

Resilient Film Marketing Playbook

A practical guide for distributors

Opening Note

Film distribution has always involved risk. Every release is close to a prototype, a new product launched into an ever-evolving market, and distributors have always made decisions with incomplete visibility and uncertain audience response.

What has changed is the margin for error. Audiences have far more to choose from and less reason to leave the house for any of it, and cinema-going has become less habitual and more event-led as a result. Meanwhile securing screens remains as hard as ever, the effect of marketing spend is still difficult to demonstrate, and audience discovery now travels globally before a local campaign has begun.

None of which means distribution is broken. The craft and invention we heard about was considerable. What kept surfacing alongside it was a small number of questions that recurred in very different markets and for very different kinds of film.

This playbook comes out of Resilient Film Marketing, an usher-led programme of conversations about how distributors are adapting. It draws on six roundtables with thirty distributors, sales agents and exhibition partners across fifteen markets, a survey of 274 filmgoers, as well as campaign data from 835 releases.

We build tools for distributors, so we have an obvious interest in them succeeding, but the problems described in these sessions are not ones any single company can fix, ours included. They are structural, they are shared, and we have a useful position in the market from which to bring together different perspectives and data for its overall benefit.

So this playbook has two jobs. To document what good distributors are already doing, clearly enough to be useful on the next release. And to name what still needs solving collectively, and ask who wants to help.

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What We Found

Intention is the gap.

Campaigns are built to produce attention and rarely to receive intention: the point at which someone stops noticing a film and starts planning to see it. Distributors are good at the first, and do it against far better funded competition for the same time and money. The sale itself belongs to an exhibitor or a ticketing platform, which may explain why little tends to get built to catch what happens in between.

The signals worth trusting are the ones that cost the audience something.

Ten thousand people can watch a trailer without one of them meaning to go. Nobody checks what time a film is on unless they are thinking about going.

In a year of campaign data, 44.8% of visitors arriving directly to film platforms reached a cinema. Paid traffic managed 2.2%. The difference is often whether the audience was looking, or was found.

AI is already answering questions about your film. The answers are not being shaped by the distributor.

A quarter of the filmgoers we surveyed, 35% including the unsure, now put questions to search or an assistant when deciding what to watch. Is this for me? Is it worth the trip?

That is intention, spoken plainly, and the accuracy of the reply depends entirely on what happens to be findable.

You can sell a million tickets and never learn the name of a single buyer.

The audiences who turned out, the communities that mobilised, the signals that proved reliable. Nobody manages to keep any of it by remembering.

Most of what a campaign buys does not compound, and this is the part that has to be built rather than simply done.

Campaign figures throughout: calendar year 2025, across 835 releases on distributor platforms built with usheru, 22.4 million sessions. "Reached a cinema" means a visitor clicked through to a cinema's ticketing page while showtimes were live. It is not a record of ticket sales. Full methodology in the appendix.

What follows

PART ONE

Sets out the plays

practical, low-lift behaviours that fit the release cycle distributors already run: reading intent earlier, keeping enough room to act on what it tells you, and making each release leave more behind than it started with.

PART TWO

Sets out the evidence

where these findings came from and why the argument holds.

PART THREE

Sets out what the sector could usefully do together

including a shared benchmark for the handoff between intent and ticketing, and practical work on how films are found and answered in conversational search.

How to use this

This is a document to come back to rather than read once, so we would suggest using it in pieces.

Part One works on its own and is probably the place to start. The signal inventory may help when you are deciding which few signals matter for a particular title. The release planning worksheet is worth a look before spend is committed, and the answerability audit takes about an hour if you want to try it on your next release. These are available as interactive tools at rfm.usheru.com

Part Two is there if you want to know why any of it holds.

Part Three is about next steps.

PART ONE

What to do

Plays for the release cycle, and two bigger moves.

The plays

Some of what follows is already practice among the sharpest distributors, written down so it can be repeated rather than rediscovered. Some of it is not common practice anywhere yet.

They are grouped by when they happen, because timing is most of the point. Agency decays across a release. At acquisition almost everything is open; by the second week of a campaign, most of the budget is allocated, the positioning is set and the screens are booked. What the audience tells you runs the other way: the clearest indications arrive last. So the plays that come early are mostly about keeping options open, and the plays that come later are mostly about spending them well.

The useful question is not which of these you could do, but which two or three would have changed your last campaign.

Before the money is committed

The decisions that cost most are made when you know least.

