



Toronto Jewish Film Foundation: Attracting the Next Generation of Festival Patrons

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INTRODUCTION

It was a busy afternoon in the winter of 2025 when Executive Director Debbie Werner sat at her desk in the Toronto Jewish Film Foundation's (TJFF) office, reflecting on TJFF's recent marketing efforts. With the upcoming season approaching, she turned her attention to a challenge that had grown harder to ignore. TJFF's core audience was aging, and in a city crowded with cultural events and streaming alternatives, Werner knew that reaching the next generation of filmgoers would define the organization's future. She needed to develop a strategy that would attract younger Toronto filmgoers without losing the long-time patrons who had kept the festival alive for decades.

TORONTO JEWISH FILM FOUNDATION

TJFF was a Toronto-based nonprofit arts organization that presented the Toronto Jewish Film Festival, along with year-round film programming and events. Through in-person screenings and a digital platform offering access to more than 200 films, TJFF delivered both a cultural and cinematic experience to its customers. The organization emphasized films in their original languages with subtitles, aiming to foster cross-cultural understanding and overcome social and religious barriers. By combining film, education, and cultural connection, TJFF had established itself within Toronto's arts and festival landscape.

TORONTO JEWISH FILM FOUNDATION

The TJFF was founded in 1993 by Helen Zukerman, who continued to serve as the Artistic Director. Under her leadership, the festival grew into a significant cultural event in Toronto, showcasing films that explored Jewish identity, history, and global perspectives. As the organization expanded beyond its original annual festival format into year-round programming and digital offerings, it rebranded as the Toronto Jewish Film Foundation, reflecting its evolution over more than three decades.

TJFF operated with a relatively small, full-time team, supported by staff across programming, operations, development, and communications, as well as a large group of volunteers who assisted during the festival's operations. As a nonprofit, TJFF generated revenue through a combination of ticket sales, sponsorships, donations, and membership programs, while also leveraging its online platform to expand engagement. Ticket sales represented only 18% of the foundation's annual operating revenue. The largest share of revenue, approximately 48%, came from its membership program, followed by 15% from sponsors, 14% from grants, and 4% from the foundation's annual fundraising campaign.¹

Debbie Werner

Debbie Werner had been with TJFF since 2009, advancing into senior roles, including Operations Director and Managing Director, before being appointed Executive Director in 2013. Prior to joining TJFF, Debbie earned a Bachelor of Arts in History from University College at the University of Toronto, graduating in 1989. Her study of history cultivated a deep appreciation for culture, storytelling, and the preservation of community narratives, which were interests that naturally drew her toward arts administration and ultimately to TJFF. As Executive Director, she oversaw the organization's strategic direction, including marketing, audience development, and overall growth, playing a central role in guiding TJFF's expansion from a single annual festival into a year-round cultural platform.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Werner led TJFF's transition to an online festival format, making it one of the first organizations in Canada to pivot to digital delivery. Through this shift, she saw firsthand how digital access expanded TJFF's reach beyond Toronto, allowing audiences across Canada to engage with the festival. However, she also recognized that while some audiences valued the convenience of online viewing, others continued to seek the shared, in-person experience that had long defined the festival. In the years that followed, her focus had turned increasingly toward deepening consumer engagement, particularly with younger audiences, as the festival's traditional patron base continued to age.

[1] *Patron Circle 2026*, TJFF, https://tjff.com/media/Patron_Circle_Brochure_2026.pdf.

INDUSTRY

In 2024, Canada's arts and culture sector contributed \$65 billion² in GDP to the Canadian economy, reflecting steady growth that outpaced several major industries, including oil and gas and manufacturing.³ Output in the arts, entertainment, and recreation sector grew by approximately 2.4% between 2023 and 2024, with the live entertainment segment projected to expand at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 5.9% through 2033, as in-person events continued to rebound.⁴ Profit margins across the sector varied considerably by organization type. In 2024, for-profit performing arts companies reported operating margins of approximately 21% in 2024, while not-for-profit organizations saw margins decline to -2.4%. This reflected the financial pressure of rising operational costs against heavily grant-dependent revenue models.⁵ Within the broader industry, film festivals occupied a unique niche, combining elements of live entertainment, curated film distribution, and cultural programming, which relied heavily on audience engagement and differentiated content to drive attendance.

