

Christian Entertainment: Methods Used in Targeting the Christian and Secular Audiences

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Abstract

This thesis examines Christian entertainment companies, specifically those producing faith-based films. It includes an in-depth analysis of the tactics used by public relations and marketing specialists to discover how Christian versus non-Christian audiences are targeted during the promotional process of the film and what differences in method possibly exist. Based on the analysis, the conclusion is drawn that this industry generally chooses to target Christian organizations and influential leaders. Reasons for the selection of this target are given, and the effectiveness of communication specialists' efforts in reaching their defined target is considered in light of the overall mission of Christian entertainment companies.

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Reclaiming the arts for Christ. What does that look like? What does that even mean? To several visionaries in the film industry, it means creating and promoting faith-based films to rival Hollywood's best. But these are visionaries. Hollywood is legendary; its credible talent has been established and its publicity, generally guaranteed. In spreading the word about their films, Hollywood is exactly who these filmmakers of the faith are up against. Not only are they challenged with creating an entertaining, uplifting and believable story, they also have to find a team complete with production members, actors and businessmen and women who believe in their message of hope found in Christ as well. In fact, they have to believe in this message so strongly that they would be willing to stand behind the film and the filmmakers' mission amidst an often generous number of critics (J. Erwin, personal communication, January 31, 2012.).

An important group in this movie-making team is the marketing and public relations specialists whose job it is to make sure the movie reaches its intended audience and to persuade that audience to flock to the theater in droves. This thesis examines how communications specialists market faith-based films to Christian and non-Christian audiences in the United States. It will examine the target audience for these films, the tactics used to reach the target audience and the reasons behind the chosen audience segmentation. It will also consider the effects of these marketing efforts and the results they have on the public. Observations will be based largely on the communications efforts of Provident Films and Sherwood Pictures.

Key Terms Defined

Before beginning a discussion of the target market for Christian films, a number of terms should be defined. For the purposes of this thesis, 'Christian' will be defined as a person or persons who profess an evangelical faith in Jesus Christ and believe in the necessity of salvation that comes solely from God the Son. Conversely, 'non-Christian' refers to anyone who does not profess this belief. 'Secular' and 'mainstream' are both terms that will also be used to refer to this non-Christian group in relation to their culture.

Any references to culture will be based on the definition given by *Merriam Webster's Learner's Dictionary* as "the beliefs, customs, arts, etc., of a particular society, group, place, or time." 'Culture' will largely be used to connote the culture of the United States of America.

Though 'faith-based films' (also referred to as Christian films) carries a general connotation of a movie safe for the family and well received among Christians, its definition in practice falls along a sliding scale. Generally, 'faith-based' means a family-friendly film whose purpose is to provide an uplifting message based on the values and morals held by evangelical Christians. Generation Entertainment's founder, Matt Crouch, strives not to "necessarily make films about faith, but rather films that don't violate one's faith" (Crouch, n.d., para. 3). According to Provident Films, faith-based films convey the idea of "heartfelt family fare" ("About Provident Films," n.d., para. 4), while for Sherwood Pictures they mean specifically "family-friendly movies that build on the Judeo Christian ethic and communicate the gospel without compromise" (Catt, n.d., para. 7). Similarly, Cloud Ten Pictures' definition extends from its mission to spread the "gospel message and [produce] Christian inspirational films" ("About Cloud Ten

Pictures,” n.d., para. 5). Each of these film-making companies carries a slightly different variation of the same idea: the goal is to produce movies everyone can watch, movies with an uplifting message, movies that seek to positively build the culture rather than feed into its promotion of destructive behaviors.

Throughout this thesis, the terms ‘marketing’ and ‘public relations’ will be used interchangeably. They are not synonyms. Marketing is the promotion of a company and its products and services. Public relations is the management of an organization’s brand in relation to its various stakeholders such as consumers, investors and suppliers. The main difference is marketing’s purpose to sell a product versus public relations’ goal to build relationships and to establish a good reputation (Wilcox & Cameron, 2012). However, the terms will together indicate the combined efforts of communications specialists to promote a particular film to the targeted audience.

