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Word-of-mouth the talk of the town in Hollywood

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No proven box office stars. No magazine covers. Sometimes not even a full-page newspaper ad.

Yet the ethnic romantic comedy "My Big Fat Greek Wedding" is poised to pass the \$200 million mark at the box office this weekend.

The secret to its unexpected success? Good, old-fashioned, positive word-of-mouth advertising, the same

reward seen by hit movies like "The Blair Witch Project" and "The Full Monty."

But the praise that made the independent films smashes was hardly grass-roots.

"What's interesting about word-of-mouth campaigns is that they are more scientific than people realize," said Amorette Jones of Artisan Entertainment, which distributed "Blair Witch."

While word-of-mouth buzz

would appear to be the result of fans recommending a movie to friends, it is usually the culmination of a calculated plan by a film distributor. The movie is screened for free, often months in advance, to targeted audiences with the goal of launching with a bang a movie that is considered a gem but too unique or difficult to market conventionally.

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This year's smash hit "My Big Fat Greek Wedding," starring Nia Vardalos and Lainie Kazan, has benefited from a strong word-of-mouth campaign. The independent film is nearing the \$200 million mark.

Small films cashing in on word-of-mouth

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"Positive word-of-mouth is the manifestation of the positive feelings people have for a movie," said Paul Dergarabedian, president of the box office tracking firm Exhibitor Relations Co. "You can buy an opening weekend, literally, with enough marketing hype. But the word-of-mouth is what is going to make or break a movie in the long-term."

A film distributor, whether it's a major studio or a specialty art house company, makes the decision early on how much of their marketing budget they want to earmark for a word-of-mouth effort. It's not necessarily cheaper than traditional media marketing due to the expense of renting theaters, printing tickets and distributing them to sometimes dubious movie fans.

"Sometimes those early screenings will be overbooked 8-to-1 or even 12-to-1," said Jones, Artisan's executive vice president of worldwide marketing. "But as the heat builds up, you'll find that every ticket you give out is being used."

For "Greek Wedding" and "Full Monty," Los Angeles-based GS Entertainment Marketing Group set out months before the release of each film with a plan to make devoted

fans out of anyone who would accept a free ticket to a screening.

And when those first audiences liked what they saw, it turned out that their enthusiasm was as good as gold.

"The bottom line is you listen to your friends and your family and pay attention to that," said Steven Zeller, president of GS Entertainment. "The people close to you, you trust their opinion, which is why I think word-of-mouth is so crucial. It's the No. 1 marketing tool whether you are buying a car, a new book and picking a movie."

With "Greek Wedding," the first group the movie was screened for was the Greek community which immediately embraced the romantic comedy, a full two months before its April opening. Other targeted groups were the Jewish and Hispanic communities, whose close families might identify with the one portrayed in the film, as well as new brides and brides-to-be.

GS Entertainment began screenings for "The Full Monty" began 3½ months before the film's release, including showings in theaters in Los Angeles and New York every Monday which played an integral part in building buzz.

"It was such a good movie, but we knew advertising alone wouldn't sell it because the

concept of a bunch of average-looking English guys taking their clothes off wouldn't translate in advertising," Zeller said. "The way to sell 'The Full Monty' was word-of-mouth."

