



In Blockbuster Season, Smaller Movies Reel in Audiences With Savvy Marketing

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Iron Man, Shrek and the A-Team all are starring in big-budget blockbusters this summer backed by supersized marketing campaigns, but there's still room on theater marquees for documentaries, foreign flicks, and low-budget comedies and dramas, studio execs say. Those titles just require more creative, targeted and economical marketing strategies to entice moviegoers—with PR, word of mouth and niche events supplanting big media buys and lavish press junkets.

"It would seem the summer is a tough time to release a specialty film. In actuality, it's a good time," says Gary Rubin, president of First Independent Pictures, a Los Angeles-based specialty film distributor releasing *Holy Rollers*, a drama about a Hasidic Jew who becomes a drug smuggler, this summer. "The fare released by the major studios over the summer is aimed at such a young demographic or the films are so lightweight that adults are screaming for something reasonably intelligent to see."

A movie's release and distribution strategy is, of course, a key marketing decision. Counterprogramming—or pitting a romantic comedy's release against an action-packed blockbuster, say, to try to draw different audiences—is a well-established technique for smaller-budget movie marketers. For example, IFC Films, a New York-based film distributor, is releasing the documentary *Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work* on June 11 as counterprogramming to action fare *The A-Team* and family flick/remake *The Karate Kid*, explains Ryan Werner, SVP of marketing and publicity for IFC Entertainment, IFC Films' parent company.

Also, while big studios will spend millions to release movies nationwide and secure high grosses on opening weekend, specialty studios like Sony Pictures Classics (SPC) in New York typically release films in New York and Los Angeles and then roll them out into other markets over several weeks, aiming to build up buzz and profits along the way, explains Tom Bernard, co-president of SPC and co-leader of its marketing department. Smaller studios have to be smart about when they release their films to make sure they have a core audience more or less to themselves. For instance, SPC is releasing the drama *Mother and Child* with Annette Bening on Mother's Day weekend, weeks before *Sex and the City 2* opens and steals away the same adult female demographic, Bernard explains.

Like big studios, specialty studios will be distributing posters, releasing trailers, buying newspaper ads, securing talent for interviews and attracting stars to attend their films' premieres, execs tell *Marketing News Exclusives*. But small studios without the luxury of big advertising budgets have to more aggressively promote their films through events and PR. Amanda Lundberg, a partner who co-runs the movie marketing department in New York for entertainment PR firm 42West, says smaller studios often open up interview opportunities to alternative newspapers, magazines and websites—media outlets that bigger studios tend to skip over.

Smaller studios have to make sure that their marketing efforts are reaching those audiences who might be interested in their cinematic fare. IFC, for example, screened the Joan Rivers documentary at the Miami Gay and Lesbian Film Festival earlier this month to prompt word of mouth in that community, Werner explains. SPC has targeted fantasy and sci-fi movie sites like Ain't It Cool News to promote *Micmacs*, a fantastical French film out this month. And for *Holy Rollers*, First Independent is contacting rabbis and entertainment directors at Jewish organizations to tell them about the movie, Rubin says.

Through such niche marketing efforts, smaller movie studios can make the most of their comparably meager marketing budgets and earn a spot at multiplexes nationwide. "It's about getting the films to the right publications, screening them at the right festival, creating word of mouth and hoping you will have a film that will deliver the good reviews," Werner says.