Name the audience, and the test

Start with something specific. Not "arthouse audiences" or "fans of the genre" but: women aged 30 to 50 who follow the director's previous work, coming in pairs in the first ten days, hearing about it from a friend rather than an advert.

Then name the single thing the release depends on, in a form you can check. "This works if the Ukrainian community in four cities turns out in week one." "This works if the ending gets argued about rather than admired." Then name what would show you, early, whether it is happening: community organisations engaging and group bookings for the first, argument in the comments rather than praise for the second.

Three or four indicators are enough, chosen because they speak to that assumption. Decide now what a good and a bad reading of each looks like. It prevents both common failures: reacting to whichever signal is loudest in week two, and missing the one that mattered because nobody had said what to watch.

Comp four ways, not one.

Most comping collapses into a single number, what did the similar film do. Separate it out:

Positioning comp.

How to frame the film. Can reach back years.

Commercial comp.

What it might realistically do. Only useful if recent; the market has moved.

Mechanism comp.

How did a comparable title actually travel? A debate, a fandom, an event, a community, a piece of casting?

Audience comp.

Which specific group turned out, and can you reach them directly?

The last two are where the work is. Reading the conversation around a comparable title tells you more about how to run your campaign than its opening weekend ever will: what was said on Letterboxd, which subreddits picked it up, which clips travelled and why. It costs nothing but attention.

Talk to the community before you commit, not after.

Diaspora organisations, subject-matter groups, fan communities, local societies. The conventional move is to approach them once the release is booked; the more useful move is to approach them before. And ask for a booking, not a view, "would twenty of your members come on a Saturday?" gets a truthful answer because it involves a commitment, where "does this look interesting?" gets politeness.

One distributor saw a Brazilian community turn out in numbers at a Swiss festival weeks ahead of release. Another built a release around Georgian audiences in Germany. In every case the community existed long before the film did. Nothing prevented anyone asking them first.

Before launch

Everything you fix now is something you cannot change later.

Build native, not adapted.

Audiences on each platform expect something different and recognise a repurposed asset instantly. One distributor now holds a standing budget line purely for short-form built for the platform rather than adapted for it, and treats it as a fixed cost of release rather than an optional extra.

Prepare a second positioning.

One documentary distributor launched artwork for a film about two well-known figures and discovered in the comments that the two fan bases actively disliked each other. The assumption of a single combined audience was wrong. Because they read the comments closely and early, they repositioned toward two audiences instead of one.

Leave things undecided on purpose.

Most things get fixed early out of habit rather than necessity: positioning signed off in one meeting, creative produced in a single batch, media booked in one flight, the team moved to the next title. Very little of that is forced by the release calendar. Before each of those, ask whether the decision genuinely has to be made now.

Then decide what would change your mind. Agree in advance the signal, the threshold or the date that would make you spend more, spend less or shift the message, because once a campaign is live, nobody has time to reopen the strategy.

Stand the platform up early, and build it properly.

Release platforms are often built when showtimes are ready, a few weeks out, which wastes the entire period in which interest is forming. A platform live from announcement collects audience data, shows where traffic is coming from, and gives you somewhere to engage people who are already looking. It also has time to build search visibility, so that when someone asks where a film is playing, or asks an assistant whether it is worth seeing, the answer points somewhere you control.

How it is built matters as much as when. Across 2025, purpose-built campaign platforms built around showtimes and a clear release-window action sent 16.2% of visitors through to a cinema. Standard release pages carrying the same information sent 4.2%. The difference is structure: a clear path to showtimes, fewer competing calls to action at the moment somebody is deciding, and a page that changes when tickets go on sale.

Track the steps to the cinema.

Someone lands on your platform, looks up showtimes, picks a city, then clicks through to a ticketing page. Those steps are the visible half of the journey to a sale, and most distributors never set them up to be counted. Do it before launch, watch them daily through the release window, and keep the numbers afterwards. For context, across 2025 a standard release page moved about one visitor in twenty-four through to a cinema, and a purpose-built campaign platform about one in six. After three or four releases you have something better than either figure: your own benchmark for what normal looks like on your slate.

Tag everything.

Every link, every post, every partner placement, properly tagged. It is unglamorous and widely skipped, and it is the difference between counting the people who came close to booking and knowing which of your work brought them there.

While the campaign is live

Not a complaint.

A person telling you they would go.

Read comments for requests, not sentiment.

Sentiment tells you how people feel. Requests tell you what they intend. "Why isn't this playing in Sheffield" is not a complaint, it is a person telling you they would go.

