

COVER STORY

# THE ALMIGHTY DOLLAR

## How effective is marketing to faith-based audiences?



By Gail Schiller

**WHEN DIRECTOR ANDREW ADAMSON BEGAN** promoting today's release of "The Chronicles of Narnia: Prince Caspian," he prepared for specific questions about the Christian audience that helped 2005's "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe" gross \$291.7 million in domestic boxoffice.

"Religion seems more important here in the U.S. than anywhere," Adamson says. "As I'm promoting it here, everyone is asking me about the religious aspect. When I promoted it in France, everyone was asking why Americans are so obsessed with the religious aspect."

Indeed, Adamson's first "Narnia" came on the heels of 2004's "The Passion of the Christ," which grossed \$370 million domestically and tipped studios to a potentially untapped audience of faithful moviegoers.

But in the years since, studios that have waged extensive faith-based campaigns have garnered mixed results, leading some in Hollywood to lose faith in the practice.

Universal arranged advanced screenings for religious leaders for 2007's "Evan Almighty" and January's "The Pirates Who Don't Do Anything: A VeggieTales Movie." But attendance was not particularly heavy from religious audiences.

"From our experiences marketing to faith-based communities, we believe that moviegoers searching for appropriate entertainment don't exist independent from the mainstream," says Adam Fogelson, Universal's president of marketing and distribution. "In fact, they are the mainstream and depend on traditional marketing to inform decisions about which films seem right for themselves and their families."

Faith-based campaigns have failed to deliver big numbers even for

such recent Christian-themed films as "The Nativity Story" (2006, \$38 million) or "Facing the Giants" (2006, \$10 million). For that reason, several marketing executives say they are shying away from faith-specific outreach.

"After 'Passion,' everybody met with all of these faith-based marketing companies, and they were going to help us all change the world," a senior studio marketing executive says. "We hired them a few times and it wasn't anything you could track or put your finger on, and it didn't seem super valid, so I'd rather spend my money elsewhere."

Even some Christian entertainment companies say that studios have wasted money on overbroad campaigns rather than targeting particular denominations.

"You wouldn't spend all your marketing dollars to market a NASCAR film to a wrestling fan or vice versa," says Byron Jones, managing partner of faith-based Pure Flix Entertainment. "Yet we have seen many releases marketed with a template marketing plan. The money is being spread too thinly across too many areas."

Many experts now believe "Passion's" success was an anomaly and that mistakes have been made trying to replicate that phenomenon.

"A big misunderstanding is that the faith audience is this one monolithic audience, and if you get to a point where you have this magical database, and you just press a button, the buses will start pulling up in front of the churches," says Micheal Flaherty, president of Walden Media, which produces the "Narnia" films.

Walden has seen success with such faith-friendly films as 2007's "Bridge to Terabithia" (\$82 million) and 2006's "Charlotte's Web"

ILLUSTRATION BY CHRIS SMITH

(\$83 million). And despite grossing only \$21 million, exit polls on "Amazing Grace" — produced by Walden's sister label Bristol Bay Prods. — showed that word-of-mouth marketing, including to the faith-based community, was just as effective as traditional advertising even though much more was spent on the latter, Flaherty says.

Others in Hollywood remain similarly faithful.

Tyler Perry's films and his TBS sitcom "House of Payne" have benefited from faith-based marketing in urban markets.

"We believe that our faith-based outreach really ignited powerful word-of-mouth amongst the target audience," says Vicky Free, vp entertainment marketing at Turner.

Dennis Rice, president of worldwide marketing and publicity at United Artists and a former executive at Buena Vista Pictures Marketing, says his experience with "Narnia" and other Disney films demonstrated that faith-based marketing can work. He cites bad films and flawed outreach efforts as reasons why some campaigns fail.

"You can't try to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear and then blame the faith community when it doesn't work," he says. "If a movie is largely rejected for various reasons, you can't expect a faith program to bail it out."

**G**RACE HILL MEDIA, which has executed faith-based campaigns for more than 200 Hollywood films, including "Prince Caspian," says it has not seen any decline in business. But if some studios are backing away, Christian production companies continue to find innovative ways to market to faith-based moviegoers.