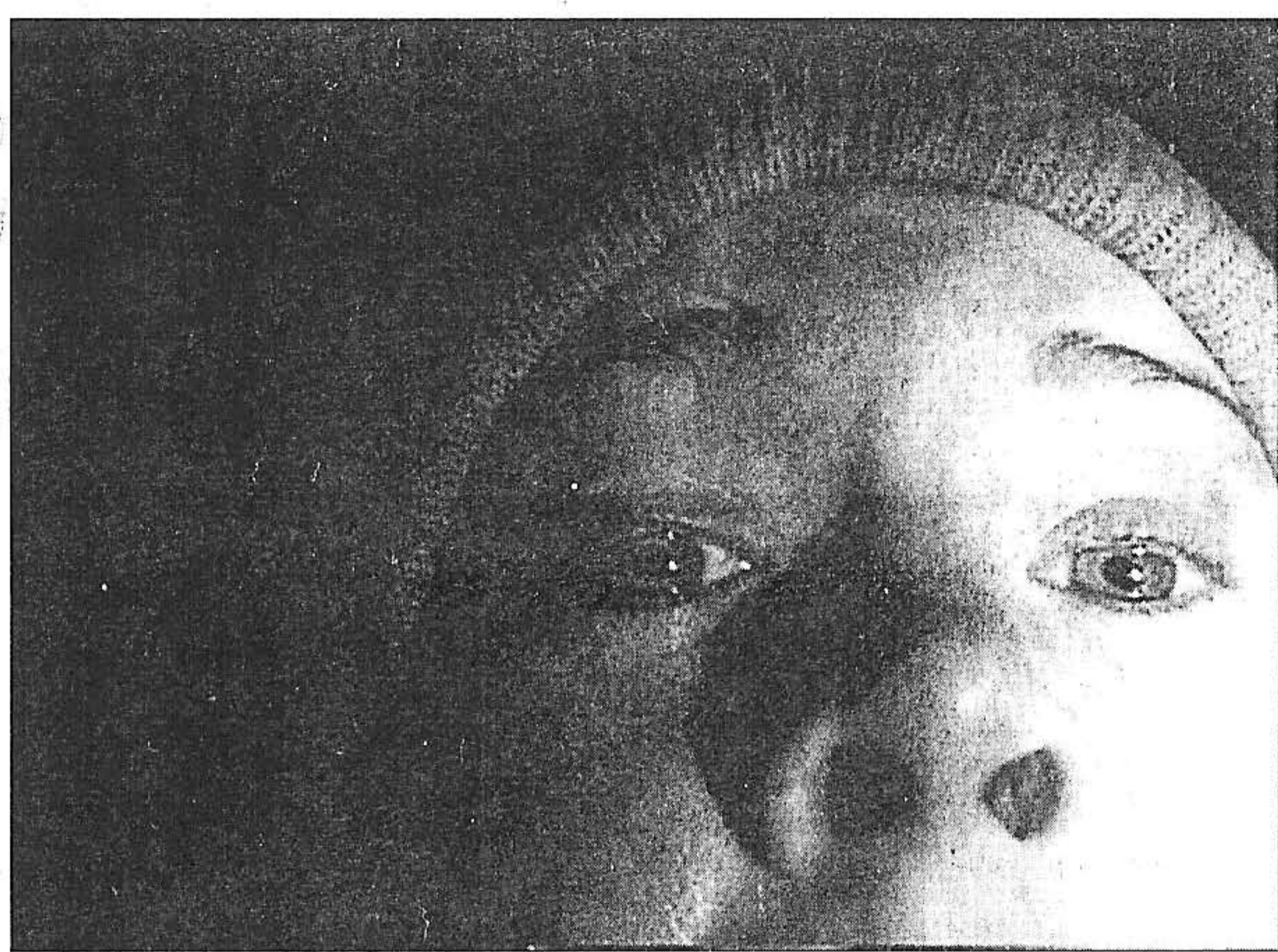
Targeting the British community, the art house crowd, college students and even strippers, the company booked theaters and played the movie week after week.

"In weeks before the movie opened, we noticed that people were really starting to come to the screenings, and advertising hadn't started," Zeller said. "The word-of-mouth was working."

Artisan's Jones said the word-of-mouth campaign can sometimes involve a three-tiered process with the first wave being small, influential groups of people like celebrities and others from the entertainment industry as well as owners of trendy restaurants and hot-spots.

"We've had success in generating key buzz among trendsetters, really targeting groups of 30 to 50 people very early in the campaigns," Jones said. "They embrace it and tend to talk about the film experience they had to anyone who would listen."

The next step involves screenings to groups of about 150 people or more and expand to include managers of retail stores, hairdressers,



Word-of-mouth with the college crowd helped make 1999's "The Blair Witch Project" a surprise hit.

beauticians, receptionists and others who interact with a large number of people throughout their workday.

"The way that it is designed to work is that the second tier will have already heard buzz from the first tier," Jones said.

The third tier involves much broader-based promotions such as those held for 1999's "Blair Witch" which targeted college students and film societies. The result was the second-highest grossing independent film of all time (\$140.5 million), bested only by the nearly \$200 million grossed so far by "Greek Wedding."

Targeted screenings for "Blair Witch" began a full five

months before the film's release with the traditional sci-fi, horror movie crowd and college students.

"It was very important to us that we were able to be embraced early by the college and alternative market," Jones said. "We also did aggressive press screenings and developed early champions."

DreamWorks' suspense-thriller "The Ring" has held its audience all month and will zoom past the \$100 million box office mark this weekend. While the studio was hoping for a hit, it benefited immeasurably from unexpectedly strong word-of-mouth even without extensive pre-screenings.

"It was a brush fire of word-of-mouth, especially among teenagers," said DreamWorks spokeswoman Susan Bennett. "There's a lot of repeat business on it."

While word-of-mouth has always been a part of a movie's success, these days there are many more venues, such as the Internet, to ignite the buzz. But the wide-ranging reach of the Internet can be a double-edged sword, either sending a film into the stratosphere or cutting it off at the knees with negative feedback before its premiere.

"The Internet could be for you or against you," said Jones. "It's truly got to be a crowd-pleaser because it really could go another way."