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Media Business
April 4, 2005

Building Brand Awareness Quickly

TV Series Debuts, Like Feature Films, Start Promo Campaigns Slowly Then Escalate Before Premiere Dates

By Mark Dominiak

Special to TelevisionWeek

Story continues below...



Spring is in the air. Easter Sunday recently passed, March Madness has whittled itself down to tonight's final game and the new baseball season starts this week. This is a time of year for both endings and beginnings.

Of spring beginnings, one of the most interesting to follow is the ramp-up to the big summer movie season. With the exception of a few trailer units that ran during the Super Bowl and other big events, the next few weeks will see trailers for summer releases start to air on television. These first trailers are the beginning of a release strategy that is used fairly consistently in new film media plans.

Two Sides of Urgency

Two urgent need states are the driving force behind conventional film release media strategy. On one hand there's the studio's need to reap as much revenue as possible from a film product with an ephemeral shelf life. On the other is the filmgoer's need to experience a hot pop culture commodity before it evaporates. It's easy to understand the film studio's side of the equation, but the filmgoer deserves a bit more commentary.

Films make it to DVD and video so quickly these days one would wonder why people feel the need to flock to the cineplex at \$10-plus a pop-and that's just for the ticket. The reason lies in the experience. Being part of what's creating buzz can happen only while the buzz is being created. There's also something special about experiencing a hot entertainment commodity in the presence of a similarly minded mass of humanity that can't be achieved in a home theater.

It shouldn't come as a surprise that the majority of filmgoers during the initial release weeks come from younger demographics. Younger people tend to draw energy from experiential moments rather than relationships. Because younger people have fewer relationships to energize them than people with spouses and kids, it makes sense that they're drawn to the energy surrounding hot pop culture events such as film releases.

Unconventional Convention

Launch strategy for film releases could be considered the antithesis of conventional brand launch strategy. Nonfilm brand launches generally hold every impression in hand until it's actually available to the public, unleashing messaging as soon as the brand hits shelves. Support will continue for the launching brand as long as budget permits. Since conventional brands don't really have an expiration date, a consumer might purchase at any time, so covering as much of the calendar as practical is a real need.

Contrarily, film release strategy begins with a trickle of exposure far in advance of actual in-theater date and ramps up over time, slowly at first to finally very heavy levels at opening week/weekend. Post-opening exposure ramps down fairly quickly following release, lasting for maybe an additional four weeks.

The core driver of the approach is the expiration date notion. Films don't remain in theaters very long-weeks to maybe a few months. That means studios don't have a lot of time to generate revenue. Awareness must be built quickly to generate interest and de-mand in advance of opening weekend. Film companies want potential moviegoers waiting in line to buy tickets when opening day arrives, not at home, hearing about the film for the first time.

While momentum for a film can be built via in-theater or Internet trailers well in advance, the length of calendar time between the first mass media trickle and release date isn't very long. Most films don't begin the real mass media trickle until four or five weeks out from launch week, and even tentpole releases don't start much further out than eight or nine weeks.

Lots in a Short Time

But therein lies the real strength of the film release approach. Very significant budgets are poured into a very short span of time. According to a recent Variety article citing data from the Motion Picture Association of America, the average film in 2003 had a marketing spend of \$39 million, about double the \$19.8 million level of 1996.

A budget of \$39 million invested in an average spending window of just 10 weeks looks for all intents and purposes like a portion of a \$200 million annual investment. And that's just for average films. What about the tentpole films, with marketing budgets far exceeding \$39 million? A \$50 million or \$60 million marketing spend will deliver the energy and impact of a \$300 million brand to filmgoing consumers sensitive to the buzz created in the release window.

Using this strategy, film releases are able to accomplish many important things:

- Reach masses of consumers quickly.
- Achieve high levels of exposure and impact in all media used.
- Use many points of contact, intersecting consumers in both mainline and alternative channels.

Mainline Media Execution

In mainline media, most films start with some form of television presence--network, cable or spot--and may layer in a magazine or newspaper ad here and there. Television presence starts out skimpy, mostly network, with some films running fewer than 10 ratings points a week up to maybe 30 points to 40 points per week.

But the trickle quickly becomes a torrent. Television elements such as cable and spot are soon added to the mix, with average film ratings point levels rocketing to 200 points to 300-plus points by opening week. Some films will run in excess of 400 ratings points during release week.

Presence in other media increases dramatically as well. Print units increase from one or two in initial weeks to dozens or hundreds of small-space newspaper ads. Radio also appears in many plans the week before and week of release at very high ratings point levels.

The average film has presence in only one medium weeks from release, but appears in six media by opening day. Tentpole films tend to appear in an average of one more media type than the average film.