Cloud Ten Pictures and Pure Flix are releasing films in churches before DVD releases.

"It helps us create a real groundswell of grassroots marketing and buzz within the community," Pure Flix's Jones says. The company is in negotiations with Lionsgate, Fox Faith and Disney to release their theatrical or direct-to-DVD titles through its church distribution system, which Jones says eventually could offer up to 10,000 church screens nationwide. In exchange for a license fee of \$99-\$599, the church can screen a film as many times as it wants on opening weekend.

Cloud Ten also found success releasing "Left Behind: World at War" in 3,200 churches across North America in 2005 for an average license fee of \$100 per church. It now has plans to release four films a year using the same model.

Other companies are coordinating advance ticket sales for church congregations to orchestrate strong opening weekends and holding

special screenings for pastors, hoping they will promote the films in their sermons.

"The No. 1 secret sauce is the relationships I have with senior pastors," Gener8Xion Entertainment's Matt Crouch says. "When a senior pastor stands up and runs a two-minute trailer for one of my films on his church's big screen and says go see this movie, that is the most powerful piece of marketing that there is."

Buzzplant, a new-media marketing company, uses e-cards and other online viral marketing, as well as ad buys on faith-based Web sites, to market movies to the Christian community online.

Another recently launched Web site, WingClips.com, allows clergy to download film clips to use in their sermons.

Companies that market more mainstream Hollywood fare are employing similar strategies. Grace Hill says it maintains a database of more than 100,000 pastors, educators and youth leaders that it invites to advanced screenings. According to Flaherty, Walden can host as many as 65 screenings for religious leaders beginning as early as 16 months before a film's release.

Motive Marketing applied the techniques it employs in the faith market to seniors and sporting communities to promote 2006's "Rocky Balboa," while Fox Faith continues to offer church-related film resources through its Web site while holding special screenings and grassroots outreach through Christian organizations.

**C**HRISTIANS REMAIN THE LARGEST and most fertile faith market, but others have received occasional attention. For 2004's "Ushpizin," Picturehouse hired consultants to screen the film in Orthodox Jewish communities. Last year's "The Kite Runner" was a natural for the Muslim community. Grace Hill held screenings at synagogues for "Evan Almighty" and Motive reached out to Christian, Jewish and Muslim leaders for 2006's "United 93."

Despite no second coming of "Passion," many Christian filmmakers and marketers insist the studios can still harness the faith market successfully by targeting it intelligently.

"I think most studios understand that religious people are a vast but cautious bunch of consumers who are naturally leery of what Hollywood's intentions are toward them," Grace Hill president Jonathan Bock says. "They aren't just going to march in lock step to theaters because they're approached one time with a mediocre movie. Savvy executives get that this is relationship-building and that winning over people of faith takes time, hard work and sincerity."

*Gregg Goldstein contributed to this report.*

## O Come, All Ye Faithful

### Three recent faith-based marketing campaigns

**"The Kite Runner"** The film dealt primarily with Muslims, so the first step was to "find



champions within the faith community," says Jonathan Bock, president of Grace Hill Media, which crafted the campaign. Radio host Michael Medved and Pasadena's Fuller Theological Seminary endorsed the film, then Bock created promotional materi-

als for 60,000 Bible-study groups. "What made the film extraordinary was that it really humanized Muslims," he says. "And that was widely embraced by the faith community."

**"The Great Debaters"** Denzel Washington was at the heart of this cam-



paign. "He was kind enough to do a taped personalized greeting that we made for 25 major African-American churches," Bock says. In addition to a faith-based press junket, Bock arranged for the Rev. Robert Schuller to interview Wash-

ington about his faith on the "Hour of Power." Clips from the film also were made available for pastors to use in sermons.

**"Bella"** The film tells the story of a Mexican waiter who persuades a female friend not to abort her



pregnancy. So Bob Angelotti, president of Angelcom Media Group, arranged extensive screenings for religious leaders and faith-based groups. Some then booked theaters for group viewings. Angelotti also bought time on Christian radio and Fox News. "When you look at the top 10 most-listened-to radio

shows in America — whether Rush Limbaugh with 20 million or Sean Hannity with 15 million — you'll find that 90% of their audience is Christian," he says. — **Stephen Galloway**