

SMALL SELL

Niche marketing and campaigns for indie films offer a different type of reward to movie marketers

BY CINDY MULKERN

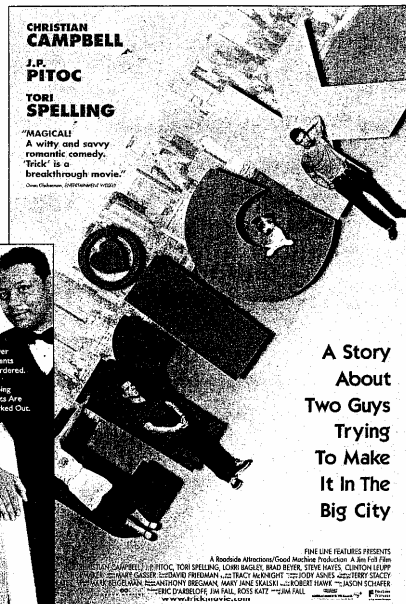
One of the challenges of movie marketing is to create campaigns that appeal to different audience segments. And when the film is aimed primarily at one segment or niche, the balance of focus and broad appeal is central.

As a species of niche marketing, key art design in the independent feature-film world is a quirky hybrid. It brings staff and budget restraints and awkward schedules. But it also means the opportunity to work against all odds on projects created by filmmakers with unique sensibilities.

"We're often blessed with a great deal of creative freedom working on independent films," says Harley Rinzler, president of Harley's House, a design firm that has created marketing materials for such clients as Fine Line Studios, Twentieth Century Fox International and Artisan Entertainment.

"I think you're encouraged to try things that are a little different," suggests Valerie Van Galder, who helped shape the campaigns for "The Ice Storm," "The Full Monty" and "Waking Ned Devine" at Fox Searchlight prior to becoming executive vp of marketing for Screen Gems, Sony's recently created niche label. "Because [they don't have] enormous budgets and enormous risk, you can be more experimental. The whole mechanism is smaller. You're close to every nuance of the process, because there are fewer people involved. You can talk to the director 10 times a day. And he or she's really involved."

"It's more pleasant and certainly more fun. We don't have to deal with any of the studio trappings," agrees Fine Line's Marian Koltai-Levine, who, along with Brian D. Caldwell,



MAJOR CAMPAIGNS: Niche marketing offers experimentation within established norms. (Left) Universal's "The Best Man" was aimed at black audiences, while Fine Line's "Trick" sought the "indie" crowd.

serves as co-senior vp of marketing and has overseen such successes as "Shine" and "The Theory of Flight."

There's also the freedom of desired collaboration. Though first-time filmmakers don't have contractual control over marketing, distributors and design shops alike want them around.

"We work with filmmakers who get very involved to everyone's benefit," says Rinzler. "That's not always the case. It's making the distinction between 'That's what I like that works in my scene in my film' and 'I understand we must do this for the film's marketing.'"

The indie world can also rub off on the marketing when it comes to new ideas. For a recent TV spot for "Julien Donkey-Boy," Independent Pictures used a female voice-over — unheard of in mainstream marketing, where male voices are routinely used even in major studio fare aimed at women.

Limited budgets often force independent distributors' marketing ideas to be more succinct, thus enhancing the unique relationship between indie marketers and the talent.

"We're working with filmmakers who have

created something they're so clear about. They couldn't get that project going without that," Koltai-Levine explains. "That clarity gets brought to us and we're able to be very clear about what we're looking for. Not to say we don't go through 20 different versions."

Most acknowledge test screenings yield valuable marketing insight, but they also relish that the independent world circumvents this step.

"When a focus group is asked, 'What are your favorite scenes?' the studio sometimes feels compelled to put them in the trailer which may have nothing contextually to do with what you're trying to communicate," adds Brian D. Fox, president of B. D. Fox & Friends, who has worked within the full spectrum of entertainment advertising — from independents to the major studios and networks. "It becomes an arduous task. But independents, maybe because they're not spending as much money, cut to the chase."

Though target audiences are by definition narrower, Rinzler believes that allows him to construct a campaign that really speaks to a particular segment of the population. Van Galder adds that studios cast a wider net, while independents must hone in on their perceived

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audience in the most cost-effective way.

Still, even niche movie marketing often straddles the line in seeking a wider audience.

"Most of the time, even though I'm targeting an urban audience, I'm trying to push the buttons [that will] target other segments," says Art Sims, founder and CEO of 11:24 Design Advertising, which has designed many campaigns aimed at black audiences for filmmakers such as Spike Lee ("Malcolm X," "Get On the Bus"), as well as indie projects for Abel Ferrara ("Bad Lieutenant") and Bertrand Tavernier ("Round Midnight"). Sims doesn't mind being known mostly for work in the "urban" niche, but points to campaigns for films such as his recent work for Paramount's "The Best Man" as blurring the line between niche and mainstream marketing by using very similar approaches. Sims adds that properly approaching a niche and not trying to be too general can bring a wider audience. "I don't think I can water down my images. I've found that when you stay true to an urban audience, that will bring the crossover audience if it's executed correctly. I think the studios are finding that [is true]."