Despite its cultural significance, the industry faced notable structural challenges. Film festivals operated in a highly competitive environment, contending with other festivals, cultural events, and a growing number of entertainment alternatives. Ticket attendance among Canadian moviegoers had declined to approximately 1.6 tickets per person in 2024, compared to 3 tickets in 2019.⁶ Additionally, many organizations relied on a combination of sponsorships, donations, and public funding, in addition to ticket sales, creating financial uncertainty. Unlike traditional cinemas or streaming platforms, festivals were time-bound and dependent on concentrated attendance during specific periods, which made audience acquisition and retention critical. With Canada's inflation rate sitting at approximately 2.4% in 2024 and the national unemployment rate reaching 6.8% by December 2025, sustained pressure on household discretionary spending meant consumers had become increasingly selective in their entertainment choices.⁷ As a result, success within the industry required strong brand recognition, effective programming, and the ability to build long-term relationships with both patrons and sponsors.

[2] All currency in CAD unless otherwise noted.

[3] *Arts and Culture Sector Contributes \$131 Billion to Canada's Economy*, Canadian Chamber of Commerce (October 28, 2025), <https://chamber.ca/news/arts-and-culture-sector-contributes-131-billion-to-canadas-economy/>.

[4] Anna Morgan, *Canada Live Entertainment Market Size & Outlook, 2026-2034*, Deep Market Insights (June 12, 2026), <https://deepmarketinsights.com/vista/insights/live-entertainment-market/canada>.

[5] Government of Canada, *Performing Arts, 2024*, The Daily (January 22, 2026), <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/260122/dq260122b-eng.htm>.

[6] *Canada: Moviegoing Habits Shift amid Industry Challenges*, Señal News (September 5, 2025), <https://senalnews.com/en/data/canada-moviegoing-habits-shift-amid-industry-challenges>.

[7] Government of Canada, *Consumer Price Index: Annual Review, 2025*, The Daily (January 19, 2026), <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/260119/dq260119b-eng.htm>.

COMPETITORS

Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF)

The Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) was one of the largest and most influential film festivals globally. Annually, it welcomed more than 700,000 attendees and generated an estimated \$240 million in annual economic impact in 2024.⁸ TIFF showcased a wide range of international films, including premieres, award contenders, and high-profile productions. They benefited from strong brand recognition, driven by their association with celebrity appearances and extensive global media coverage. Unlike TJFF, which emphasized cultural storytelling and community, TIFF focused on scale, prestige, and broad audience appeal. With regular screening tickets ranging from \$28 to \$36 (Exhibit 1), TIFF was priced considerably higher than TJFF. Backed by major corporate sponsors, such as Rogers Communications, RBC, Bell, L'Oréal Paris, and Visa, as well as funding from the Province of Ontario and the Government of Canada, TIFF had significant marketing resources and a year-round presence.⁹ This scale and financial backing enabled TIFF to consistently attract younger and more diverse audiences.

Hot Docs Canadian International Documentary Festival

Hot Docs, also based in Toronto, was North America's largest documentary film festival, presenting 168 films from 64 countries, across 274 screenings in 2024. The festival had historically attracted more than 200,000 attendees in peak years.¹⁰ It focused exclusively on documentary storytelling, appealing to audiences interested in social issues, politics, and real-world narratives.

Similar to TJFF, Hot Docs relied on curated programming and audience engagement but differentiated itself through a strong brand identity and appeal to younger, socially conscious viewers. Regular screening tickets were priced at \$20 (Exhibit 1). Hot Docs also built strong partnerships with schools, community organizations, and cultural film festivals across the Greater Toronto Area, and supported filmmakers through \$175,000.00 awarded in industry programs that connected 954 delegates from 47 countries with 65 industry decision makers.¹¹

Niche Cultural and Film Festivals

TJFF also competed with a range of smaller, niche film festivals in Toronto, including events focused on specific cultures, regions, or themes. The city hosted a broad ecosystem of identity-driven festivals, such as the Toronto Black Film Festival, Toronto Reel Asian International Film Festival, International Diaspora Film Festival, Toronto International Nollywood Film Festival, and imagineNATIVE Film + Media Arts Festival, among others.¹² The Toronto Black Film Festival, for example, offered regular screenings at \$12 (Exhibit 1), positioning itself as a more accessible option for price-conscious attendees.

While smaller in scale, they often benefited from strong community ties and highly targeted marketing strategies, which allowed them to build loyal and engaged followings. Their ability to deliver culturally relevant content and personalized experiences positioned them as strong competitors for TJFF, particularly among viewers seeking identity-driven programming.

