

December 2006

## **Fact Sheet**

### **Smithsonian on Demand TV Programming**

#### **Background**

For many years, the Smithsonian sought to establish a presence on television to showcase its vast resources—collections, exhibitions, archives and curatorial expertise—for people around the country who cannot visit the museums in Washington. With the full support of its Board of Regents, Smithsonian staff entered discussions with several large media organizations and ultimately negotiated an agreement with Showtime Networks Inc. to create a new company called Smithsonian Networks.

Smithsonian Networks will allow the Institution, for the first time, to share its vast national collections and groundbreaking research with millions of TV viewers. The revenue generated each year by this venture will support exhibitions and a wide range of public activities.

Prior to signing this agreement, the Board of Regents—composed of the Chief Justice of the United States, the Vice President, six members of Congress and nine distinguished Americans—discussed the idea of TV programming with the understanding that such an undertaking would involve a partnership with a commercial entity because the Smithsonian did not have the financial resources or expertise. The contract with Showtime Networks Inc. was unanimously approved by the Board of Regents and became effective on Jan. 1, 2006.

#### **Financial Information**

While the Smithsonian is a public institution that receives an annual federal appropriation, it is not a federal agency and cannot carry out its mission using only the funds allocated by Congress. Most of the federal funding goes toward building maintenance and renovations, operating expenses and federal salaries.

Therefore, the Smithsonian must raise private funds—from donors and revenue-producing activities, such as museum retail and magazine publishing—to support its popular exhibitions and public programs. Smithsonian On Demand is one example of a revenue-producing program.

## **Programming**

Smithsonian On Demand is Smithsonian Network's first programming service. It will feature history, science, art, popular culture and educational programs related to the Institution. The programs will include documentaries, live events, performances and seminars, features on exhibitions and research, and stories similar to those in Smithsonian magazine. Programs may be 15 minutes, a full hour or multipart series and will be listed on a menu on the TV or computer screen in exactly the same way other "on demand" services are presented.

The Smithsonian will review all programs to ensure they are factually accurate and consistent with the Institution's mission.

Prior to the establishment of Smithsonian Networks, the Institution's participation in documentaries was limited to third-party involvement. In other words, the Smithsonian responded to a filmmaker's request; it did not determine its own programming ideas or broadcast or cable outlets. For such independent projects, filmmakers apply (as they always have) to the museums to film an object, interview a curator, or use resources, but the final product is never seen or approved by the Smithsonian. In most instances, the Smithsonian content (interviews, footage, still images) makes up a small portion of the documentary and is considered incidental to the overall program. Also, the subjects of independent programs are determined solely by filmmakers with no input from the Smithsonian.

With Smithsonian on Demand, the Institution now has the ability to produce its own programming on its own channel and *in its own voice*.

## **Where to See the Programs**

Smithsonian On Demand will launch in Spring 2007 on digital cable outlets. Eventually, 100 hours of programming per year on Smithsonian-related subjects will be available to TV viewers on an ongoing basis. Television viewers need not subscribe to Showtime to receive Smithsonian On Demand; it will be a stand-alone channel. Programs will not be pay-per-view; they will be included in the digital cable customers' video-on-demand service.

## **Financing**

Showtime Networks Inc. will finance the production and marketing of all Smithsonian Network programs and will hire the filmmakers to produce them. The Smithsonian will provide content but no funding. The revenue that the Institution receives from this venture will be used for collections care and acquisitions, exhibitions and public programs that are not supported by federal funds.

## **Access to the Collections and Curators**

Access to the national collections and to the expertise of Smithsonian curators is a fundamental part of the Institution's 160-year-old mission. Access to Smithsonian collections, archives and libraries for news, public affairs, academic and scholarly programs, and research remains unchanged.

## **Access and Use by Filmmakers**

For independent producers who wish to film at the Smithsonian or use its resources, the process is the same as it has always been. For filming requests, the filmmaker submits an online application, which includes a brief description of the program; identifies the content; duration of the shoot; size of the crew; length of the Smithsonian content in the completed program; the distributor (a cable TV channel such as Discovery or National Geographic, PBS, broadcast network, etc.), and other relevant information. Applications initially are reviewed by the museum's public affairs office, as well as appropriate curatorial staff and a review committee in the Smithsonian's central public affairs office before a decision is made to agree or decline.

The majority of filming requests made to the Smithsonian fall into the "incidental use" category. In rare cases, the Smithsonian receives requests that seek to use Smithsonian content in a significant way (i.e., more than incidental in the context of the overall program). An example would be a one-hour special on the collections of the Smithsonian.

In determining if a request amounts to incidental use, reviewers consider a number of factors, among them: the subject matter of the film; the total run time of the film; the estimated time for Smithsonian content; and how many other organizations or experts are participating in the program.

A filming request may be declined for a variety of reasons that are completely unrelated to Smithsonian on Demand, including inappropriate content; excessive use of resources (the number of days for filming is more than the museum can manage or it interferes with visitors or museum activities); the artifact (or expertise) is not available at the Smithsonian; the subject matter conflicts with Institutional or federal policies; or the production presents risks to the collection. In some cases, the producer cannot pay the standard location fee of \$2,000 for a full day.

## **Changes as a Result of Contract With Showtime**

When an independent producer's request to use Smithsonian content has been determined to be significant (more than incidental), there are several options:

- The Smithsonian has opportunities to pursue programs outside of the new channel.
- Independent producers may decrease the amount of Smithsonian content to make it incidental.
- Producers may approach Smithsonian Networks to film the piece for Smithsonian on Demand. Such arrangements are completely independent and result only from the independent producer's desire to work with the Networks—the Institution does not share filming applications with Smithsonian Networks.
- The project may be considered for an exemption to the contract (a “one-off”), to be broadcast on another network. (The Smithsonian has a limited number of “one-off” opportunities per year to do programming outside of its own channel year.)
- If none of the above options are acceptable or feasible, the Smithsonian may decline the request.

During the first 11 months of 2006 since the contract agreement between Smithsonian and Showtime (Jan. 1), only two of more than 130 proposals were declined due to the contract.

These limitations will have a minimal impact on the commercial filmmakers who want to use Smithsonian content in their programs. The Institution examined its filming applications from the past five years and found that there were only a few requests that used Smithsonian content in a more than incidental way.

This new channel will allow the Smithsonian to further its mission by bringing its collections to millions of people who may not otherwise have the opportunity to experience all the Institution has to offer.

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