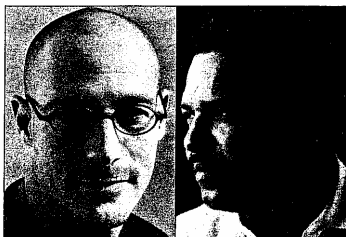
Preplanning is especially crucial in niche marketing. A unified front with all marketing materials is a must. "The trailer looks like the poster, which is reminiscent of the trailer," says Van Galder. Campaigns also rarely change midstream. There's absolutely no budget to market each city differently. "You must come up with something that plays to your demographic," continues Van Galder. "It's hard to totally redirect a campaign once it has started. Occasionally, you can tweak it or add some quotes. But, if something's not working, to totally remarket it would be pretty unlikely."

Also, forget about the multimillion-dollar media buys. "Ours are just a few zeros less," jokes Koltai-Levine. "We had a billboard for the very first time in June."

Independents also sell their wares on the small screen — just in calculated ways. "We do buy TV, but not with the weight that the studios do," acknowledges Caldwell. "Even with 'Shine,' where we were buying more weight and frequency than we normally would, the budget pales in comparison to a megabudget film."

Media attention is even more prized by independents than their studio counterparts.

"The validation of certain press or festivals becomes very influential," says Koltai-Levine. "If we are in the fortunate position of having a quote, we'll put that very big and bold on a one-sheet."



Harley Rinzler
Harley's House

Art Sims
11:24 Design

One area where money is willingly diverted is the international realm, traditionally an enthusiastic haven for independents. Here, marketers can also exercise more of the creative freedom they prize. Van Galder remembers the British "Full Monty" campaign. "Their culture would allow something a little more risqué. The teaser poster showed the guys naked with a plate of fish-and-chips — something we'd never do in America."

In years past, marketing indies was a cottage industry because independent films were thought to be only those that played in West Village art houses. But today, all of that has changed. For one, independent films now often have A-list actors to promote, such as Ben Affleck and Matt Damon for "Dogma." Similarly, B-movie fare such as horror has undergone a renaissance, and now attracts top talent — and marketing muscle — to projects such as "Scream" and "Urban Legend."

"Independent films used to be something people did for the love of cinema, hoping to turn a small profit," Caldwell reflects. "Now, smaller films can break out. What could have topped out at \$10 million 10 years ago now could do anywhere from \$20 (million) to \$60 million. Films like 'Shine' or 'The Piano' redefined independent cinema. We had to realize that audiences now look for these films."

"If anything, the difference between the words 'indie' and 'studio-driven' does not really apply the way it used to," observes Ed Glass, president of Glass/Schoor Films, pointing to films such as "Election," from MTV Films and DreamWorks' "American Beauty" as examples. Glass, who built his company on campaigns for indie faves such as "sex, lies and videotape," prefers to distinguish between "content" films and those driven more by special effects or event status.

"The press recently described a studio film as 'Feeling, looking and having the personality of an independent,'" says Rinzler. "The studio people commented that they'd seen so many successful independent films, they realized they

couldn't just create the same formula pictures advertised the same way. That's great for companies like ours. It opens up opportunities to do more inventive work on bigger pictures."

Such changes mean niche marketing must increasingly mirror more mainstream efforts.

"Five years ago, there were fewer films in the marketplace. Something like 'The Brothers McMullen' was marketed on a really, really limited budget. Now, that process feels dated," says Van Galder. Instead, she believes the increased competition means that now even specialized films need to be marketed as "events." "The luxury of building an audience is gone," Van Galder continues. "If your film doesn't perform, you toss it out. This puts great pressure on marketers to make a film stand out. You have one shot. They live or die by one night at the cinema. It's heartbreaking."

Technological advances are also influencing campaign approaches.

"I think that innovations will actually level the playing field among agencies like ours, the studios, the independents," Rinzler suggests. "Communicating to your audience will be very personal, changing the way films are marketed. In 10 years, you'll wake up to a panel on your refrigerator saying, 'Good morning Harley, film X opens tonight at your favorite theater. Push this button and reserve that eighth row seat you like. Push this button and see a preview.'"

But as the future impacts independent and niche film marketing, the one constant many will revisit is passion.

"Take a project like 'Tumbleweed,'" says Caldwell. "Here are two guys who basically sold everything to make this movie. They weren't making something because it was what the studios were looking for. They made it because they had belief in their vision and were willing to put their money where their mouths are. Independent film is still about people following their dreams of making art. In some cases, the art is more commercial than others."

And with passion must come perseverance.

"Sometime you're better off not knowing how impossible things are," Van Galder reflects. "We'll love a movie so much, we didn't even think about that. You just bulldoze ahead." □