Take that evidence to your bookers.

One distributor collected exactly those comments and took them to exhibitors as proof of regional demand. They won additional screenings.

Run many variants, and let them move the money.

Not two creative routes but as many as you can produce, live at the same time, with a standing commitment to shift budget toward whatever is working every few days. Pre-launch testing tells you what people said they liked. Live variants tell you what actually moves someone toward a showtime. Most teams run some version of this. The discipline is not the testing, it is acting on the result fast enough for it to matter.

Follow unexpected traction fast.

A distributor releasing a Turkish-Georgian film found the Georgian community in Germany responding far more strongly than modelled, and moved budget toward them mid-campaign. The signal was visible. Acting on it required having something left to move.

Correct the wrong impression rather than repeating the right one.

One distributor uses social listening to find the misconception forming around a title, in one case, confusion over whether the film was a comedy, and addresses it directly in community management. Fixing a misread is cheaper than building fresh awareness.

After release, and into the next one

Most releases
leave almost
nothing behind.

**Ask the people
who came.**

One distributor sent teams into their ten largest cinemas and surveyed six hundred attendees on what brought them in. Social dominated; billboards barely registered. Close to the cheapest research available, and rarely done.

**Check which
signals lied.**

Compare what looked promising early against what actually happened. Across a few releases this builds the thing no external research can supply: a calibrated sense of which signals your team can trust.

Very little of this costs money. Most of it costs attention, earlier than usual, and a willingness to leave something undecided so there is a decision left to make.

A note on where AI actually helps

Several of these plays ask for more reading than a small team has time to do. The conversation around a comparable title, spread across Letterboxd, Reddit and half a dozen forums. Which community organisations exist for a subject, in which cities. Three thousand comments sorted into requests and reactions.

One distributor in this research uses AI tools to compile lists of relevant community groups before approaching any of them, work that used to take a week and now takes an afternoon.

Nothing here involves generating anything. It is reading, sorting and summarising at a volume a two-person marketing team cannot reach on its own.

The assets that compounds

The transaction belongs to the exhibitor or the ticketing platform. The audience relationship is rented from Meta, TikTok or Google, and re-rented every campaign. Most distributors have spent two decades paying repeatedly to reach the same people, and own nothing at the end of it.

Plenty have tried. Distributors know the argument and most have attempted some version of it, a newsletter, a members' scheme, a list built around one release. It is genuinely difficult, and the reasons are structural rather than a lack of will. But it is the only thing here that compounds.

Not all audience knowledge is worth the same.

It is worth being precise about what you actually have:

Aggregate,

market data, box office, panel research. Context, not yours.

Behavioural,

site analytics, showtime checks, traffic sources. Yours, but anonymous.

Identified,

an email address and permission. Reachable without paying a platform.

Relationship,

they recognise you, expect to hear from you, and open it.

Community,

they identify with what you release, organise around it, and bring others.

Most distributors operate at behavioural, occasionally identified. Platforms hold the rest and rent it back.

The mechanisms already exist.

Competitions and ticket giveaways remain the most direct route to permissioned audience data. Notify-me signups. Ballots for preview screenings, which identify your highest-intent audience in a single step. Q&A and event bookings, where the contact already exists and simply isn't kept. Newsletters built around a curatorial identity rather than a single title. Membership schemes, the hardest and the most valuable.

And one routinely overlooked: you do not always need to own the list. A standing relationship with a community organisation that already has one is cheaper, easier to maintain, and often more effective than a database for a distribution brand people are not familiar with.

Why it stays hard.

Consent for one film does not transfer to the next. Audiences follow films and talent, not distributors. Nobody on a small team owns it, there is rarely a system to put it in, and the payoff arrives in eighteen months while the release is on Friday. These are real objections, not excuses.

But the compound effect is what makes it worth the trouble. One exhibitor-distributor in this research made a deliberate decision several years ago to build a younger membership base. Their largest audience segment moved from over-55s to 25-34s. That is not a campaign result. It is an asset, one that informs what they acquire and who they aim at, and takes some of the guesswork out of every release that follows.

On a mixed slate, do not try to build one audience.

Build several small ones, the Georgian audience from one title, the documentary audience in three northern cities, the horror crowd who found you once. More achievable than becoming a brand, and they pay back on the second relevant title rather than in a decade.

When audiences ask, will your film answer?

