

An E-Mail Push for 'Better Luck'

Film about Asian American teens is one of a growing number of ethnic-focused and niche projects using grass-roots marketing efforts.

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The star of MTV Films' edgy new movie about Asian American teens in suburbia knew he'd hit pay dirt when copies of his own mass e-mail began bombarding his in-box: "Just see this film," actor Parry Shen wrote. "That is your vote."

Shen's Asian American friends and the hundreds of Asian American friends they forwarded his message to are part of a growing grass-roots movement to promote independent movies and niche projects, particularly those about ethnic groups largely overlooked by mainstream productions.

The cast and crew behind "Better Luck Tomorrow" say there is more at stake than box-office success when the movie opens today in limited release. They hope it will lead to future projects for Asian American actors and filmmakers and to roles that go beyond the stereotypes of Asians as brainy nerds and kung fu fighters.

"If we fall short, it's going to be a shame," Shen said. "It's going to be a long, long time before we get a chance like this again."

Community activists for years have used the Internet to promote niche projects, and that strategy is helping boost a trend toward underground marketing tactics to promote films.

That is particularly attractive to independent filmmakers with limited budgets. They can blanket the streets with fliers and cards and send out e-mails during the crucial first weeks, which determine whether films will gain wide distribution or make a speedy dive to the video store.

Grass-roots efforts paid off big for "My Big Fat Greek Wedding" when buzz within the Greek community helped make that film a runaway success.

"Ethnic audiences are really aware that if they want to see films about themselves, they need to vote or weigh in," said Laura Kim, senior vice president of MPRM Public Relations, who specializes in marketing independent films and is handling MTV Films'

limited publicity. "If they're not there for opening weekend, they may not see a second weekend."

To that end, college students armed with giveaways from MTV Films are holding rallies around the country to raise awareness about "Better Luck Tomorrow," and business leaders and community activists are buying out screenings. Several showings, including one in New York and one in the Bay Area, have sold out, and advance ticket sales are said to be strong in Los Angeles.

The African American community is credited with pioneering underground marketing for films in 1998 with so-called First Weekend Clubs. They urged people to pack movie houses for new releases by and about blacks.

Now there are 37,000 people on the Black First Weekend Club e-mail list. Chris Rock targeted that group with an e-mail similar to Shen's, urging people to go see "Head of State," the top-grossing film when it opened March 28. And studios and producers have started floating ideas to club members as a way to test the market.

"It just took on a life of its own," said the group's founder, Sandra Evers-Manly. "We know there's a diverse base out there that's hungry for diverse stories.... The greatest compliment is that we are starting to see some progress."

Encouraged by such successes, Latinos, Asians, gays, Christians and Canadians are among those who have since copied the idea.

The First Weekend Club in Vancouver, Canada, is one of the newest ventures, launched two months ago in an effort to help struggling Canadian filmmakers. One of the first films they promoted, "Flower & Garnet," sold out opening weekend and was bumped to a larger theater, said Anita Adams, a filmmaker and founder of Alibi Unplugged, which helps Canadian writers and their projects.

Some companies are tapping into the concept by offering grass-roots marketing services - for a fee.

Urban Movie Corp. of America, for example, hires "ambassadors" or "street teams" to wear T-shirts and spread the word to their friends, said its president, Carl Washington. He said the company's campaigns cost \$20,000 to \$500,000 and can be more effective than million-dollar advertising through billboards or commercials.

"It's not happenstance," Washington said. "This is a proven way to reach a targeted group in a very effective way."

Using this tactic can be risky, however, especially if the film doesn't deliver.

"You can't fool audiences," said Samuel Goldwyn Jr., chairman and chief executive of

Samuel Goldwyn Films. "The picture speaks. That's what it's about."

The trick is turning a movie into a movement, said filmmaker Sandi DuBowski, whose documentary "Trembling Before G-d" enjoyed a 4 1/2-month run at Film Forum in New York, one of the best-known independent cinemas in the country.

He sent out mass e-mails but also staged town hall meetings after screenings of his movie, which chronicles the lives of gay Hasidic and Orthodox Jews. He also aimed his marketing at three distinct audiences: gays, Jews and art house fans.

"We were creating this whole community around the movie," said DuBowski. "People got very attached to it, and it became something they would champion in a major way. "

Both "Trembling Before G-d" and "Better Luck Tomorrow" take the grass-roots campaigns to a new extreme: The movie Web sites include a call for volunteers to help pass out fliers and spread the word.

"Better Luck Tomorrow" director Justin Lin believes that his movie about teens who kill a classmate will capture the MTV crowd, thanks to slick promotions aired on that network -- the only traditional marketing behind the film. With good buzz and critical acclaim, it also is likely to attract the indie crowd.

Lin expects Asian Americans to see the movie, but he also wants to attract a mainstream crowd with the story about kids who just happen to be Asian Americans.

Considering that his movie opens on 13 screens Friday against "Anger Management," breaking through won't be easy. That movie, starring Jack Nicholson and Adam Sandler, is spending millions on advertising alone, compared with the \$250,000 it cost to make "Better Luck Tomorrow."

Still, Lin is hopeful that his film will prove that Asian Americans have drawing power.

"It would be great if we could carve out our own piece of the pie," Lin said.

"Fairly or unfairly, a lot of things are riding on this film. That's the reality."