The Process of Communication

Communication is the transfer of a message from a sender, or source, to a receiver (Foulger, 2004). The key to effective communication is the transfer of the sender’s intended message to its intended receiver. While sending and receiving the message, various internal and external factors have the potential to cause noise during the communication process limiting the effectiveness of the message’s intended meaning. The goal of marketing and public relations specialists is to clearly send their message to the intended receivers in a way that all of these noise-inducing factors do not inhibit the reception of their message.

In the world of mass communications, the intended receiver is labeled as the target audience. It is a collective group of people with similar a demographic,

psychographic and/or geographic attributes. Marketers group these individuals together because they anticipate like behavior from the group as a whole in response to the message. In fact, they communicate with a desired reaction in mind. The communicators' message does not change based on the target audience, but the methods they use to send the message do. The methods are chosen to specifically illicit a desired response. This is called feedback in an interactive model of the communication process (Foulger, 2004), and its evaluation determines the success of the methods used to send the message.

As communicators in a fast-paced world where the public has a penchant for anything visual and a shorter average attention span than in previous generations, marketing and public relations teams must use every means available to effectively capture attention and reach their target audiences. The goal is for the target to consume the intended message and to respond in the predicted manner. These means include television commercials, radio spots, print advertisements, out-of-home advertisements, social media, special events and buzz marketing among many other available resources. The key to successful marketing is knowing who the audience is and what they like (S. Schwartz, personal communication, September 9, 2011). This enables public relations specialists to determine what communication methods or tactics will be most effective in sending their message and yielding the intended response. The first step is to identify that target audience.

In Christian entertainment, as in any form of communication, selecting a target audience is critical to insuring the success of the reception of the message. For faith-based organizations, their message is not always well received by the mainstream culture; and as Cloud Ten Pictures' founder and CEO Paul Lalonde acknowledges, there seems to

be a “general consensus that Christian movies are low quality” (“Courageous,” n.d., para. 5). In order to combat that common idea, it is the job of the film directors and producers to produce quality films, but it is the job of marketing and public relations professionals to make sure movie-going audiences aware these faith-based films are new and worth seeing.

Recently, Christian entertainment organizations in a relatively new movement to “reclaim the arts for Christ” (J. Erwin, personal communication, January 31, 2012) and positively impact today’s culture, have specified their target audience and begun to tap into a wide variety of resources available for promoting their message. The result has been the success of movies like *Fireproof* (2008), *Courageous* (2011) and *Soul Surfer* (2011), all recent box office hits that had virtually everyone on the contemporary Christian scene talking and even a few in the mainstream commenting on the success of these low-budget, feature films. Julie Bloom of *The New York Times* wrote of *Fireproof*’s No. 4 spot at the box office, just “a few spots behind the No. 1 big-budget action thriller ‘Eagle Eye’” (Bloom, 2008, para. 2). She also quoted her colleague, Neil Genzlinger, who appreciated the movie’s “characters with a strong, conservative Christian faith who don’t sound crazy” (as cited in Bloom, 2008, para. 5). It is not only technological developments that allow business organizations to communicate within seconds to consumers all over world that has improved the communication of these films. Communications professionals are strategically selecting their target and deftly applying tactics, including the late advances in social media, to reach these groups. Once the target audience has been chosen, communication professionals decide which tactics will be

most successful in sending the message of the newest must-see, faith-based films and reaching that audience.

Conversely, by examining the tactics several communications professionals use, the target audience these organizations have chosen can be deduced. Through examination of best practices of the tactics employed by faith-based entertainment companies Provident Films, Sherwood Pictures and specialists, Lovell-Fairchild Communications, the target market and their keys to success can be determined.

The Companies

Provident Films is a part of Provident Music Group, based in Nashville, Tennessee. It is a division of Sony Music Entertainment devoted to producing films that “make a difference” and can be “something the entire family enjoys together” (“About Provident Films,” n.d., para. 1). This branch of Sony is responsible for producing, marketing and distributing popular films such as *Courageous*, *Fireproof*, *Facing the Giants* and *Grace Card*, among many others. These four films “crack[ed] the Top 10 on a per-theater average” (Foust, 2012, para. 3).

Sherwood Pictures was founded out of Sherwood Baptist Church’s commitment to excellence and the desire to address the decrease of the church as one of the top cultural influences (Catt, n.d.). It is the birthplace of the Kendrick brothers’ films *Flywheel*, *Facing the Giants*, *Fireproof* and *Courageous*. As top independent films, these movies have stirred audiences worldwide and brought much attention to and growth in the faith-based film-making industry.