Audiences have always asked whether a film is worth it. Is this for me? Is it any good? Will I regret giving up an evening for it? Nothing about those questions is new. What has changed is where some of them are being asked.

A quarter of the 274 filmgoers we surveyed, 35% including those who weren't sure, now put those questions to a search engine or an AI assistant when deciding what to watch. Is this worth seeing? What are people saying? Would I enjoy this if I liked another film? What's showing near me?

These are not browsing questions. They are the questions of somebody deciding, asked at the exact point where interest either becomes a plan or evaporates.

In other words, they are intent questions.

They are also invisible. Unlike a comment or a showtime check, you cannot see them, count them, or respond to them. What you can do is prepare for them.

An assistant answers by assembling what it can find from sources it treats as reliable. If your account of the film is not among them, the answer gets built from whatever is: a review from another territory, an aggregator's one-line synopsis, a forum thread from six months ago. A film you are positioning as a date film will not be described as one unless something credible says so. The narrative you spent a campaign building can be quietly replaced by somebody else's, at precisely the moment somebody is deciding.

Campaign data says the same thing from the other direction, by almost not registering at all. Across the whole of 2025, on distributor platforms built with usheru, traffic identifiably referred from an AI assistant amounted to about sixteen hundred sessions. A quarter of audiences say they are asking. The platforms see a rounding error.

Both can be true, because most of these conversations never produce a click. Someone asks whether a film is worth seeing, gets an answer, and then arrives by another route entirely, or does not arrive at all. What surfaces as an AI referral is only the fraction where a link happened to be offered, followed, and the referrer preserved.

So this is not only a channel to be optimised. It is a layer sitting above the channels, shaping decisions that get attributed somewhere else. Some of the direct traffic that converts best is likely to be people an assistant pointed there.

The one thing that is measurable is at least suggestive. Where those visitors can be identified, they convert well above average: 20.9% on purpose-built platforms against a 16.2% average, and 13.6% on standard pages against 4.2%. Small numbers, and only the taggable subset, but consistent with people arriving having already decided something.

The full survey findings are published at usheru.com.

Answerability

The question this raises is not whether to market on AI platforms. It is narrower and more immediate: when someone asks about your film, what do they find?

A film is answerable when its digital footprint contains what an assistant, a search engine or a curious person needs to respond usefully:

- Is the film described in the words an audience would use to look for it, rather than the words in the press notes?
- Are reviews and audience reactions easy to find and attribute?
- Is the theatrical reason to go stated anywhere, or only implied?
- Is availability current, where it is playing, and when?
- Is there a route from the answer to an actual showtime?

Most release campaigns are built to persuade.

Answerability asks something different: whether the film can be described accurately by someone who is not you, to someone who has already asked.

Become the source

The fix is not a channel strategy. It is making sure a reliable, machine-readable account of your film exists somewhere you control.

Structured text on your own platform gives assistants and search engines something authoritative to draw on: clear positioning, who it is for, what it is like, why it belongs on a big screen, and where and when it is playing. Structure matters as much as substance: clear headings, consistent naming, and marked-up dates and showtimes are read far more reliably than the same information buried in a paragraph of campaign copy.

It also has to exist early. A page published a fortnight before release has not been crawled, indexed or established as anything. This is the second argument for standing the platform up at announcement rather than waiting for showtimes.

Run the audit

Before fixing anything, find out what is actually being said. An answerability audit takes about an hour per title, and almost nobody does one.

Write the questions your audience would ask.

Start with the generic ones. Is it any good, is it for me, where can I see it. Then add the ones specific to this film. Is it a good date film? Is it suitable for a thirteen-year-old? Is it subtitled? Is it frightening? If I liked a particular comparable title, will I like this? These are rarely the questions a campaign is built to answer.

Put each one to a search engine and an assistant,

the way an audience member would. Use a personal account or a signed-out window rather than a work one.

Record what comes back.

Accurate, incomplete, out of date, or nothing at all. Note where the answer points: to you, to an aggregator, to a review from another territory, to a page with no showtimes on it.

Fix what you can.

Some of what you find will be on pages you control. Some will not.

Doing this by hand is the only way to do it today. It is also the obvious candidate for automation, and one of the things we would like to work on.

The answerability audit is available at rfm.usheru.com

This is early, and worth keeping in proportion. A third of a sample doing something that barely existed three years ago is a signal, not a settled market, and this is a behaviour to prepare for rather than a channel to budget for. But the cost of preparing is an hour and some structured copy. The cost of not preparing is letting something else describe your film at the moment somebody is deciding whether to go.

