

Pointers for selling films at Cannes

In difficult times, pictures must stand out

BY PAMELA MCCLINTOCK

FEST ISN'T ALWAYS BEST

A slot in the festival lineup, or in one of the sidebars, doesn't guarantee a North American distribution deal. Sure, it's one of the quickest ways to generate buzz, but buyers still need to be sold on why the film will work at the domestic box office.

Last year, a number of high-profile films unspooling at the fest left the Croisette without deals in place, including Steven Soderbergh's "Che" and Charlie Kaufman's "Synecdoche, New York."

Well-seasoned sales agents — some of whom have been burned by showing a film in the white hot spotlight of the Palais — recommend sitting out Cannes and waiting for the Venice or Toronto fests.

"We try to avoid bringing stuff to Cannes that doesn't have U.S. distribution in place," one seller says. "It's not worth risking your life on one night in France."

DRUM UP ATTENTION

Unspooling a finished film at the market isn't a cakewalk either. Ask filmmaker Peter Roger, whose documentary "Oh My God" is making its world premiere in the Cannes Market. (Peace Arch is handling sales.)

"First, get great publicists. Second, have a campaign that stands out. Basically, do anything you can to be recognized," he says.

He'll use a snappy visual campaign to lure buyers (he won't divulge the details). He also says having a simple concept — in this case: How does having faith play a role in people's lives? — helps. And he'll tout the appearances of Hugh Jackman, Ringo Starr and David Copperfield.

KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

The best way to sell a finished film is in the marketing and the research," says Odd Lot Intl.'s Brian O'Shea, who is taking dance movie "B-Girl" to the Marche. He says if he's comparing the movie to, say, "Step Up," he needs to know where that film did well overseas and where it didn't. "That way, distributors are able to quickly dissect the information and come up with a specific plan."

The Film Department's Steve Bickel agrees that sellers have to do their homework. "In order for a distributor to buy your product, you have to know how these films will do in a particular territory," says Bickel, who will be selling foreign rights to thriller "Law Abiding Citizen," starring Gerard Butler and Jamie Foxx. (Pic has domestic distribution via Overture Films.)

CREATE THE RIGHT ENVIRONMENT

At AFM, IM Global's Stuart Ford recruited a huge teenage audience for a screening of "Paranormal Activity." "It was 100 distributors and 300 teenagers from the Valley," he says. "We sold out the whole world in 48 hours. I'm sure if we would have put a bunch of middle-aged men in the room, the reaction wouldn't have been as euphoric."

Ford has quite a movie experience lined up for Cannes Market this year: "Bitch Slap," which he describes as "a pure exploitation pic — chicks, boobs, guns and bad guys, in that order." His strategy includes a May 14 private screening, with a themed party to follow. "Doing things in a crass, fun-filled way is best for this film," he adds. "In these recessionary times, people want escapism."

TO SCREEN OR NOT TO SCREEN, THAT IS THE QUESTION

Some buyers and sellers are starting to wonder if it's better to show an entire film at the market, or entice with clips only.

"I've been noticing that major distributors already have a screener with them when they arrive at Cannes. With screeners, you can get to a whole bunch of people very quickly," says Unified Pictures' Ann Dubinet.

Unified will use Cannes Market to show footage of Werner Herzog's thriller "My Son, My Son, What Have Ye Done," with Chloe Sevigny and Michael Shannon. It'll be the first time buyers get a look.



Law Abiding Citizen