[8] Jenny Yin, *How TIFF Powers Toronto's Economy*, The Varsity (September 14, 2025), <https://thevarsity.ca/2025/09/14/how-tiff-powers-torontos-economy/>.

[9] *Rogers Becomes the Presenting Sponsor of the 2024 Toronto International Film Festival*, TIFF (July 31, 2024), <https://tiff.net/press/news/rogers-becomes-the-presenting-sponsor-of-the-2024-toronto-international-film-festival>.

[10] Brad Wheeler, *Hot Docs 2024: Everything You Need to Know to Attend the Festival in Toronto*, The Globe and Mail (April 18, 2024), <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/film/article-hot-docs-festival-2024-toronto-2/>.

[11] *2025/26 Hot Docs Year in Review*, Hot Docs, (2026), https://s3.amazonaws.com/assets.hotdocs.ca/doc/HD26_Year-in-Review.pdf.

[12] Rachel West, *Beyond TIFF: 5 Toronto Film Festivals You Shouldn't Miss in 2026*, Now. (January 18, 2026), <https://nowtoronto.com/culture/beyond-tiff-5-toronto-film-festivals-you-shouldnt-miss-in-2026/>.

TARGET MARKET

TJFF's audience was broadly segmented into two primary groups: long-time patrons and the emerging younger audience. The long-time patron segment consisted primarily of older members of the Jewish community who had attended the festival for many years, with the average Toronto performing arts attendee approximately 53 years old.^[13] This segment valued the film festival experience not only for its film offerings but also for its sense of community, cultural connection, and tradition. Many attended multiple screenings and were more likely to purchase passes or memberships, making them less price-sensitive and more responsive to traditional marketing channels, such as print media and direct communication. As a result, this segment had historically formed the foundation of TJFF's attendance and revenue base.

The emerging young audience segment included individuals under the age of 35 who engaged with the festival on a more selective basis. This group was more likely to select screenings based on interest in particular films, rather than the broader festival experience. Even so, this segment represented a meaningful opportunity, as 78% of millennials reported a preference for spending on experiences over products, a preference well aligned with film festival offerings.^[14] They were more digitally engaged, with 64% of Gen Z and 61% of millennials relying on social media platforms to find events, and they were generally more price-conscious, considering a wider range of competing entertainment options.^[15] While this segment represented a key opportunity for growth, converting these attendees into repeat festival-goers remained a challenge. Although TJFF had recently seen success in attracting younger audiences through targeted digital advertising, particularly through a campaign on Reddit, it remained unclear how the organization could effectively position its offerings to appeal to this segment, while maintaining engagement with its long-time patrons.

PRICE

TJFF offered a tiered pricing structure designed to accommodate both audience segments. Adult tickets at the box office for in-theatre screenings were priced at \$16.50 when purchased in advance and \$18 when purchased at the door. Senior tickets, available to attendees aged 65 and over, were priced at \$15 in advance and \$17 at the door, while student tickets were priced at \$15 in advance and free at the door. Archival screenings were offered at \$11 in advance and \$13 at the door. For those attending virtually, online tickets granting access to a digital screening were available at a flat rate of \$18.00, regardless of when they were purchased.

To attract younger audiences, TJFF introduced a Next Gen ticket for designated NXTGN screenings, available exclusively to patrons aged 35 and under. The ticket was priced at \$5 at the door, while students received free admission with a valid student identification, regardless of screening type. This initiative helped engage younger adults who were not enrolled students and, therefore, ineligible for student discounts.

For patrons seeking greater value and flexibility, TJFF offered Flex Passes redeemable for a choice of in-person or online screenings. The Flex 10 Pass, valid for 10 screenings, was priced at \$130, while the Flex 20 Pass, valid for 20 screenings, was priced at \$230. An Online All-Access Pass, providing unlimited access to over 30 online programs, was also available at \$230 (Exhibit 2).

[13] *TAPA Audience Survey: Attendance and Engagement with Arts and Cultural Activities in Toronto*, Toronto Alliance for the Performing Arts (November 2013), https://tapa.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/TAPA_Audience_Report_FINAL_REVISED.pdf.

[14] *Top 20 Festival Marketing Statistics*, Amra & Elma (2026), <https://www.amraandelma.com/festival-marketing-statistics/>.

[15] Craig Heron, *55 Useful Event Industry Statistics (Updated for 2025)*, Vesta (May 16, 2024), <https://info.eventvesta.com/resources/event-industry-statistics/>.

