

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

AAAwareness Isn't Everything

Adam Leipzig · Wednesday, June 1st, 2011

When I was a kid, in pre-Google days, if you wanted to find something you'd look in the Yellow Pages. The book, not the website. It listed business categories alphabetically. Within each category, business names appeared alphabetically too.

Business owners quickly figured out that people didn't like flipping pages. If a business name appeared first in the listings, it got more customers, and the best way to be first was to name your business with an A.

There were a lot of Acmes. And one A wasn't enough. Soon there were businesses with more A's. Aamco Transmissions. Aardvark Vintage Clothing. AAAA Self Storage.

It was an early lesson in how customers decide what to buy. Consumers are either looking for something very specific (in which case, they looked up the business by name in the White Pages), or for something very easy.

Movies are the same. In fact, movie companies are still selling movies as if they were businesses in the Yellow Pages, emphasizing awareness, which just like making sure your name starts with an A. That's fine for big studio movies with huge marketing budgets; with so much content clamoring for our attention, they spend money to "get above the noise." But it's rotten for independent films, where old-fashioned Yellow Pages marketing just doesn't do the trick any more.

Here are some examples of how companies focus on awareness:

Buy it. In early March, everyone knew *Mars Needs Moms* was coming to a theatre near you. Disney bought our awareness, and paid at least \$50 million to do so. Disney upped the ante for *Pirates 4*: its marketing budget was reportedly \$200 million.

Grapple for the home page. That's what's behind the Facebook-Netflix conversations – finding a way to get a movie on the first page a customer looks at. Because many customers won't click "Next."

Jockey for your number. Bloomberg is threatening to sue over its channel placement on Comcast. Clearly, Bloomberg execs believe consumers won't be looking for "Bloomberg" by name – instead, they will be hanging out in a neighborhood of cable numbers, and Bloomberg wants to be found easily.

Once again, start with an A. This is happening, literally, in the VOD game. VOD programmers are realizing that customers don't like to scroll through lists of titles; instead, they generally wind up selecting a movie with its name near the start of the alphabet.

Here's the problem. *Awareness* is not *Want-To-See*. *Want-To-See* is what drives ticket sales. Everyone knew that Mars needed Moms...we just didn't want to pay to see them.

Indie film audiences are generous, adventuresome and game, and I believe can be far, far larger than they are thought to be. Offer them something striking, like *The King's Speech* or *Black Swan*, and they come out in droves. Like all audiences, they either want something very specific or very easy. However, because indie films have negligible marketing budgets to begin with, indie distribution companies cannot focus on marketing. They just don't have enough dollars to spend.

Instead, the focus must be on the film – on the core essential of each film, which is its story. High-priced research studies, as well as our own, personal day-to-day experiences, tell us that the most important factor in deciding if you want to see a movie is The Story.

The reason some indie films underperform at the box office is really kind of simple. They are not stories that many people want to see. They are not entertaining enough. They are too grim, too depressing. They are too hermetically sealed in their own juices, and not open enough to embrace the audience at large.

If we care about indie movies, and want to expand their audience, we have to start with the movies themselves. Through our caring about the movies' stories, we'll show devotion for the people who love and support indie movies – the audience. Then we'll have a genuine opportunity to connect with audiences, not superficially (such as having email addresses or lots of Facebook friends) but deeply, in a two-way relationship that builds *Want-To-See*.

Because indie movie audiences need a better place to start than the letter A.

Image from Stanley Kubrick's A Clockwork Orange. Yes, it starts with an A.

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