the companies that buy exactly that. Buyers publish their appetites in their catalogues and recent acquisitions — a distributor whose last ten titles are faith-based family films is not a secret buyer for your elevated horror title, whatever their badge says. Match first on demonstrated behavior: what they have actually acquired lately, at your size.

Size the list at **30 to 40 companies**. That range is deliberate: enough that a thin response still leaves meetings on the calendar, small enough that every name on it is researched, not scraped. A list of two hundred is not ambition — it is a list nobody worked.

Tier the list

TIER	WHO THEY ARE	HOW YOU WORK THEM
A	The precise fits: right genre, right size, a visible slot for your title. Usually a shorter list than you expect.	Meetings booked first, before the market. Best materials, best time slots, your freshest hours.
B	Adjacent fits: same audience, neighboring genre or size; regional and platform buyers; educational and specialty buyers if your title fits their lane.	Booked second. Real effort — adjacency converts more often than sellers expect.
C	The field: everyone else attending who touches your category.	Screeners and one-sheets out; meetings if the calendar allows. Never at the cost

Two warnings from experience. First: the famous names are not automatically your A tier. The biggest companies in the building buy a narrow band of product at a scale most independents don't have; a meeting with them feels like progress and usually isn't. Second: the unglamorous lanes — educational distribution, television, VOD aggregators' direct counterparts, regional distributors — close real deals for real films every market, and they are systematically under-worked by sellers chasing logos. Fit beats fame, at every tier.

Direct, or through a sales agent?

If you hold the rights and the relationships are yours to build, selling direct keeps you in the room and in the follow-up — at the cost of your own time and your own learning curve. A sales agent brings the list, the room, and the market's trust in their slate — at a commission, a share of expenses, and your distance from the buyer relationships. Neither is the "professional" choice by default. The question is which asset you're shorter on this year: money, or access. Answer honestly; the market charges full price for the wrong answer.

The pre-market *timeline*

Markets are won on a calendar. This is the standard runway, counted back from opening day. Compress it and things break in a predictable order: first the meeting quality, then the materials, then you.

WHEN	THE WORK
8 weeks out	Product locked or locked enough: screener export planned, package frozen. Target list built and tiered. Deck passed the thirty-second test (see the companion workbook on this shelf).
6 weeks out	Meeting requests to A tier, in order. One-sheet and screener link ready to send the moment anyone asks. Chain-of-title and paperwork pulled into one folder — you will be asked, and "I'll get it to you" is a cost, not a catastrophe, only if it's fast.
4 weeks out	B-tier requests out. Calendar discipline begins: meetings confirmed in writing, gaps protected for screenings and follow-up. Travel and lodging settled — the market punishes logistics amateurs daily.
2 weeks out	C-tier materials out. Pitch rehearsed out loud, timed. Every meeting researched: who they are, what they bought last, what slot yours fills.
Final week	Confirmations re-sent. Screener links tested from a cold browser, on hotel-grade wifi, by someone who isn't you. One-page meeting sheets printed per appointment: who, what they buy, your ask, your fallback.
The day before	Walk the venue if you can. Know where the meetings physically happen. Sleep. The week is a marathon conducted in thirty-minute sprints, and day-one freshness is a competitive advantage nobody can buy back.

Buyers are booking their meetings now — the calendar fills before the market does. If your deck isn't ready, it isn't early. It's late.

The meeting *math*

Market meetings run on slots — typically thirty minutes, back to back, across five or six working days. That arithmetic is unforgiving, and planning by it honestly is what separates a worked market from an attended one.

- **Realistic capacity:** a focused seller sustains roughly eight to twelve real meetings a day. More than that and the meetings blur, the notes don't get written, and the follow-up — where deals close — gets quietly sacrificed.
- **No-shows and drift are normal:** a portion of booked meetings will move, shrink, or evaporate. Build the calendar so a lost slot is a bonus hour for follow-up, not a hole in the week.
- **Protect the edges:** the first meeting of the day sets your rhythm — never give it to your most important buyer cold. The last hour of the day is for the day's notes and next-day confirmations, every day, without exception.
- **Rank ruthlessly:** when two meetings compete, the A-tier buyer wins over the interesting conversation, every time. Interesting conversations are what the hallway is for.

