

**Lower
Manhattan
Cultural
Council**

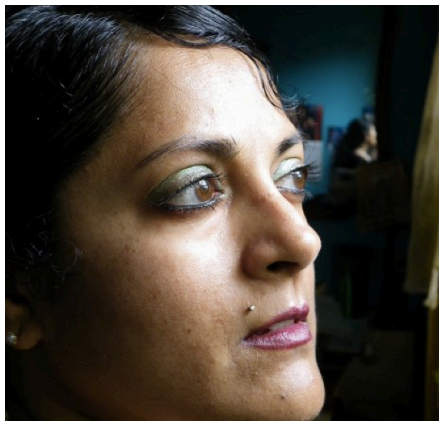
EMPOWERING ARTISTS,
INVESTED IN COMMUNITY

FUNDRAISING FUNDAMENTALS

Building and Cultivating Relationships with Individual Donors

QUESTIONS FOR HIMA B: CROWDFUNDING AND INDIVIDUAL FUNDRAISING

In 2012, Crowdfunding has become an increasingly common and successful platform for artists to fundraise from individuals. LMCC asked NYC-based artists questions on their opinions and experience using crowdfunding platforms including Kickstarter and Indiegogo to raise funds to support their artistic projects.



Hima B.'s 2012 Kickstarter Campaign:

<https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/himab/license-to-pimp-documentary>

Raised: \$30,795.00

Goal: \$30,000.00

LMCC: Briefly describe your work and professional background as an artist.

Hima B.: I'm a filmmaker who makes social issue documentaries and fictional films. Most of my films have been funded through my own means with sporadic funding received through private foundations and government grants. It's been a challenge to continue a professional practice of filmmaking so I'm self-sustaining, which is why I finally got to a place where I considered crowdfunding. I think that in order to be a successful documentary filmmaker, you need diverse funding channels, which include private and government grants, individual donors, and now crowdfunding.

In June 2012, I launched my Kickstarter campaign for **License to Pimp** which is a feature documentary about the choices that 3 strippers make when their clubs engage in illegal labor practices which result in them operating as defacto brothels. By the end, I raised, \$30,795 of a \$30K goal. I was exhausted from sleep deprivation and anxiety, but far more grateful and elated because I not only met my goal, but an audience of 505 new people now supported my film and it garnered some publicity so there was public awareness about the issues and why this project was important to get made.

Content updated 2012

LMCC: When and how did you start using crowdfunding platforms? How did you select the platform you ultimately used? Had you carried out an individual fundraising campaign in the past, either online or by other means? Did you have any reservations about crowdfunding?

HB: I've selectively approached individuals in the past to help fund my films and had some success with getting infusions of cash, which really made huge differences at the time in moving my films forward. I'd see Kickstarter used amongst my peers but was skeptical that I'd have similar success. I attended a film workshop where Yancey Strickler of Kickstarter was a panelist and presented some alarming statistics: (1) about 40% of their campaigns actually succeed and (2) if a project meets 33% of its goal within a period of time, it has a 90% chance of succeeding. That info alone was scary, but I was desperately in need of money to move my film forward by hiring an editor to make a huge dent in the film by cutting a rough cut. I was looking for options that didn't involve me writing a grant, as I've done that with minimal success.

I also knew that Indiegogo's model was far less stressful, because even if you don't reach your goal, you can still keep whatever you raise, but you pay a slightly higher percentage to do so. In the end, I went with Kickstarter because most of my film peers went that route and I felt that the urgency and constraints of a 30-day-all-or-nothing campaign might incentivize my network to pitch in. Fortunately for me, it worked, but you really need to decide if that's a model that's suitable to your personality and your project. It's incredibly stressful and you have to exclusively devote yourself to your campaign for that period of time, and just put yourself out there and stand strong in the face of rejection. If your goal is a substantial amount, you will absolutely need a team to help you, so don't try to go at it alone! I worked with an intern and had her help me prep as well as work on posting updates during the campaign.

LMCC: Please describe your process of planning the crowdfunding campaign, including timing, outreach methods, strategies to reach your goal, etc. What were the most challenging aspects?

HB: Preparation goes a long way! For months before launching my own campaign, I did as much research as possible in checking out projects that are similar to mine on various crowdfunding platforms. What are their funding goals? What rewards are they offering? What kinds of info are they posting (written, videos, photos) about their project? How could I translate that to my own project? I kept lists of things that attracted me to other people's projects and modified them to fit my own.

Because crowdfunding is now a given for any artist, there's a lot of articles and tips written by other artists on what they did to succeed in their campaigns. Read as much of this literature so that you understand what's working and what isn't.

Don't plan any other major events during the time that you're crowdfunding because it absolutely requires your complete attention unless your funding goal is small. Work with a team when possible—and especially if your goal is substantial.

If there are social issues that your project addresses, reach out to media outlets at least one month prior to launching your campaign. Identify bloggers, writers, and various newspapers or other media outlets. Create a 2-4 page press kit that you can send them about your project that includes a short description, info about who you are and why you're doing this project, and stills or a link to a video. You can re-use much of this written text for your crowdfunding page so it's good to write concise, powerful info that reveals interesting, unique aspects of your project. You will most likely get a writer's attention if you're doing something innovative or taking a new approach to something that's been done millions of times before. Let the writers know you're doing a crowdfunding campaign because they might help promote your project if it fits into their interests and agenda. You won't get a URL to your crowdfunding campaign until you're ready to launch, but if/when you are, make sure to include this link in any future promo material you send out. Update your press kit with this info. While the media I got didn't always translate into readers funding my project, it definitely created visibility for my film, which was super important.