Lovell-Fairchild Communications, founded by communications specialists Nancy Lovell and Julie Fairchild, works with various clients including Provident Films and

Sherwood Pictures to promote their films and other projects. Their work covers public relations, event planning, branding and grassroots marketing among other services for their clients.

Tactics

Advertisements

As a marketing and public relations company, Lovell-Fairchild Communications does not turn its focus to creating advertisements as do many other companies. Instead they focus on consumer interaction with the goal of persuading their target to provide the company with feedback and to begin conversations amongst themselves. For the advertisements they do utilize, they create and sell posters, handbills and brochures for those who want to hang them locally in their hometown. The movie trailers function as online advertisements as well. Aside from these few outlets for advertisements, faith-based film companies rely more heavily on tactics that require interaction from the target audience.

Social Media

In today's technologically advanced society, social media plays an integral part in disseminating information to a vast audience in record time. It is the fastest way to send a message and the easiest way to get people talking and sharing and interacting with a company and its products. Each of the above mentioned companies has a Facebook page where fans can get more information about the organization and current projects and leave comments about the latest news.

Interestingly, all three of their Facebook pages had relatively few 'likes' and much fewer people talking about the page. At this writing, Lovell-Fairchild had the

fewest people following the page with just 160 fans and only one person talking about the page (Lovell-Fairchild Communications, 2012). However, each of these pages refers viewers to specific movie pages, which have a substantially larger number of fans and many more people interacting with the page. In the film industry, these companies are more interested in securing people who will go see the movie on opening weekend than in who knows about the production company behind the scenes. As a result, though the page links visitors back to the company's website, Facebook becomes an avenue for the company to discuss the upcoming movie with expectant fans. Once the movie premieres, it is often left to fans to continue the conversation as production companies turn their sights to the next film. Fans do continue to engage in that conversation. The page is always available for comment whether it is opening weekend or someone is watching the film for the sixth time a year later.

YouTube.com has played a key factor in promotions for Provident Films and Sherwood Pictures. Both organizations have used the website to post trailers for upcoming films. YouTube is designed to allow for viewers to comment and interact with each other as well as provide the companies with valuable feedback. Before films are released the production companies can get a sense of how many people are interested in the film and planning to watch it during the all-important release weekend. Lovell-Fairchild Communications does not have a direct link to YouTube on their website; however, YouTube is still a vital channel of communication for many of their clients' sites.

Twitter is not currently the communication of choice for these companies. As with Facebook, Provident Films' website includes a button on each page where fans can

tweet a link to that specific page. They can add their own comment or ask friends to visit Provident's website, but it does not take the viewer to the movie's or the company's actual Twitter page. Lovell-Fairchild includes a link to their Twitter page. However, the page is filled with company tweets and re-tweets mentioning their clients without interaction from their target audience (Lovell-Fairchild, 2012). Sherwood Pictures has created a Twitter profile, but they have only posted one tweet since its creation (Sherwood Pictures, 2009).

Sherwood Pictures' website incorporates a log-in option as it draws from its church member base and links to the church's bookstore website for purchases. Member registration and log-in creates a deeper connection with website viewers and increases the website's stickiness – its ability to capture internet users on that specific site for a longer period of time ("The Source," 2006). Ideally members will feel a greater attachment to organizations of which they are members and will increase interactions with other members. Similarly, Provident Films offers a registration page, but it is used solely for updates. Even so, this portion of the website does give Provident an opportunity to build its database and consistently stay in touch with fans who have asked for more information. Especially now, when advertisements can be found everywhere screaming for the attention of consumers, it is important to seize the opportunity when those consumers express an interest in receiving more information over another company's advertising efforts.

In terms of the numerous blogs and blog-like media available, none of the three companies have really tapped into these social resources yet. Provident Films does provide visitors with the option to publish links on diverse platforms such as blogger,

Gmail, Reddit, Tumblr and LinkedIn to name a few. Lovell-Fairchild has occasionally used instagr.am to document pictures from events and includes links on their Facebook page to articles and videos of people who were inspired or whose lives were changed by the message in the faith-based films they promote. However, the potential of these resources has not yet been fully explored.