As a nonprofit, TJFF's pricing strategy had to balance generating enough revenue to support operations, while also remaining accessible to both its long-time patron base and emerging young audiences. With six individual ticket types and three pass options, however, the complexity of TJFF's pricing structure risked creating confusion for potential attendees, especially the younger demographic new to the festival. Werner wondered whether simplifying the pricing structure could improve accessibility and conversion, or whether the tiered options were essential to serving the distinct needs of TJFF's two primary audiences.

PLACEMENT

Werner also wanted to evaluate TJFF's distribution strategy as the organization expanded beyond its traditional in-person festival format. Historically, TJFF relied on screenings at select venues across Toronto. While this approach strengthened audience engagement and reinforced the festival's cultural identity, it limited access to those unable to attend in person.

Following the pandemic, TJFF introduced J-Flix, an online platform offering access to over 200 films year-round, as well as paid digital viewing options during the festival through its Flex Pass and Online All-Access Pass structures (Exhibit 2). This expanded TJFF's geographic reach well beyond Toronto and provided greater flexibility, particularly for younger and more digitally engaged audiences. However, increased digital access raised concerns about the potential erosion of in-person attendance and the communal experience that had long defined the festival's value proposition.

As Werner considered the path forward, she wondered if it was better to prioritize in-person screenings across its existing venues or expand digital access through its online platform. Each option presented trade-offs between accessibility, audience engagement, revenue generation, and the preservation of the festival's community-driven identity (Exhibit 3).

PRODUCT

TJFF's core product consisted of a curated selection of over 80 films presented during the annual festival, complemented by year-round programming and access to J-Flix, a digital library of over 200 films available to audiences across Canada. The NXTGN film series represented TJFF's most direct effort to tailor its programming to viewers aged 35 and under, pairing more contemporary film selections with the \$5 Next Gen ticket to lower the cost barrier. While the series had successfully expanded the festival's reach among younger viewers, it remained a relatively small component of overall programming.

Werner weighed whether to expand NXTGN programming or maintain TJFF's focus on the broader festival experience. Expanding NXTGN could offer better engagement with the younger audience TJFF needed for long-term sustainability, but producing programming that genuinely resonated with this segment likely required more than a discounted ticket price. Werner recognized the question was not simply whether to add more NXTGN screenings, but whether TJFF had the capacity to deliver programming that younger audiences would return for without compromising the experience that had sustained the festival for over three decades.

PROMOTION

Werner wanted to evaluate TJFF's promotional strategy as the organization prepared for its upcoming festival. Historically, TJFF relied on traditional channels, such as print media, posters, and transit advertising to reach its core patron base, spending approximately \$10,000 across these three channels during the festival season. TJFF had not tracked the reach or conversion data for these traditional channels as they would be able to with digital platforms.

More recently, TJFF began experimenting with digital marketing. During the previous season, a Reddit campaign promoting a pre-release screening of *Marty Supreme* had drawn a noticeably younger audience to the festival, the first clear signal that digital outreach could reach the demographic TJFF hoped to grow. However, it remained unclear whether this single result could be consistently replicated or whether it represented a broader shift in audience behaviour. Werner recognized that one successful campaign was not yet a strategy.

Werner considered continuing to prioritize traditional channels that engaged long-time patrons or expand investment in digital advertising to target younger audiences. With a total estimated marketing budget of \$15,000 for the upcoming festival, Werner needed to determine how best to allocate available resources across channels (Exhibit 4).

DECISION

Werner knew she had to make decisions quickly, since the festival was approaching. As she stepped away from her desk, she continued to consider TJFF's next steps. Should the organization continue prioritizing traditional promotional channels that engaged long-time patrons, or shift resources toward digital platforms to attract younger audiences? If so, how should TJFF position its product offerings to appeal to this segment, while maintaining the festival experience valued by its core audiences?

Werner also questioned whether initiatives, such as Next Gen ticket, were sufficient to drive repeat attendance among younger viewers, or whether bigger changes were needed. With limited resources and two distinct audiences to serve, Werner knew that identifying the right marketing mix would be critical to TJFF's long-term sustainability.

