

Marketers Hone 'Social Listening'

9:00 AM EST 2/28/2012 by Pamela McClintock

Online chatter on Twitter and Facebook is playing a pivotal role in how films are promoted before release.



When Paramount's microbudgeted horror pic *The Devil Inside* opened to a record-breaking \$33.7 million in early January, Hollywood was floored. After all, traditional tracking suggested the film should have opened to about \$10 million.

But insiders paying close attention to social media knew the film's potential. Thanks to "social listening," a term that is becoming ubiquitous in the movie business, more studios are harnessing the power of such mediums as Twitter and Facebook to understand audiences, generate early interest in films and gauge box-office prospects long before opening weekend.

Aspect Ratio, an entertainment marketing and advertising company specializing in trailers and TV campaigns, is one of several firms vying to provide studios and independents with listening measurements in the months before a movie debuts. It's as simple as monitoring chatter to gauge the tone of conversation about a property, as well as who is interested. "After going through those findings, we are then able to provide concrete solutions to either adapt, embrace, challenge or mold the film's message," says Aspect's chief marketing officer, Heather Phillips, who previously headed marketing at Walden Media. "Then [we] create content in-house to support those solutions."

More than a year before the planned release of *The Host*, Aspect has been working on the big-screen adaptation of *Twilight* author Stephenie Meyer's adult sci-fi novel that Open Road will debut in March 2013. "Clearly the fans of Stephenie Meyer are a vocal online group," says Jason Cassidy, Open Road's president of marketing. "We not only want to see what our 'evangelists' are saying but also see what is grinding the gears of our detractors. How can we most effectively engage as many audiences as possible and still be authentic to the property?" Paramount has been especially savvy in exploiting social media (witness the *Paranormal Activity* franchise). Last year, the studio relied heavily on Twitter and Facebook to promote *Justin Bieber: Never Say Never*, which grossed a stellar \$73 million in North America. Recent youth-targeted releases such as *The Vow*, *Chronicle* and *The Woman in Black* also have benefited from similar online outreach. Stuart Ford's sales and distribution company IM Global is working closely with Prescreen.com, an online VOD platform that has partnered with Facebook. "By tracking feedback instantly and monitoring traffic on our own website, we can assess whether our efforts are effective and make changes on the fly," says Ford.

Film companies aren't the only ones tuning in to social network chatter: TV networks and even talent agencies are paying attention to what's being said online about upcoming projects and stars (with agents now demanding that clients get credit for driving online interest via social sites). Still, the major tracking services -- NRG, MarketCast -- aren't going away. "Social media," says one industry executive, "is just one voice."