



News

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You Can Read It in the Funny Pages

Superheroes Are Flexing Their Muscles in a Variety of Media

By Mark Dominiak, Special to *TelevisionWeek*

Last summer, a Media Planner column suggested that planners in search of a big idea might possibly turn to a superhero for help. That was a tongue-in-cheek way of suggesting that maybe large- and small-screen content with roots in the comic book genre might supply good energy for plan ideas.

Back in August, we noted the growing influence of superheroes and comic creators in Hollywood. Box office impact of the comic genre in the last 5 1/2 years has been remarkable. Going back a bit earlier, from 1996 to 2000, superhero-based films captured \$265 million at the domestic box office, less than 2 percent of the \$16.7 billion generated by the top 25 films of those years.

But in a dramatic uptick, from 2001 to 2006 comic-based films generated a whopping \$2.2 billion of roughly \$24.3 billion in total box office revenue among the top 25 films of each of those years. That's approximately a tenfold increase in box office receipts and about a five-fold increase in share of the overall pie for the comic genre.

Big-Screen Developments

The forward-thinking suggestion of that column was right on, as box office power for comic book-based content has grown even stronger in the past six months. So far this year, there have been four strong comic book-originated successes. "Spider-Man 3" leads the pack at \$330 million in box office and counting. The surprise hit "300," based on Frank Miller's comic adaptation of the Spartans' stand at Thermopylae, grossed \$210 million. "Ghost Rider" set February opening records and has pulled in \$115.8 million to date.

Most recently, "Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer" opened June 15 with a weekend gross of \$57.4 million, suggesting it's another \$100 million-plus comic/hero-based property.

If you're keeping a tally, that's likely upwards of three-quarters of a billion dollars for just four films. That's about one-third the hero impact in the past five years in just the first six months of 2007.

Marvel Comics in particular is taking advantage of this tremendous growth in a significant way. After years of looking for studios to green-light projects from its deep comic library, Marvel, backed by a significant level of investment, now has the ability to produce its own films. Marvel has thus positioned itself to enjoy

hundreds of millions of dollars of revenue, versus the tens of millions it earned in licensing in recent years.

That broader revenue pool should mean a deeper capability over time to fully open Marvel's vault of comic content for potential projects, signaling a likely steady stream of comic book-based content to fuel the box office and popular culture for many years to come.

On the Small Screen

TV also is taking advantage of the opportunities comic content has to offer. For example, in April, Advertising Age noted an interesting tactical execution using a comic book-based approach in conjunction with The CW's comic-based property "Smallville." Toyota took advantage of The CW's content wraps to accomplish a variety of tasks.

First, viewers were treated to two-minute comic-like mini-episodes of "Smallville," created by various DC Comics artists. "Smallville" viewers enjoyed expanded content while DC enjoyed cross-platform exposure.

Second, and importantly for Toyota, each mini-episode contained answers to unexplained clues from the show and sprung some new clues on the viewers that could be answered only by logging on to the client Web site. Online, viewers could register, play along with show-based content to solve clues and enter for a chance to win a new Toyota vehicle.

The comic genre doesn't just influence television; television is churning out properties that have a ripple effect in the comic industry. NBC's "Heroes" provides a good example of this, but the impact goes deeper. Wizard, arguably the comic industry's leading publication, is featuring the hottest comic-esque TV programming for the coming season in its upcoming September issue, covering not only the programming but how the shows will impact the comic industry more broadly. Its coverage will help bring comic readers to the tube to view.

In addition to reports on "Heroes" and "Smallville," Wizard will devote 40 pages to "The Simpsons," "South Park," "Aqua Teen Hunger Force," "Battlestar Galactica" and "Lost."

Why would programming like "Lost" generate interest in the comic industry?

Beyond "Lost's" outstanding serial quality, no comic aficionado could miss the EC Comics horror flair to last season's Episode 14, "Expose." Nikki and Paulo's story is reminiscent of a classic "Tales From the Crypt" yarn.

It's exactly those types of storylines that draw comic fans in to so many of today's television programs.

Wizard's coverage also will focus on new programming such as "Reaper," "Bionic Woman," "Pushing Daisies," "The Sarah Connor Chronicles" and "New Amsterdam." These properties have a shot at attracting the comic crowd, who could become the foundation of a long-term audience.

Comic-based feature films including "Iron Man" with Robert Downey Jr., "The Incredible Hulk" with Ed Norton and "Dark Knight" also will be covered.

Planning Implications

This interplay between television or film and the comic industry is important to media planners for a couple of important reasons beyond those noted in August. First, as demonstrated by the Toyota content-wrap example, audiences are becoming accustomed to content experiences delivered across multiple platforms, and they enjoy them. When the viewer has an engaged, worthwhile experience across multiple contact points at which messages can be delivered, the brand wins.

Creating multiplatform content opportunities seems to be easier when comic genres serve as a foundation. The comics industry seems to realize that promoting comic-friendly films and programming in turn helps keep the comic industry vital, refreshing interest among old fans and bringing in new ones. That vitality ensures a dynamic industry that can churn out yet more fresh content that has the potential to fuel more films and programming. If fans can enjoy the content experience from television to comic to Web, there is even more value in the experience.

Planners also should note that comic book content is a valuable social currency. In a way, box office performance and ratings are outward signs of a property's ability to capture attention within society. To generate big-ticket sales or ratings, there must be enough interest and demand among a large portion of the population.

Publicity machines, program promotions and marketing efforts do everything they can to ensure that interest is created. But those elements create only so much momentum. There also has to be something special about a film or quality TV show that captures enough of society's interest to become part of the pop culture conversation. Comic-based film and TV offerings have a good record of success in creating those types of conversations. Lots of people share buzz about properties like "Spider-Man" or "Heroes." That word-of-mouth buzz multiplies to generate big box office revenue and big ratings.

Comic-based properties seem to generate a disproportionate share of that social lingua franca. It becomes cool and topical to have social conversations about the high level of quality in "300" or the twist at the end of "Heroes." The social interaction in those environments is inherently positive and becomes a wonderful environment in which a planner's brand can live.

The environment provides a guilt-by-association type of opportunity. If the property is cool enough to make it into social conversation among so many people, the brand that hangs with it must be as well. For a planner, this phenomenon may be valuable to keep in mind and leverage for their brand.

So if your target happens to have some affinity for comic-based content, take a look at what's on the horizon in film and TV programming as you seek ideas. Not only might you find opportunities that could create buzz around your brand, you might find the environment conducive to multiplatform ideas as well.

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