The hallway is a real venue

Some of the most productive market encounters are unbooked: the introduction after a screening, the coffee-line conversation, the shared elevator with a name from your B list. Work them like meetings — short, clear, specific, and always ending with a concrete next step and a same-day follow-up note. What the hallway cannot do is substitute for the booked calendar. It is a bonus layer on a worked list, never the list itself.

In the room: the *meeting itself*

Thirty minutes, a stranger, and a decision that will mostly be made on clarity. Here is the structure that serves sellers best.

The shape of the meeting

1. **The opening (2 minutes)**. Who you are, what you have, what stage it's at — in that order, in plain words. The buyer is placing you before you finish your coffee order. Help them.
2. **The pitch (3–5 minutes)**. The logline, the hook, the audience, the business shape. This is the deck's thirty-second test, expanded to conversation length — shelf, money, ask. If you are still explaining the plot at minute ten, you have spent the meeting on the part that closes nothing.
3. **The materials (5 minutes)**. Trailer or screener, one-sheet, the numbers that matter. Let the buyer drive from here — their questions are the meeting's real agenda, because they reveal the slot they're testing you against.
4. **The business (10 minutes)**. Rights, territories, timing, terms shape, what you need and by when. Specifics live here. Vagueness here reads as either inexperience or something to hide.
5. **The close (2 minutes)**. Agree the exact next step and its date: who sends what, to whom, by when. "Let's stay in touch" is not a next step. A meeting without a dated next step didn't happen — it was a chat.

What buyers ask — and what they're really asking

THE QUESTION	WHAT IT TESTS
"What's the budget?"	Whether your comps, your ask, and your expectations live in the same world as your costs.
"Who's attached?"	Value — and your honesty. The follow-up "attached, or in discussion?" is a credibility exam. Pass it.
"What's available?"	Whether you know your own rights map: territories, windows, prior deals, encumbrances.
"When can you deliver?"	Professionalism. Delivery is where amateur deals quietly die; a real date with real materials behind it carries weight.
"Who else are you talking to?"	Heat — and your discretion. Answer in shape, never in names. A seller who names other buyers to you will name you to them.

"Can you send the screener / the paperwork?"

Speed. This is the meeting converting. The answer is yes, today, and then it must actually be today.

And when the honest answer is "not yet" — a deliverable pending, a right still clearing — say it plainly with the date it resolves. Buyers forgive timelines. They do not forgive discovering them.

PART SIX

Materials & *paperwork*

Nothing in this section is glamorous, and it decides more deals than the pitch does. The seller who can produce clean materials and clean paperwork on request is the seller a buyer can put in front of their own acquisitions committee.

- **The screener.** Private, reliable, tested from outside your own accounts. A screener that buffers, expires, or demands the buyer email you for a password is a closed door wearing a link.
- **The trailer and one-sheet.** The trailer sells the shelf; the one-sheet survives the meeting — it is the page that gets forwarded up the buyer's chain when you're not there. Make both say the same film.
- **The deck.** Business-forward, current, with the ask on it. (Its construction is the companion Template Pack on this shelf.)
- **Chain of title.** The documentary proof that you control what you're selling: rights agreements, releases, licenses, in one folder, producible on request.
- **Delivery basics.** Know your masters, your formats, your captions and paperwork status before you're asked. "Ready to deliver" is a claim buyers verify.
- **Errors & omissions (E&O) insurance.** Many buyers require it for a closed deal. Knowing its status — in place, obtainable, costed — is part of knowing your own product.

THE ONE-FOLDER RULE

Every document above lives in one folder, shared in one link, named so a stranger can navigate it. When a buyer asks, the reply should take you ninety seconds. Speed of paperwork is read — correctly — as a proxy for how you'll behave across a whole distribution term.

After the market: *follow-up discipline*

Here is where the market is actually decided. Every seller leaves with a stack of warm conversations. Almost none of the warmth survives contact with the buyer's ordinary workload — unless the seller runs a cadence. This is the section this playbook exists for.

The cadence

WHEN	THE MOVE
Within 24–48 hours	The thank-you that works: short, specific to your conversation, with the exact materials promised in the meeting attached or linked. Not a form letter — buyers can tell, and the ones who can't have assistants who can.
One week	The status touch for anyone who took a screener: confirm receipt, offer the one thing they asked about that wasn't in the first send (a territory sheet, the paperwork folder, a cast update). Give the follow-up a reason to exist.
Three weeks	The direct check-in on live conversations: where does it sit, what do they need next, what date should you circle? Professional, brief, no pleading.
Six weeks	The decision pass. By now, warm silence is information. One clean, final note that makes saying no easy and saying yes easier — then believe the answer you're given, including the silent one, and reallocate the title to its next lane.