One of the newest films to the Christian movie scene is *October Baby*. This movie, released in March 2012, was already the recipient of rave reviews before its theater release from prominent blogs and reviews such as one by Dr. Gina Loudon, wife of Missouri's State Senator, John Loudon (Loudon, 2011). The result of the reviews is those who read Dr. Loudon's article begin conversing amongst themselves and spreading the word about the film.

This is a just a glimpse of the possibilities available through these resources. The more people have an opportunity to interact with a film, the more likely they will be to remember it and to choose to view it in theaters and form their own opinions so they can join in the conversation. This online interaction also works to increase the search optimization results for the movie. Though these organizations do not capitalize on all of the available social media outlets, they are well aware of the effects of social media and they try to maintain presence in the most popular forms. The promotion of their products on fans' and viewers' pages is key as they aim for their intended message to be passed along to families and friends who will provide credible recommendations.

Considering status updates and comments from followers, it is easy to see what audience these organizations are reaching and seem to be specifically targeting. For Sherwood Pictures, the latest Facebook statuses discussed the 2011 release of

Courageous, their newest feature film. The posts attracted a Christian base of fans as they directed to the *Courageous* blog where people could join them in a 40-day challenge praying for the impact of the movie. This is not exactly a status that would appeal to the non-Christian market that often does not make it a habit to pray. Interestingly, the blog itself only contained daily prayer requests leading up to the release of the movie, which kept people engaged in its release. However, it only included the original posts; comments were turned off, limiting interaction among those who were accepting the challenge along with Sherwood Pictures. The blog was no longer used after the film's release date.

Based on their Facebook statuses, Lovell-Fairchild does not limit themselves to a Christian audience, but rather chooses to simply spread information about their clients' products. Not all of their clients are Christian filmmakers, so they are careful not to isolate non-Christians who visit the page. That being said, their page is not creating many conversations amongst its 160 fans at all. Rather, most of the fans go to the separate client and product pages; those fans that do interact with the designated movie pages are derived from the Christian group. For example, on *October Baby* Movie's page, fans leave comments like "What a way to show the power of God's forgiveness on the big screen!" (Jesse, February 4, 2012) and comment about how far away the closest theater is that will be playing the movie on its opening weekend.

Provident Films does not post statuses specific for either Christians or non-Christians, but many of the comments are from supporters of their Christian-themed films. In fact, Provident is very careful to promote only their films and the direct quotes of prominent leaders whose opinions will be respected among audiences. Otherwise, they

let everyone else on their page bring in the “faith” part of the discussion. Through the implementation of social media tactics, the varied strategies of these close-knit organizations begin to hint at their target audience.

Organization Collaborations

It is a small world after all. In the world of Christian entertainment, specifically of faith-based film producers, that world is tiny. One of the tactics Christian entertainment organizations have used to promote recent films is their collaboration with various organizations. Some companies, Affirm Films for instance, are entities associated with larger, more public organizations. Affirms Films is a Sony Pictures Entertainment company, which provides additional resources as well as avenues to increase brand awareness. Other collaborations take place through partnerships for specific projects. For the release of *Courageous*, Sherwood Pictures partnered with Provident Films and Affirm Films to produce and distribute the movie. In doing so, *Courageous* was featured by three separate, though closely related, powerhouse production companies and their separate databases of contacts and followers. Theoretically, this strategic collaboration triples the number of people reached in the target audience. They also outsourced some of their marketing efforts to Lovell-Fairchild Communications. This guaranteed the concentrated promotion of the film by four organizations to fans who eagerly awaited the release of the next film following the earlier successes of *Fireproof* and *Facing the Giants*. Other Christian organizations, like Gospel Music Channel (n.d.), promoted and supported the organizations, advertising the film and DVD releases and offering praise for its successful production on their websites. These organizations all work in tandem to spread the word to the public.

Though this collaboration ensures that movie promotions cover a wider population than the organizations presumably would on their own, it can have some divisive effects. As most of the collaborating organizations are Christian-based or Christian affiliated, they are largely known by like-minded organizations and their followers. They are not, however, as well known outside of these circles. In some ways, this limits the effectiveness of these collaborations as it can become an exclusive circle difficult for those on the outside to understand or to even recognize is in existence. This makes it harder to reach beyond the church-going, Christian target into the non-Christian demographic. Again, this exemplifies faith-based entertainment companies not excluding a mainstream target, but not necessarily catering to one either.

