

BIG SCREENS, BIG IDEAS

The top initiatives that are bringing audiences back to movie theaters in droves *by Shlomo Schwartzberg*

With increasing competition for audiences' attention and dollars, North American film circuits have had to be proactive in attracting patrons. Their innovative solutions include concentrating on the specialty movie market, emphasizing the uniqueness of the filmgoing experience, and offering entertainment options unavailable elsewhere.

AMC Entertainment is bullish on its AMC Select program, which since May has reserved screen space for art-house fare in about a quarter of its 323 large-market North American theaters. "While AMC has programmed specialty films in the past, the creation of AMC Select marks the first time we have committed to providing specialty film programming on at least 72 screens in 38 markets 365 days a year," says AMC spokesperson Zach Baze.

National Amusements, with its Kidtoon Films program, is doing the same with family films. "By joining forces with Kidtoon Films, a new kind of movie distributor, we are able to guarantee G-rated content in our theaters every weekend, 12 months a year, for our young patrons," says National Amusement's Rebecca Stein, director of children's marketing and entertainment.

Century Theatres is promoting art films and foreign-language fare with its new CinéArts division. "Whether showcased within an existing multiplex playing CinéArts-endorsed product or exhibited in a dedicated CinéArts theater, the specialty film slate has produced a stronger affinity between Century and many of its existing customers," says Tony Maniscalco, director of advertising and promotions for Century.

Regal Cinemas got the jump on this trend, having initiated its Cinema Arts program in 1999. Currently, Regal shows specialty films at 70 branded Cinema Arts screens in 20 states. "Regal has committed a senior-level film buyer and marketing manager to work on the initiative full time," according to Dick Westerling, senior VP of marketing and advertising. "This

concentration of efforts has led to some terrific relationships with independent studios. Our company recognizes the need to involve our Cinema Art theatre managers in grass-roots marketing within the local community to help bring attention to some of these lesser-known films."



SELECT BRAND: AMC turns square-peg indies into event programming.

Concentrating on specialty movies is paying off for the circuits, they say. In AMC Select's second weekend of operation (May 12-14), AMC "dominated market share and was the number one circuit for six specialty pictures," says Zach Baze (the films were "Akeelah and the Bee," "Goal! The Dream Begins," "Art School Confidential," "Thank You for Smoking," "Friends With Money" and "Keeping Up With the Steins"). "AMC Select [immediately] proved it is an excellent vehicle for exhibiting specialty pictures. By broadening the breadth and depth of films available under a single roof, AMC

is realizing the promise of the megaplex."

National Amusements began testing its Kidtoon program in a few select theaters at the beginning of the year, and now offers it in 17 of its theaters. "We look forward to a strong lineup of product in the next few months, with films that include 'Arthur's Missing Pal,' the Strawberry Shortcake 'Sweet Dreams' movie, and 'My Little Pony: The Runaway Rainbow,' the third of the 'My Little Pony' films," says Rebecca Stein. These otherwise direct-to-DVD titles enjoy increased exposure via the Kidtoon project while offering patrons more choices than would normally be available. Targeting G-rated fare, so popular with the family market but often in short supply theatrically, seems to have particularly lucrative potential.

Cineplex Entertainment, Canada's dominant chain, is going a step further, pushing movies in general as a highly desirable entertainment choice, preferable to staying at home and watching the tube. In what Pat Marshall, Cineplex's VP of communications and investor relations, calls "a first for the industry and the largest single marketing campaign Cineplex has ever put together," the company is launching a Going to the Movies campaign, which will cover all media at a cost of C\$800,000 (US\$723,360) and sell filmgoing as a desirable way to spend one's entertainment dollar. "The studios [traditionally say] 'Go see my film,'" says Marshall. "Cineplex Entertainment says, 'Go see the movie.'" And the timing, adds Marshall, after the end of the TV season and at the beginning of the summer movie release season, couldn't be better. Marshall, like her colleagues, emphasizes the point that, despite DVDs and downloads, the cinema is still the optimum place to view films. "Movies must be seen on giant screens, 50-foot versus 50 inches. 'Go Big' is the concept [behind Cineplex's campaign]."

The movies are only one selling point for the chains which, increasingly, are venturing into other realms of entertainment and even new modes of social interaction to attract new people to their cinemas. "We're using screens for a variety of different means, maximizing opportunities," says Cineplex's Marshall. These include hosting "corporate entities and annual general meetings with a lot more frequency." In Western Canada, Cineplex is also

broadcasting Pay-Per-View programs of NHL hockey games featuring the Vancouver Canucks, Calgary Flames and the Stanley Cup-contending Edmonton Oilers. National Amusements, the first circuit to feature live, high-definition sports broadcasts, continues to do the same for baseball, with sold-out screenings of



BIG IMPRESSION: Cineplex sizes up the competition.

Boston Red Sox games. They offer "images so vivid you can actually see the stitches on the baseball and have high visibility on umpire's calls," says William J. Towey, National Amusements' senior VP of operations.