PART TWO

Why

how we arrived here.

01

Attention isn't the problem

Not the most interesting film.
Not the best reviewed.
The one that would lose
something at home.

Ask distributors whether they can get a film noticed and most say yes, with effort. Ask whether that notice becomes a ticket, and the answer changes.

This finding came out of the first round of Resilient Film Marketing conversations, reported at the time in the words that fitted best: attention isn't the problem, conversion is. What follows is the next stage of that work: five further sessions, thirty participants across fifteen markets, and a survey of 274 filmgoers, testing whether it holds. It does. Asked directly whether it was harder to get a film noticed or to turn that into attendance, distributors in three separate sessions gave the same answer without prompting.

Distributors are good at attention

It is not easy, and it is getting harder. One described the reality of small films: "you always have to find a way of doing a lot with nothing." Another described the opposite problem, an ever-growing list of formats and platforms to maintain, with no reliable way to know which of it matters.

But the craft is real, and often inventive in ways budget alone would never buy. One distributor released a comedy with no press, no interviews and no television. The talent toured for a month instead, filmed daily, edited overnight, released as clips the following afternoon. It brought people into cinemas who had never been. A Brazilian distributor builds campaigns around offline stunts designed to travel online: a carnival parade on a festival red carpet, an entire red carpet dyed blue to match a film's title, a public lookalike contest for a film's lead.

These are not people struggling to be noticed.

Attention and intention are different things

They are not two points on the same scale.

Attention is something an audience gives to a film. It is cheap to give and cheap to withdraw. Someone can watch a trailer, admire a poster, share a clip, and genuinely mean to see the film one day, without any of it committing them to anything.

Intention involves their own life. It is a specific Thursday, a particular cinema, the price of two tickets, and usually somebody else's schedule to coordinate. Every one of those conditions has got harder. A Brazilian distributor described cinemas competing directly with bars and restaurants while ticket prices rise:

"in order for us to sell tickets and really succeed, the film must be like an event." A UK distributor put it more bluntly, audiences "will show up to certain things, but they absolutely won't show up for other things."

Audiences describe the same threshold in their own terms. Asked what makes a film worth leaving home for, 81% of survey respondents chose "it feels like the kind of film best experienced in a cinema." Not the most interesting film. Not the best reviewed. The one that would lose something at home.

None of this distinction is new. Studios have measured it for decades, tracking studies separate awareness from definite interest from first choice. That machinery does not scale down: the sample collapses when few respondents have heard of your film, the cost exceeds the entire P&A of most independent releases, it samples a general moviegoing public rather than the communities that carry a specialty title, and it forecasts rather than diagnoses. As one distributor in this research put it, they simply do not have "those panels and the metrics that bigger studios might have." Having them does not settle the question either.

Which is why attention misleads

One distributor described a major premiere: a well-known name in attendance, a significant PR push, everything that normally reads as confidence. Early screenings a month later:

"so many
empty rooms."

Asked whether they could connect a piece of content to an actual ticket sale, another searched for the word in a second language rather than leave the thought unfinished: causality. There was no way to establish it.

The attention was real in both cases. What nobody could tell was whether any of it would turn up.

What intention looks like

The specificity that makes intention hard to manufacture is also what makes it visible. People who are planning behave differently from people who are interested.

It looks like a request rather than a reaction

arrive asking why the film wasn't playing in Sheffield, or the north-east. They took the comments to exhibitors as evidence of demand, and won extra regional screenings on the strength of them.

It looks like an audience organising itself.

A distributor releasing a Turkish-Georgian film noticed unexpected traction among Georgian audiences in Germany, and moved budget toward them mid-campaign. Another saw a Brazilian community turn out in numbers at a Swiss festival screening, weeks ahead of release. A third found the same pattern with Ukrainian audiences in Germany at Christmas.

It looks like arriving on purpose

Across 2025, on distributor platforms built with usheru, visitors who arrived direct reached a cinema at 44.8% and those from organic search at 35.5%. Paid traffic managed 2.2%.

Direct is a mixed category. It covers typed addresses and bookmarks, but also links shared in messaging apps that strip their origin, codes scanned off a poster, and anything where the referrer was lost along the way. Much of what looks like direct traffic is word of mouth that the analytics could not label. What unites all of it is that somebody arrived on purpose.

It looks like someone checking what time the film is on.

