

Grassroots Marketing, Old-Sod Style

Generating word of mouth for indie films is an art form in itself.

BY PETER BREEN

Big-budget movies made by Hollywood studios command equally big marketing programs. But small, independent films (even those produced by studio subsidiaries) still rely heavily on the oldest form of marketing: word of mouth. And gaining the person-by-person buzz that can make or break an independent film requires two other clichéd body parts: greased elbows and flat feet.

Case in point: Fox Searchlight's *Waking Ned Devine*, an Irish-made film that emigrated to the U.S. last December. The studio believed the movie, a lighthearted comedy in the vein of *Local Hero* or *The Full Monty*, had mainstream-audience potential. But there wasn't going to be any major media campaign to alert the masses; though part of the Twentieth Century Fox empire, Fox Searchlight operates as an "independent" studio, and doesn't have the marketing resources enjoyed by its sister studios.

Los Angeles-based GS Entertainment Marketing Group understands those limitations, having worked on Searchlight campaigns for several years. The eight-employee agency's mandate is simple: Do whatever it takes to get people talking about the movie. That sometimes means using the same tactics utilized by the Medina Ladies Auxiliary for its annual White Elephant Sale; the work's not always glamorous, but it's often effective.

"Studios have, like, 45,000 people for marketing, but the independents have very limited staffs," hyperbolizes GS's vp-marketing Todd Zeller. "It's all a matter of getting whatever we can for free."

The goal is to stage as many advance screenings as possible to get people praising the film before its release. GS always starts by preparing a national promotion, "because that takes a lot more time to put together," says president Steven Zeller, Todd's brother.

Partners for small films don't always come

easy, and GS encountered scores of rejections. "With this type of movie, it's hard to get national partners," says Fox Searchlight vp-marketing Marc Weinstock. "But we were able to put together a really good program."

Since *Waking's* plot centered on a lottery, GS ran a scratch-and-win sweepstakes with prizes that came right out of the script. Fox provided money for cash prizes; the Irish Tourist Board and Virgin Atlantic teamed for a free trip to Ireland; and Triumph Motorcycle supplied a \$10,000 bike.

Circuit City signed on to display counter-cards and distribute game cards via 533 stores, while Bravo Cable joined as national media partner and ran spots on its two networks.

With the national program in place, GS began plotting local efforts concentrated in Los Angeles and New York City. Lacking a big media budget, "we barter whenever we can," offering screenings, game cards, tickets, or whatever it takes to get free advertising, says Steve. *Premiere* magazine and The Sundance Channel both provided freebies in exchange for screenings. Local newspapers and TV and radio stations did likewise.

"We knew we couldn't get enough screenings for this movie," says Weinstock. "The more we had, the better the (advanced) word would be."

With screenings scheduled, GS sent out its "street teams" of part-timers, who go door-to-door putting mini-posters in store windows. "A lot of the owners know us by now," and are happy to cooperate in exchange for a bit of swag — game cards, screening tickets, or whatever is available, says Steve. Primary targets for advertising and ticket giveaways

Ned's campaign was modest in budget, extravagant in execution.

were Irish bars and restaurants, acting schools and theater groups, and beauty parlors. "We felt the movie was going to be very attractive to women," Todd says of the latter.

Screening attendees watched Irish dancers and fiddlers perform, and received tea packages courtesy of Twinings. In some cases, local restaurants donated food in exchange for tickets or media placement. "We wanted to make the whole evening memorable," says Todd.

The first few screenings did not play to packed houses. "But by the end, we were turning people away," says Todd. *Waking Ned Devine* grossed \$26 million in the U.S. For a low-budget foreign film, "that's pretty good," understates Weinstock.

Word of mouth strikes again. e