EXHIBIT #1

Competitor Pricing Comparison

Organization	Regular Screening Price
TIFF ¹⁶	\$28 - \$36
Hot Docs ¹⁷	\$20
Toronto Black Film Festival ¹⁸	\$12

EXHIBIT #2

TJFF Ticket and Pass Pricing Structure (HST Included)

Ticket Type	Advance Price	At-Door Price
Adult (In-Theatre)	\$16.50	\$18
Senior (65+) (In-Theatre)	\$15	\$17
Student (In-Theatre)	\$15	Free ¹⁹
Archival (In-Theatre)	\$11	\$13
Next Gen (35 and under) ²⁰	N/A	\$5
Online Ticket	\$18	\$18

Pass Type	Regular Price
Flex 10 Pass (10 screenings)	\$130
Flex 20 Pass (20 screenings)	\$230
Online All-Access Pass (30+ programs)	\$230

[16] Holly McKenzie-Sutter, *TIFF 2024: How Much Money Is Too Much Money for a Film-Festival Ticket?*, The Globe and Mail (September 13, 2024), <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/film/tiff/article-tiff-2024-how-much-money-is-too-much-money-for-a-film-festival-ticket/>.
[17] Phoebe Knight, *10 Movies Getting Big Advance Buzz at the Hot Docs Film Festival in Toronto*, blogTO (April 2, 2024), <https://www.blogto.com/film/2024/04/hot-docs-festival-toronto/>.
[18] *12th Annual Toronto Black Film Festival*, Global News (2024), <https://globalnews.ca/event/10284307/12th-annual-toronto-black-film-festival/>.
[19] Free at door with valid student ID.

EXHIBIT #3

Distribution Option Cost Comparison

Option 1: Prioritize In-Person Screenings		
Venue	Estimated Screenings	Cost per Screening ²¹
Hot Docs Ted Rogers Cinema	29	\$3,500
TIFF Lightbox	18	\$5,500
Miles Nadal JCC	11	\$900

Attendance Metric	Estimate
In-Person Screenings ²²	58
Average Attendance Per Screening ²³	200
Average Ticket Revenue Per Attendee	\$17.25

Option 2: Expand Digital Access	
Cost Item	Annual Cost
Platform Maintenance, Bug Fixes, and Content Protection	\$12,000
Digital Platform Manager Salary	\$50,000

Attendance Metric	Estimate
Online Presentations ²⁴	27
Average Viewers Per Online Screening ²⁵	50
Online Ticket Revenue Per Viewer	\$18

[21] Rental rate estimates obtained via email correspondence with venue representatives at Hot Docs, Ted Rogers Cinema, TIFF Lightbox, and the Miles Nadal JCC, 2025

[22] *The Toronto Jewish Film Foundation Announces its 34th Annual Festival, June 4-14, 2026*, That Eric Alper (May 11, 2026), <https://www.thatericalper.com/2026/05/11/the-toronto-jewish-film-foundation-announces-its-34th-annual-festival-june-4-14-2026/>.

[23] Estimated based on average venue capacity across the three festival locations and an assumed 50% fill rate for a niche cultural film festival.

[24] *34th Annual Festival*, Toronto Jewish Film Foundation.

[25] Digital viewership estimated based on organizational scale and J-Flix platform usage patterns.

EXHIBIT #4

Distribution Option Cost Comparison

Platform	CPM	Conversion Rate (High)	Conversion Rate (Low)
Instagram ²⁷	\$3.00	0.24%	0.06%
Facebook ²⁸	\$2.28	2.74%	0.69%
Reddit ²⁹	\$3.50	1.00%	0.25%
TikTok ³⁰	\$4.80	1.92%	0.48%

Note: Conversion rate referred to the percentage of ad impressions that resulted in a click-through to TJFF's website or ticketing page, not the percentage that resulted in a completed ticket purchase

[26] Werner estimated a total promotional budget of \$15,000 for the upcoming festival season, of which approximately \$10,000 had historically been allocated to traditional channels.

[27] Rob Glover, *How Much Do Instagram Ads Cost in 2026? (+How to Make the Most of Your Budget)*, WordStream (May 27, 2026), <https://www.wordstream.com/blog/instagram-ads-cost>.

[28] Susie Marino, *Facebook Ads Benchmarks 2025: New Data, Trends, & Insights for Your Industry*, WordStream (September 15, 2025), <https://www.wordstream.com/blog/facebook-ads-benchmarks-2025>.

[29] *How Much Do Reddit Ads Cost in 2026? (Complete Pricing Guide)*, Recho, (2026), <https://recho.co/blog/how-much-do-reddit-ads-cost-in-2026>.

[30] *TikTok Ads Benchmarks for CTR, CR, and CPM – 2026 Update*, Lebesgue (March 1, 2026), <https://lebesgue.io/tiktok-ads/tiktok-ads-benchmarks-for-ctr-cr-and-cpm>.