A page view is attention. A showtime check is intention. So is selecting a city, sharing a listing, or clicking through to a cinema's ticketing page, though only where a platform has been built to record them. Across the distributor platforms usheru works on, the click through to a cinema is the most useful signal available, because it is the last observable act of planning before the part nobody can see.

It looks like people asking practical questions.

showing near me? Is it for me? Those are not expressions of interest. They are the questions of someone deciding.

None of this is attribution. All of it arrives earlier than attribution, which is the point. And notice what those distributors did next: one took comments to an exhibitor and won screens, another moved budget mid-campaign. Each found part of the journey they could still influence.

02

More signals, less certainty

"Nobody checks what time a film is on unless they are thinking about going."

Distributors do not lack signals. What they lack is a reliable way to tell which ones mean anything for the film in front of them.

In one session for this research, two experienced distributors were asked which signal they trust most. The first answered without hesitation: exhibitor enthusiasm.

"They know very well what works and what doesn't."

Another said almost the opposite, exhibitor interest tells you mainly what else is opening that week.

A booker may take your film because the slot exists, not because they believe in it.

"That's one to take with a pinch of salt."

Both are right, for their own slate. Which is the difficulty: the same signal carries different weight depending on what you release.

Five kinds of signal

Signals get discussed as a single pile, which is why the conversation goes nowhere. They answer five different questions:

01

Do people care

(talent, subject, festival reaction, diaspora relevance)

02

Do we believe this works theatrically

(exhibitor enthusiasm, presales, trailer response, reviews)

03

Are audiences moving toward action

(showtime clicks, where-to-watch clicks, ticketing searches, questions asked of an assistant)

04

Did they attend

(sales velocity, occupancy, group bookings, box office)

05

What improves the next one

false positives, traffic source quality, cinema overperformance, later-window performance).

The full inventory, with when each signal arrives and where it misleads, is in the appendix. The distinction that matters most is not between good signals and bad ones. It is this:

The challenge is not to collect more signals. It is to distinguish between signals that show interest, signals that build confidence, signals that reveal intent, and signals that arrive too late to change the plan.

Most distributors are well served on the first two categories and the fourth. The third is thin, and the fifth is almost never collected at all.

Three ways signals fail

Signals get discussed as a single pile, which is why the conversation goes nowhere. They answer five different questions:

01 They mislead.

The most consistent trap in this research was talent whose fandom does not match the film. One distributor is releasing a well-known action star in a slow, poetic role and already expects the trailer response to overstate the audience: "it's sort of a false signal, because I already know that the word of mouth will not be that good." Another described two leads with enormous separate fandoms whose comment sections filled with excitement that had little to do with attending. A third assumed a documentary about two famous figures had one combined audience, and learned from the artwork comments that the two fan bases actively dislike each other.

02 They arrive too late.

Presales are among the clearest reads on intent available, and in most markets they open days before the film does, long after positioning, spend and scale are fixed. As one distributor put it, by the time you notice, "it's already too late."

03 They reverse.

One distributor bought a film nobody else in their territory wanted, which exhibitors had skipped at Cannes. It then won two awards, and cinemas began approaching her unprompted. The signal at acquisition was worthless. Six weeks later it was decisive. Signals are not fixed properties of a film.

Which is why nobody has the formula

The head of marketing at one of Germany's largest independents, a company that buys tracking and comparison data on every release, is blunt about the limits: "We use a lot of data, but we are not led by data. In the end, decision cannot be made only out of data." And more directly: "If anybody found the formula, there would only be very successful movies out there."

The practical response is not to watch everything. It is to decide, before the campaign starts, which three or four signals speak to the specific assumption this release depends on, and what a good and a bad reading of each would look like. Part One sets out how.

The full signal inventory, twenty-nine signals across the five categories, with timing and failure modes, is in the appendix.

03

You can see further than you think

"We send people to cinema sites, but what happens next is invisible to us."

The reason is commercial, not technical

The data exists. Someone holds it. The obstacle is that they have good reasons not to pass it on. Exhibitors monetise audience data themselves, through advertising, memberships and their own marketing, so sharing it means giving away a revenue line. Nobody is being obstructive. The incentives simply point the other way.

In several markets an intermediary sits between the two. In Brazil, most tickets are sold through two large platforms that share nothing back with distributors. In Italy, regional booking agencies represent all distributors and take a fee per ticket, which gives them an interest in whichever title earns them most. One Italian distributor described not knowing her final screen count or which cities she would play until the week of release, committing P&A against a footprint she could not see.