Testimonials and Endorsements

Along with collaborating with other organizations, Provident Films, Sherwood Pictures and Lovell-Fairchild Communications capitalize on celebrity endorsements and testimonials from credible leaders to increase the buzz about upcoming films. In *October Baby*, a new film scheduled for release in March 2012 for which Lovell-Fairchild holds responsibility for its public relations efforts, recognized actors John Schneider and Jasmine Guy were promoted for their roles in the film. In addition, Chris Sligh, American Idol's Season Six Top 10 finalist and contemporary Christian singer, includes his uplifting music in the film's soundtrack and provides the movie's comic relief in his feature film debut ("Chris Sligh," n.d.). Lovell-Fairchild Communications also benefitted from the network of the film's directors, a brother duo with extensive experience directing music videos for contemporary Christian music artists. The Erwin brothers were able to use those connections to garner video testimonials from popular Christian artists

they had previously worked with to endorse the movie and its message (“Welcome to Every Life is Beautiful,” 2012). Those videos were posted on websites associated with the movie. As a result, the reach of the movie’s promotions was extended, albeit to the Christian demographic.

The goal for these Christian film companies is to use movies to promote their message (J. Erwin, personal communication, January 13, 2012.). Because these movies often contain such a strong message, they are able to use well-known advocates for that message to join in supporting the movie as well. For *October Baby*, Gianna Jessen, a pro-life advocate and abortion survivor, spoke out in support of the film and its message about the value of human life. As a result, the film gained in credibility and potential to reach a broader audience base. As Lovell-Fairchild’s co-founder, Nancy Lovell, stated, ‘Christian’ often carries several nuances in its definition (N. Lovell, personal communication, January 31, 2012). Practicing Christians want to know the film is supported by Christian leaders whose beliefs and values they identify with before they pledge their own support. The power of these endorsements and testimonials is a key to winning the acceptance of the Christian audience.

Press Releases and News Stories

Traditional public relations plays a large role in the promotion of faith-based films. Lovell-Fairchild Communications circulates press releases announcing the premiere of their clients’ movies, availability of the DVDs and details for various events. As a result, numerous publications, especially Christian journals and blogs have published information about upcoming and record-breaking films from the Christian entertainment scene. As Lovell puts it, in order for the information included in the press

release to be a valuable story picked up by news sources, the press release must contain information that makes the film newsworthy (N. Lovell, personal communication, January 31, 2012). It has to involve an issue. For *Facing the Giants*, it was the story of a small church producing a major feature film on such a low budget that caught the attention of news sources. For *Fireproof*, it was the incorporation of childhood star, Kirk Cameron who had not been seen professionally in several years and who now emerged as the film's star. The movie also gained attention after earning \$6.5 million in ticket sales after being produced for \$500,000, a fairly small budget compared to the budget of Hollywood films (Bloom, 2008). *October Baby* addresses the highly controversial issue of abortion in today's culture.

These are the issues that make not only Christian news organizations take notice, but also secular organizations. Fox News picked up the story of *Courageous* ("Film 'Courageous' Breaks Hollywood Mold," 2011). They were attracted to a small church's success as they competed for theater-goers against Hollywood, the established industry with access to an exponentially greater sum of production funds (Foust, 2011). In this way, Christian entertainment companies are able to make a splash in the secular environment. Though they are not directly focusing their efforts on sending press releases to the larger, mainstream news organizations, they are able to use these instances as a measure of the film's market penetration.

Events

Events are another one of the key tactics used to spread the word about upcoming faith-based films. Lovell-Fairchild Communications has been responsible for much of the marketing for both Sherwood Pictures and Provident Films. For *Courageous*, Lovell-

Fairchild, Sherwood Pictures and Provident Films worked together to plan events from the very beginning. They began the process with an event formally announcing the concept for their newest film immediately garnering interest on the heels of *Fireproof's* box office success. Fans were already jumping at the chance to see more from Sherwood Pictures' Kendrick brothers.