Alternative Channels

For many in the media planning community, the Internet can no longer be considered an alternative medium, but for others it's still a frontier. Not so for the film industry. Studios have done a wonderful job of getting buzz out on films by the simple release of trailers to Web portals.

Buzz is starting to build for films like "Star Wars: Episode III" and "Fantastic Four" largely based on the Web release of the trailers. Talk about trickle--the films won't open until May 16 and July 8, respectively. Closer in, last weekend's release of "Sin City" has not enjoyed deep support in mainline media, but buzz on the film had been building for quite a while in the Internet space. If you haven't experienced trailers on the Web, check out iFilm or Movie-List.

Films use a lot more than the Web to build alternative media channel buzz. Basic media coverage is another tool films often use to generate pre-release exposure. The aforementioned "Sin City" scored a nice cover story in Entertainment Weekly's spring movie release issue back in February. What do you think the value was for that piece of real estate? Not only does the film enjoy the subscription and newsstand exposure, but the implied endorsement as well. Would the magazine have featured the film on the cover if it weren't buzz-worthy?

One tool a planner can use to get a sense of the value of that type of exposure is Lexis-Nexis. How many print mentions were received? Where were the mentions? In magazines? In newspapers? Lexis-Nexis can help quantify answers to those questions.

Also consider the pre-release tour of talk shows and Internet chat rooms the film's stars make right around release. This tactic is certainly one way to generate powerful media exposure outside of paid media.

Finally, there's a lot to be said for the power of co-marketing. Films do a great job of finding partners that can provide incremental exposure in other channels. Limited-edition products, contests and co-branded line extensions find their way onto grocery and mass-merchandise shelves every summer, reaching consumers during their shopping experience. And as the communication plans for those co-brands unfold in the marketplace, the films enjoy messaging in many channels, some that may not have been covered by the film's own marketing plan.

Who Benefits Most?

Brands/categories that are influenced by the expiration date mentality benefit the most from a film release type of strategy. Among those are DVD releases of the films. Take a deeper look at a few of the releases as they happen in coming months. You'll notice that they are almost a mini-version of the film's initial release activity. New album releases seemingly follow the same pattern, likely more reliant on Web and radio than are films.

Then there are some not-so-obvious "brands." Political candidates follow a similar pattern, the main differences being a geographic roll of activity and immediate cessation of messaging as of the expiration date (Election Day).

Local retailers closely mirror a film release strategy during events such as grand openings. Many of the same elements are there as with a national film release, just using a local proxy. Instead of magazine covers and celebrity tours, you see owner appearances, radio remotes and press coverage in the community section of the local paper. Instead of heavy levels of network television, there will be lots of local cable. There also may be some interesting local-specific pieces such as direct mail or newspaper inserts.

New television shows also behave in ways very similar to film releases. Of course they have the benefit of the network's war chest of promotional units, but they tend to use them the same way, building messaging up to the launch of the show. The other media elements are there as well, from radio to bus boards to Entertainment Weekly and TV Guide coverage.

Television shows will also use the occasional alternative vehicle. As part of its marketing launch, "Lost" used interesting tactics such as SOS bottles on beaches, "missing" posters featuring cast members and crackling radio spots evocative of the show's French island broadcast.

Is It Worthwhile?

There are two schools of thought on whether or not a film release type of strategy even pays off.

In school No. 1 is a media person's simple illustration of common metrics.

Take the biggest films of 2002, 2003 and 2004. Of 23 films in that period that grossed \$150 million or more, 13, or 57 percent, had reported media spending of \$35 million-plus. Of the 45 films with less than a \$150 million gross, only 24 percent reported media expenditures of more than \$35 million. The average gross of the films investing more than \$35 million was about \$178 million; for those under \$35 million it was \$71 million.

While nothing's a sure bet, on the surface it seems there's about a \$100 million box office advantage for films spending more than \$35 million. In school of thought No. 2, the Anderson School at UCLA conducted a noteworthy study in 2002-03. In short, it concludes via regression analysis that, while still providing positive impact, rapidly rising media investments made on films in the past decade do not show a corresponding increase in box office return.

One of the interesting factors noted as contributing to the lack of box office oomph is the increasing cost of television media time coupled with the decreasing reach of the television medium. The study's authors suggest more emphasis on alternative media such as the Internet to help solve the problem.

While the efficacy of classic film release media strategy is inconclusive, it's hard to argue against its real benefit: multimedia contact points generating big impact and high consumer interest in a short time frame. As the media blitz for big summer releases starts teasing your attention this spring, maybe you'll be tempted to think about a film release strategy's value for your brand.

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