What is visible

The handoff itself is measurable, and the spread is wide. Across 2025, on distributor platforms built with usheru, standard release pages moved 4.2% of visitors through to a cinema when showtimes were live. Platforms purpose-built for the release window moved 16.2%. Most distributors have never seen either figure for their own titles, which makes it difficult to know whether a campaign page is working or merely present.

That range matters more than any single number. It says the handoff is not a fixed rate you inherit, it responds to how the page is built, what else competes for the click, and whether showtimes appear at the moment intent peaks. It is a partial measure of a partial journey, but it can be compared against itself, release after release.

What you can do

Sell tickets directly where the format already allows it. Previews, Q&As and event screenings may make this possible - and they draw your highest-intent audience, and they are the one place you see the whole journey.

Reduce the friction on the stretch you own. The distance between interest and the cinema's site is where the range above is won and lost, and it is entirely yours to fix.

And ask. One distributor sent teams into their ten largest cinemas and surveyed six hundred attendees about what had brought them in, finding social dominant and billboards barely registering. Another approached a large independent cinema in his market, explained how much traffic he was sending them, and asked for nothing but a total: how many arrived, how many bought. The answer, across three releases, was 15 to 17%. Both got a straight answer to a direct question.

None of this produces a benchmark. It produces your own number, which is more than most distributors have, and it is where Part Three begins.

PART THREE

What's Next

What we could not answer, and
what we would like to work on
with you.

What we still don't know

This research answered some questions and opened others. Four are worth naming, because they are the ones we would most like help with.

01

What a click to a cinema is actually worth.

One distributor has built the whole model, cost per click, share of the ticket price, break-even at roughly one sale per seventy clicks, and cannot close it, because the conversion rate is the single figure nobody has. Everybody guesses at it separately.

03

Whether an owned audience converts better than a rented one.

The logic is sound and the distributors who have built one are convinced. Nobody has measured it against a comparable release.

02

Whether being answerable changes anything.

We can show that audiences are asking, and that most films have no reliable answer waiting. We cannot yet show that fixing it brings anyone to a cinema.

04

Whether the cost-of-signal rule holds everywhere.

It was consistent across the markets in this research. Six sessions is not a proof.

Two things we would like to work on

A clearer picture of the handoff

The gap between interest and a ticket is not a technical problem. Exhibitors and ticketing platforms hold the data and monetise it themselves, and no individual distributor has the leverage to change that.

But establishing what a normal handoff looks like does not need the industry to agree. It needs a handful of distributors and a small number of willing cinemas, sharing a narrow slice of data for a limited period. Bilateral versions already exist, several distributors have negotiated visibility with individual chains, and the major studios receive detailed reporting, though they pay for it. And in at least one European territory, a national scheme has had distributors and cinemas sharing release data directly for more than a year.

The ask:

We are looking for a small number of distributors willing to give a few hours across a few months (see more details below).

Practical AI for distributors

Much of the industry conversation around AI has focused, understandably, on generation: scripts, images, synthetic performance and authorship. But that has left less room for a different, more practical conversation.

Distributors are, on the whole, not using these tools for the unglamorous work they are actually good at: reading campaign data, sorting audience feedback, mapping communities, reducing the reporting burden on teams of two. Younger people in the industry are asking where to learn and finding no obvious answer.

We would like to run a small programme of practical sessions, what a distributor or film marketer can actually do with these tools today, with worked examples rather than principles. As much listening as teaching: where the useful applications are, where people are resistant, and where the line should sit.

How to take part

The working group.

We are looking for a small number of distributors willing to give a few hours across a few months. Not a data submission: a conversation about what each of you can already see, what you have managed to get from exhibitor partners, and whether the numbers we have hold up against yours. Everything discussed stays unattributed unless you say otherwise, and contributors are credited in whatever gets published.

The AI sessions.

Tell us what would be useful. We would rather run three sessions that answer real questions than a series that covers the field. If you have already found something that works, we would like to hear that too.

To register interest in either, or to tell us where you think we have got this wrong, please drop us a line at rfm@usheru.com.

Appendix

Methodology

This playbook draws on three sources.

Conversations.

Six roundtables between November 2025 and mid-2026, with thirty contributors engaged across the programme. Participants included independent distributors, sales agents, an exhibitor-distributor and an exhibition technology partner, across fifteen markets in Europe, the Americas and Africa. Roundtables were held under Chatham House rules. Quotes are unattributed throughout unless the speaker has agreed otherwise, and identifying detail has been removed where it is not essential to the point. Contributors who were happy to be named are listed on the back cover.