These events were documented with pictures posted on Lovell-Fairchild's website as well as various social media outlets. Along with pre-release screenings among other events, they also held red carpet events for the film's premiere to build anticipation for the all-important first weekend in the theaters. The first weekend is stressed because as faith-based films face their Hollywood competitors, box office sales from the first weekend determine the length of its theatrical run before the movie leaves the theater and DVD sales begin. Lovell-Fairchild hosts events like these because they give the production companies a reason to keep followers talking about the movie and its associated events with like-minded fans before its release. It should be noted, however, that these events still reach a predominantly Christian crowd.

Collateral Materials

In addition to events, Christian film organizations push for audiences' exposure to collateral material. Lovell remarked that at Lovell-Fairchild Communications they begin the process of seeking influencers a year in advance (N. Lovell, personal communication, January 31, 2012). A large part of the reason they specifically seek influencers is to put the movie supplements in their hands to be distributed to those over whom the influencers hold credibility. Supplements range from posters, brochures and short scenes from the movie to books, Bible studies and discussion guides for families and churches to work

through after watching the film. *Fireproof* was able to market *The Love Dare*, a book which played a central role in the movie's story. Not only were consumers able to engage with the movie long after it left the theaters, but it also gave them an opportunity to take actively study and practice unconditional love based on the movie's key message.

In the same way, Sherwood Pictures released *The Resolution* and *The Resolution for Women* after *Courageous* hit the movie theaters. Again, the books gave viewers a call to action to improve the decisions they make that affect themselves and their families. The purpose of these materials is to challenge viewers with the lessons presented in the films and to provide practical ways for them to apply these lessons in their own lives. Many are structured like Bible studies for a church or small group to go through together, clearly targeting the Christian market.

One of the main movie supplements was access to movie event kits promoted on each movie website. These kits came complete with a Public Authorization Exhibition License to show the movie to a crowd larger than 100 people, as well as the actual DVD plus special features and posters to promote the event ("Courageous Church Movie Event," n.d.). *Courageous'* website also offered the purchase of additional posters plus invitations and bulletin inserts in bulk quantities. These kits are strategically designed for a church or religious group that wants to bring the movie to its congregation and make it easy for them to invite friends.

Public Relations in Action

All of these tactics can be seen in the case study of *October Baby*. It is one of the newest faith-based films from American Family Studios, Provident Films and Samuel Goldwyn Films and is scheduled to enter theaters nationwide on March 23, 2012. To

begin, the movie has its own website, Facebook page and Twitter account as well as supporting posts and tweets from Provident Films and Lovell-Fairchild Communications on Facebook and Twitter. A press release written for the movie has been used on numerous websites, movie rating sites offer feedback from viewers and the trailer can be found on at least the first four sites listed on a Google search of “October baby.”

As part of their collaboration with other organizations, the Erwin brothers partnered with Lovell-Fairchild Communications and Provident Films among other production companies. In addition, they worked in conjunction with organizations like Focus on the Family, Hope for Orphans and Bethany Christian Services to name a few. In strategically partnering with these companies, they did not just raise a controversial issue; they offered resources for a solution to the issue. In the process of creating the film, a fund, “Every Life is Beautiful,” was birthed as a charity project. Funds raised will be used to support organizations like the ones affiliated with the film.

For the first premiere of *October Baby*, the movie was released in selected theaters in Alabama and Mississippi. Lovell-Fairchild subsequently hosted a tour of pre-release movie screenings across the United States before the second, nation-wide premiere in March. They invited prominent “influencers” (N. Lovell, personal communication, January 28, 2012) in the Christian and pro-life communities who could endorse the film; build its credibility and spread the word to their fans, followers and respective groups. Lovell-Fairchild staff took the opportunity of having these leaders captive in one room, and the leaders left feeling not only like a VIP, but also feeling the weight of their influence to reach their communities with the message of the film and ultimately the gospel.

These screenings were complete with swag bags filled with an “Every Life is Beautiful” T-shirt, a poster, a few handbills and a resource DVD including the movie’s trailer plus a few scenes and supplemental videos. The bag also included a survey and an “Every Life is Beautiful” pen. The materials allowed Lovell-Fairchild and the *October Baby* team to place promotional materials in the hands of each of these influencers reminding them of the film they watched and giving them a sample of materials they could order in bulk. Attendants had no excuse but to pass on the information and the movie’s message to those around them. They were jokingly told they could not leave until the survey handed out at the door was completed. This provided the production and public relations teams with immediate feedback as to what was working and what was not, growing their database at the same time. A camera was also set up in the corner, which gave viewers the opportunity to answer questions about the movie similar to those on the survey. The questions helped bolster the audience’s conversations about the movie, something the production team wanted viewers to continue as they left for the theater and went home.