Use Twitter, LinkedIn, Pinterest, and obviously Facebook, which is where you will mostly live during your campaign. Before you launch your campaign, sign up for any groups on these platforms where your audience is likely to be found. For example, I signed up for various sex worker, feminist, and film groups on Facebook and LinkedIn and regularly posted updates there.

Plan out campaign updates and materials (videos, pictures) in advance before launching your campaign. For example, every few days, I'd post a new update that might just focus on one film character and some of the issues that she was dealing with. It would include a film clip of her, pictures, and written text. Plan this before launching if possible because once you launch, you just want a regular schedule of things going out and it might be difficult to find time to be creative if you're stressed out.

LMCC: Briefly describe the size and characteristics of network you reached out to (ie friends, colleagues, past supporters, new contacts), and how often during the campaign.

HB: Import your contacts from Facebook, your emails, and the business cards you have acquired over the years into a free mailing list like MailChimp. When you send out your intro crowdfunding letter to your network, write a personal sentence to each recipient so your letter asking for a contribution doesn't come off as an impersonal mass mailing. MailChimp allows you to create a separate field where you can do this. Be genuine when you do write something! One really good thing is that you can re-use your Mailchimp list for other projects in the future and to keep people posted about things beyond Kickstarter. A lot of hard work up front pays off in the end.

I sent updates to my network via a Mailchimp mailing at least once a week during my Kickstarter campaign. If/when your contacts unsubscribe, don't take it personally. But what I like about something like Mailchimp as opposed to regular emails (gmail, yahoo, etc) is that you get statistics on when someone reads your email, if they're clicking on any links, and other useful info about how effective your email is. This allows you to re-shape your future emails so they're more

likely to be read, and hopefully lead to your network checking out your crowdfunding page and giving to your project.

Create a template of tweets that you'll (re)use during your campaign. Use something like Tweetdeck to pre-schedule them so they go out every few hours or everyday. Link to your Facebook page and other social network sites so that you're not going crazy updating in tons of places when you can just do it in 1 or 2 sites and have them update the rest.

LMCC: Why do you think it was successful? Were there any lessons learned or things you would do differently on your next campaign?

HB: My first crowdfunding campaign was successful and I got 102% of my goal. But I have to admit that it's made me appreciate grantwriting again. I knew that I'd need to continue writing grants, but at least now I can show funders that there's a definite audience for the film and link to my Kickstarter page as well as the publicity generated during this event.

Send out your crowdfunding updates on a Monday or Tuesday by lunchtime when you're more likely to have more eyeballs looking at emails or Facebook. Launch your campaign on a Monday or Tuesday and end it on those days for the same reason.

If it's possible, try to host a short, live, in-person event mid-way during your campaign (when it slows down) so that people can meet and greet you + learn more about your project. Document this event and use it as an update.

Don't crowdfund your project during a major holiday because you'll be competing with people preparing for Thanksgiving or buying Christmas presents. When you hit a stale point in your crowdfunding campaign, reach out to people who have already donated and ask them to forward your email 4 to 5 other friends whom they think might support the project. Because your donor has donated, it sends a powerful message to his/her network that it's a project that they think is worthy of support. Make it easy for your donor to forward info about your project by providing them with a 2 to 3 sentence description of your project, a picture, and the URL to your campaign. This is another reason why Mailchimp is great, because your donor doesn't have to do anything more than just click on the link to share it with their friends, and this automatically adds them to your mailing list.

Creating, packaging, and snail-mailing rewards take a bite out of your funds. Think of digital rewards when possible since it's green, easy to send, immediately gratifying, and it doesn't require spending more money, which ultimately translates to you being able to devote more time and money on your project.

If I ever do another crowdfunding campaign again, it'll definitely have to be during a time when the film is done because I can't go back to my donor network and ask for more money without showing them results. The relationship you build with your audience now may translate into long term funding and collaboration relationships. So be courteous and prompt in responding to your donors.

LMCC: Did you learn anything new about your donors as a result of your crowdfunding campaign?

HB: The audience for your project should include everyone who might be interested in the issues it raises, as well as people who like you. When people you know give, it's because they're giving to you. When people you don't know give, it's because there's something about your project that touches them.

When someone in your network tells you they don't have money to donate, ask them if they can post your campaign info to their Facebook page, on Twitter, or elsewhere. This can make a huge difference with some folks since they are still recognized as your supporters by contributing to the success of your project through sweat instead of money.

I was really surprised how so many of my donors tuned in in the last few hours of my campaign to ensure that it succeeded! I got emails, Facebook messages, and tweets asking if I had angel donors waiting in the wings to put in the last few monies to bail out the project so it met its goal. It was really touching to see how so many people were invested in the project and it made all the difference in knowing that these individuals will be the ones who may help promote the film once its done. They've also become a powerful incentive to do the hard work in getting my film completed—in some ways more than my grant funders because they are people I see on a regular basis in my everyday life!

Hima B. was born in India & raised in America—a product of cultures, which often clash. After moving to San Francisco in 1990, she came out as bisexual & supported herself as a stripper, which inspired her first documentary STRAIGHT FOR THE MONEY about queer sex workers, which was included as part of the 1995 Whitney Biennial and has traveled to many international film festivals. She earned an MFA from Mills College.

Hima lives/works in NYC as an independent filmmaker making social-issue based documentaries & narrative films, which focus on the experiences of LGBTQ people, women/girls, & people of color. In 2008, Hima launched HIV SISTERS, an online living HIV/AIDS quit that features multimedia made by/about women/girls who are impacted, infected, & at-risk for the virus. Hima is currently in post-production on her first feature documentary, LICENSE TO PIMP (www.LicenseToPimp.com). This personal story chronicles three exotic dancers and the choices they make when their workplaces engage in illegal and unsafe practices that result in them operating as underground brothels.

<http://licensetopimp.com>