Audience survey.

274 film-engaged respondents from the UK and Ireland, asked how they find films, what makes one worth leaving the house for, and whether they have put questions to search or an AI assistant when deciding what to watch. An exploratory pulse rather than a representative study. Published in full at usheru.com

Campaign data.

The 2025 calendar year, across 835 releases on distributor platforms built with usheru: 36 purpose-built campaign platforms and 799 standard release pages, 22.4 million sessions in total. Where this document says a visitor "reached a cinema," it means they clicked through to a cinema's ticketing page while showtimes were live. It is not a record of ticket sales, which distributors cannot see.

Signal inventory

Twenty-nine signals across five categories.

Timing: A around acquisition · P pre-launch · L launch window · R retrospective.

Demand, do people care?

Signal	When	What it tells you	Where it misleads
Talent and existing fandom	A	Potential reach	Fandom may not match the film's tone
Subject and premise	A	Whether there is a natural audience	A subject people care about is not a film they will travel for
Community and diaspora relevance	A	A specific, reachable, motivated audience	Concentrated; easy to over-read nationally
Festival reaction	A	Critical positioning and press framing	Industry enthusiasm rarely reaches local audiences
Social conversation	A	Whether the film has a mechanism people engage with	Volume is attention, not intent
Prior territory performance	A	Broad appetite for the material	Negative results travel further and stick harder

Confidence, do we believe it works theatrically?

Signal	When	What it tells you	Where it misleads
Exhibitor enthusiasm	A	Screens, and their read on local demand	May reflect an empty slot rather than belief
Trailer response	P	Whether the framing lands	Views are attention; they are not intent
Asset launch comments	P	Who thinks the film is for them, and who doesn't	Diagnostic only if read rather than counted
Local partner support	P	Independent commercial validation	Rare, but seldom wrong
Press and review strength	P	Critical framing for the run	Strong reviews do not reliably produce attendance
Preview and festival sell-through	P	Real intent, measured in tickets	Festival audiences are not general audiences

Intent, are audiences moving toward action?

Signal	When	What it tells you	Where it misleads
Showtime clicks	P	Someone is planning	Only exists if the platform is built to capture it
Where-to-watch clicks	P	Active search for access	May resolve to a later window instead
Booking link clicks	L	The last visible step before purchase	The purchase itself stays invisible
Repeat visits	P	Sustained consideration	Small numbers; directional only
Ticketing searches	L	Explicit purchase intent	Often captured by aggregators, not you
Questions asked of search or an assistant	A	Decision-stage uncertainty, in the audience's own words	Largely unobservable; see Part One

Conversion, did they attend?

Signal	When	What it tells you	Where it misleads
Presales	L	The clearest read on intent available	Usually too late to change anything significant

Sales velocity	L	Direction of travel, not just volume	Distorted by discounting and subscription schemes
Occupancy	L	Whether screens are the right size	An exhibitor metric before it is yours
Group bookings	L	Committed, organised attendance	Concentrated by city and community
Box office	L-	The outcome	Arrives with nothing left to decide

Learning, what improves the next one?

Signal	When	What it tells you	Where it misleads
False positives	R	Which signals your team should discount	Requires having written the prediction down first
Traffic source quality	R	Which activity produced planners, not just visitors	Needs tagging in place from the start
Audience mismatch	R	Where the hypothesis was wrong	Uncomfortable; frequently skipped
Cinema overperformance	R	Which venues and staff actually build audiences	Says as much about the cinema as the film
Community traction	R	Which relationships are worth keeping	Only useful if the contact was captured
Later-window performance	R	Whether the audience existed but not theatrically	Can excuse a theatrical miss too comfortably

The tools

The release planning worksheet.

Write down who you believe will come and why, name the single assumption the release depends on, decide which signal would test it, and agree in advance what a good and a bad reading would mean. One page, filled in before the money is committed.

The answerability audit.

Write the questions your audience would ask, put each to a search engine and an assistant, record what comes back and where it points, then fix what you can. About an hour per title.

Both are available as interactive tools, alongside the filterable signal inventory, at rfm.usheru.com

With Thanks

This playbook came out of conversations held under Chatham House rules. Participants included the people below. Listed with permission. Inclusion indicates participation, not agreement with the conclusions.

Clelia Arnò, Vuelta Media
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