The tracking sheet

Run the whole market off one sheet: company, contact, tier, what was sent and when, what they asked for, the next step and its date, status. Updated the same day as every meeting, without exception — market notes written from memory on the plane home are fiction. The sheet is also your asset register for the next market: relationships compound, and this is where they live between markets.

Reading the answers

- **A pass** is data: log the stated reason verbatim. Passes cluster around real signals — size, shelf, timing — and the pattern across ten passes is your product's true market position.
- **"Send it to me"** is not interest; it's a step. It becomes interest when the screener is watched and the questions start. Track steps, not vibes.
- **An offer** starts the real work, below. Never treat the first number as the deal, and never shop an offer by name — shape only, always.

Offers & *terms*

When an offer comes, it arrives as a shape before it arrives as a contract: which rights, which territories, what term, what money structure. Your job in the deal phase is to understand shape before you negotiate numbers — because the same headline number is a good deal or a bad one entirely depending on the rights and costs wrapped around it.

- **Minimum guarantee (MG):** money paid up front against future royalties. Real money — but read it alongside the term and the rights it buys.
- **Royalty / revenue share:** your percentage after the distributor recoups expenses and fees. The order of deductions decides what the percentage is worth.
- **Expenses:** marketing, deliverables, market fees, capped or uncapped. Uncapped expense recoupment is where back-end goes to die.
- **Term:** how long they hold the rights. Years of exclusivity are part of the price, whether or not they appear in the number.
- **Territory and window carve-outs:** what you keep is as valuable as what you sell — an educational carve-out, a festival right, a home territory held back can each be worth real money later.
- **Flat-fee / buyout:** simpler and final: a fixed sum for defined rights. Compare it honestly against the speculative back-end of a royalty deal.

NON-NEGOTIABLE

Before you sign anything, the deal memo gets read by an entertainment attorney — yours, not theirs. This playbook teaches you to read the shape of an offer; it is not legal advice, and no checklist replaces counsel on a rights contract. Budget for the lawyer the way you budget for the market badge: as a cost of being in the business, not an optional extra.

Terms glossary

Acquisitions	The buyer side of distribution: the people and departments who evaluate and buy titles for a catalogue or slate.
Aggregator	A company that places finished films onto streaming platforms, typically for a fee or revenue share, without buying rights outright.
All-rights deal	One buyer takes the full bundle of rights for a territory: theatrical, home entertainment, television, streaming.

Carve-out	A right or territory excluded from a deal and retained by the seller – educational rights are a common one.
Chain of title	The documented chain of agreements proving the seller controls the rights being sold.
Delivery	Supplying the buyer with the film masters and all required materials and paperwork to specification, by the contracted date.
E&O	Errors & omissions insurance; covers legal exposures in the content. Often required to close.
Holdback	A contracted delay before a right can be exploited in a window, protecting an earlier window's value.
MG	Minimum guarantee: an advance paid against royalties.
Output deal	A standing agreement for a buyer's channel or platform to take a producer's or distributor's output over a period.
Pre-sale	A sale agreed before the film is finished, on the strength of the package – script, attachments, marketable elements.
Royalty	The seller's ongoing share of revenue after the distributor's fees and recoupable expenses, per the contract's definitions.
Screener	A private viewing copy of the film, sent for evaluation.
Slate	The set of titles a buyer or seller is working in a period – the buyer's slots your title is competing to fill.
Term	The length of time a deal grants rights.
Territory	The geographic unit of a rights deal – a country, a language bloc, or worldwide.
Window	The release stage in which a right is exploited – theatrical, transactional streaming, subscription streaming, television – sequenced by the contracts.

DONE WITH YOU

Want a buyer's read *before the market?*

Solo Lab is the done-with-you door: a former distribution executive reads your deck the way the room will, in writing, within 48 hours — then walks it through with you on a call. It starts with The Breakdown.

The Breakdown — \$350

solofilmstudios.com/solo-labs

The AFM Playbook is a Solo Films Inc. publication, written from a career in film distribution. It teaches market craft; it is not legal or financial advice. © Solo Films Inc. — solofilmstudios.com