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Harness the Power of Superheroes

Genre's Appeal is Wide-Ranging and Growing, So Look to TV Shows and Films for Blockbuster Ad Campaigns

By Mark Dominiak

Special to TelevisionWeek

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Media planners worth their salt are constantly searching for new ideas that can have big impact for their brands in the marketplace.

But those big ideas have seemed increasingly hard to find in recent years given the fragmentation of mass media and explosion of new media forms. What's a planner to do? Maybe take a lesson from Hollywood and rely on a superhero to deliver big impact.

Before you chuckle and turn the page, consider a few things. First, the content available in the comic book hero universe is vast, deep and very fresh for use on the big screen. Second, audiences for hero content have the potential to be quite large, which

increases the chances of producing a potential blockbuster. Finally, superhero content plays well across media platforms, which opens up potential revenue streams in games, in print and on the Web and other digital media as well. All of these reasons make superhero content a potentially powerful asset for use in media planning.

Superhero Impact Growing

The box-office impact of the superhero genre in the last 5½ years has been remarkable. From 1996 to 2000, superhero-based films captured only \$265 million in box-office revenue, less than 2 percent of the \$16.7 billion generated by those years' top 25 films.

Conversely, from 2001 to date in 2006, superhero-based films have generated a whopping \$2.2 billion out of the roughly \$24.3 billion in total box office among the top 25 films of each of those years. That's approximately a tenfold increase in box-office revenue and about a fivefold increase in share of the overall pie for the superhero genre.

The power of the genre doesn't stop at the big screen. When you consider the ongoing success of The WB's "Smallville" and Spike TV's new series "Blade," there's growing superhero presence on the small screen as well.

In fact, at the recent Wizard World Chicago, there was some preliminary buzz in the air about Comedy Central working with DC Comics to create a wholly new property, to be called "Freak Show." Thinking about developments like these and Stan Lee's "Who Wants To Be a Hero?" on Sci Fi Channel, you can reach at least one conclusion: when superhero content masters are being recruited to create content for both big and small screens, superhero currency's value is rising.

Implications for Planners

The key to leveraging the strength of the superhero genre in film is to integrate the film and its marketing effort into your brand's plan. A good place to start is with the film's relevance to your target.

Films generating \$250 million at the box office succeed because a lot more than just teenage boys visit the multiplex. The superhero genre will not work for every brand, but its mass appeal means it will do a good job reaching many targets. Among the targets will be boys, teens, young men, young women, men and possibly even families.

When considering how a film might fit into a plan, planners shouldn't think the only opportunity is a cinema placement prior to the movie. Impact potential should be considered holistically. A significant portion of the power for superhero properties lies outside conventional media contact points. Here are a few to consider:

- Product placement is a powerful unconventional contact point. How closely have you paid attention to recent superhero films? For example, do you remember Peter Parker as Spider-Man practicing his web-snaring abilities on a can of Dr Pepper in his room? What about Bobby Drake (Iceman) chilling down that very same Dr Pepper brand for Wolverine in "X-Men 2"? And there was a lot more in "X-Men 2." Did you notice Miller Genuine Draft and Tropicana orange juice in Drake's fridge a bit later in the film?

Those placements were viewed by millions during the run of the films and continue to be viewed on the small screen and on DVD.

- Through the door opened by a product-placement deal, on-pack movie tie-in graphics can also be negotiated. On-pack graphics have ability to create more visual impact at the retail shelf. The aforementioned Dr Pepper in fact did just that with the release of "Spider-Man 2."

Brands generate millions of low-involvement impressions every day at the retail shelf as consumers wander through aisles. When films are released, the marketing blitz behind them generates a ton of interest, awareness and energy. Capturing energy and awareness from the film and transferring it to your brand's package is a great way to convert those otherwise mundane impressions into something more noticeable, timely and special.

- Event presence can be obtained in a variety of venues. The film premiere and the theater lobby are obvious considerations, but there are other venues such as the national series of Wizard World Conventions and other comics conventions. Sony promoted "Ghost Rider" at Wizard World with components like video game stations and tattoos.

Large banners for "Superman Returns" and "Cars" were also at the event, along with a significant presence by Lion's Gate promoting non-superhero properties, including "Saw 3," "Descent" and others. The DVD release for "X-Men 3" was also promoted at the event.

Spike TV had a large presence as well, promoting "Blade: The TV Series" via tote bags, the back page of the convention guide and signage. Spike also promoted programming in general with giveaways and video.

This presence is pristinely absent of traditional mass-market brands. Any brand deeply tied in with the films or networks could use these same events as platforms to connect with influencer consumers having almost no competitive clutter.

The Radar Screen

Connecting a brand to a film property is a large task, but it's one that can be achieved by planners. Perhaps the biggest hurdle is to identify opportune properties early enough in the process to enable the team to connect with the studio to negotiate involvement.

For a planner, you could turn to a sister company specializing in entertainment, if you have that kind of synergy available. If you don't, you'll need to keep your feelers out to learn about projects as they develop.

Resources such as Variety, in print or online, imdb.com or even Entertainment Weekly are helpful. But if you want to tap into the superhero genre specifically, Wizard is the underrated player in the market.

Wizard has evolved beyond a print price guide for comics geeks. It has maintained its position as barometer of the comics industry, but has expanded to keep its audience informed about developments in comics on the Web, at events and through other properties. As such, Wizard can also serve to inform media planners about properties on the horizon that may be ripe planning opportunities. Pick up a copy in the near future and dive into the burgeoning landscape of the superhero genre. It may pay dividends for your brand down the line.

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