

PROFILE

# Zellers eye big time after string of indie-film PR hits

After scoring publicity hits with numerous indie films, most notably 'My Big Fat Greek Wedding,' brothers Steve and Todd Zeller have reason to believe that major clients are in their near future. By Anita Chabria

Forget Liza and David, or Julia and Daniel. The nuptials to remember in 2002 were *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, which raked in more than \$215 million dollars at the box office and became the media-darling movie of the year.

Still in theaters more than eight months after its release, and considered a dark-horse Oscar contender, the film's success isn't just about the little-script-that-could, or even the newly discovered talent of writer and lead actor Nia Vardalos. It's a success built by good buzz, carefully crafted by the film's publicity team, Steve and Todd Zeller, brothers who own GS Entertainment Marketing Group in Los Angeles.

"We decided early that it was a word-of-mouth film," says Todd of *Greek Wedding*, which was made for only \$5 million. "We're finding it played for many different ages and ethnicities."

Armed with that knowledge, but little budget, the Zellers began a grass-roots campaign in the Greek community months before the film's release, screening the picture for opinion leaders. They also searched out unusual promotional partners such as Bed Bath & Beyond (which has a wedding registry), and persuaded the company to sponsor its first ever movie promotion.

"Steven put together the national and LA publicity campaigns, and I handled the LA and national promotions for the movie," says Todd. "We brought together all these different groups to support the film. You don't always have to go to the mainstream audiences. You have to finely tune. We try to go to as many different areas as possible."



Todd (l) and Steve Zeller... publicist brothers feel appreciation of relationships – including their own – is something they can bring corporate America

While *Greek Wedding* might be GS Marketing's most notable success, the company has helped many indie films find their audience. The duo has worked on *The Full Monty*, *Waking Ned Devine*, *Swimming With Sharks*, *Boys Don't Cry*, *The Eyes of Tammy Faye*, and the United Artists' upcoming *Nicholas Nickelby* during the company's 13 years in business. Each year after the studios pick up low-budget productions at festivals like Sundance, the Zellers' calendar is filled by distributors hoping to turn their acquisitions into the next *Blair Witch Project* or *Greek Wedding*.

The oldest of five kids, Steve was the first in the family to take up publicity as a career. As entertainment editor of the college paper in his hometown of Miami Beach, he first encountered Hollywood's publicity machine when dealing with the studios for new releases. After graduation, he found a job with an ad and PR agency that specialized in cruise

lines, but the paycheck was very small.

"They said, 'If you want more money, bring in accounts,'" he recalls. "And I thought of all my friends at the studios."

After cold-calling publicity departments hoping to score a client, Steve found that Columbia was interested in hiring him – but not his firm – as a field rep. Steve jumped at the offer, but also kept his old job, sneaking out to pay phones to make pitch calls whenever a new Columbia film came to town.

Columbia eventually eliminated the position, but offered him a job as a unit publicist on *Spring Break*, an '80s paean to the teenage fantasy of unsupervised beach vacations. (Tagline: Like it's really, totally, the most fun a couple of bodies can have. You know?)

"I asked for \$400 a week, and the woman on the phone started laughing," says Steve of his initial job interview. "So I went up to \$750 per week, not realizing I could have gotten much more."

Steve Zeller
1981-1987
Publicist roles at Columbia Pictures, Universal Studios, and New World Pictures
1987-1988
De Laurentiis Entertainment Group, director of publicity
1988-1989
The Gordon Weaver Company, head of publicity
1990-present
GS Entertainment Marketing Group, president (since 1994)

Todd Zeller
1987-1989
Cannon Films, publicity department coordinator, promoted to manager of promotions and field operations
1989-1991
Susan Smith & Associates, agent trainee program
1991
Freelance writer and producer in Europe
1992-present
GS Entertainment Marketing Group, VP of marketing (since 1996)

With a natural knack for publicity, if not contract negotiations, Steve won unit jobs with other studios, and eventually decided to move to LA after Universal hinted it would give him a Hollywood-based position if he made his way to the West Coast. He did, and after working freelance on features like *ET*, he landed a staff position.

After a few years working with various studios and production companies, Steve founded GS Entertainment Marketing Group to fill what he saw as a void in the publicity business.

"The indie world started taking shape at that point," he explains. "But we realized that there were just a few people in any individual distributor, and there was a niche that needed filling."

Todd joined the company four years later, after Steve's original partner left. Todd had worked in marketing and as a trainee at a talent agency, but decided he didn't like that career track, and took

time off to travel around Europe.

"After a year went by, he came back and needed a job," says Steve. "We happened to be really busy, so I said, 'Why don't you come work for us?'"

The relationship worked so well that the brothers decided to turn the temporary job into a full-fledged partnership.

"There is great trust, respect, and love that you might not have in a conventional business partner," says Steve. "We play off of each other very well," adds Todd. "We can be opinionated, passionate, and not take offense."

Now that the Zellers have cemented their place in the world of indie promotion, they hope to expand the business to include big, fat business clients, and turn their film-promotion résumé into a calling card for mainstream clients.

"Corporate America, I think there is a lot of potential there," says Steve. "People are not working the relationship as much as it can be worked."