In addition, a question and answer session was held with directors, Jon and Andrew Erwin, and actor, Shari Rigby, after the movie. The audience was able to get a small glimpse of the heart of the directors, creating a deeper connection to the project than simply watching a movie and leaving the theater. It almost became a personal favor to the down-to-earth directors to help support the movie and their vision. They informed the audience on the best way to become a part of *October Baby*’s success reiterating the posters and other collateral material and resources available. This included action squads, a program allowing fans the responsibility to bring *October Baby*’s premiere to their

hometown. These easy and practical ways to get involved left the viewers with a desire to provide their support in any way possible, especially since there were various avenues to do so.

Attendance at the movie screening was an opportune time to take a firsthand look at the demographic of the production companies' chosen target. The crowd was diverse in age and ethnic background, though the majority of the audience fell into the middle-aged adult and older category. Lovell-Fairchild was also careful to invite groups they knew would support the cause. For instance, a group of nuns and others from the Catholic faith were invited to attend and readily accepted the invite. Several pastors were in attendance as well. One writer in an opinion article on LifeNews.com said she tweeted that she was "thinking of driving to Alabama to see @OctoberBabyFilm" (Clinger, 2011) and received a personal invitation to the first *October Baby* premier by Dan Atchinson, one of the film's producers. As a result, she wrote a raving article, which was published online, and joined *October Baby*'s list of supporters. The audience was filled with influencers like this journalist, strategically chosen because of their ability to spread the word.

Actually, that is the strategy behind all of these tactics: to gain the support of influencers whose third party endorsements will increase the reach of the film and spread its message. They are all designed to spread the word, create buzz, get people talking. Jon Erwin said movies are a safe way to start a conversation about a controversial issue (J. Erwin, personal communication, January 31, 2012). In the same way, the tactics Lovell-Fairchild chose are designed to facilitate conversations. They stem from the mission of these organizations to impact the culture. A change in the culture invariably means a change in people's way of living. It is much easier to incorporate a lifestyle change when

other trusted individuals are endorsing and embarking on the same journey. This all begins with a conversation and a resolve to take action, exactly what faith-based films encourage.

A common theme throughout these tactics is the provisions made for groups of people, specifically Christians. Licensing kits are prominently advertised for churches to show their congregations and communities; Christian organizations partner with other faith-based organizations with similar values; each movie touts the endorsements of credible Christian leaders.

Target Market Defined

Based on the tactics implemented by today's acclaimed faith-based entertainment companies, Provident Films, Sherwood Pictures and the communications specialists at Lovell-Fairchild Communications, the general target market for faith-based entertainment companies has emerged as Christian organizations, churches and leaders. Naturally, the more refined demographics of the target (i.e., gender, age, etc.) vary based on the film and its message; but, overall, these companies target Christian organizations and trendsetters to promote their films.

Christian versus Non-Christian

As reflected in the previously mentioned missions of these companies, Christian filmmakers are all desirous of producing family-friendly movies and making an impact on today's mainstream culture. However, as has been established, they target Christians. Christians only make up part of the culture. It would seem that to impact the culture, each group that comprises the culture would need to be targeted and reached. If that is the case, the target audience for these faith-based entertainment companies would need to be

shifted to include non-Christians as well as Christians in order to fulfill their mission. Only targeting Christians seems like preaching to the choir and, furthermore, does not appear to aid in the Great Commission Jesus gives in Matthew 28. Instead of reaching all the nations, filmmakers are staying within the Christian bubble and specifically reaching out to people they know will agree with them.

There are several reasons why the Christian entertainment companies choose to target Christians rather than non-Christians. Lovell offers a key reason why this is the case: producers need to “get butts in the seats” (N. Lovell, personal communication, January 31, 2012). In order for any film to be successful, not only do the producers need viewers to watch it while it is in theaters, they need them to watch it the first weekend it comes to the theater. Because this determines the box office value of the movie and the exposure it receives, the first weekend is crucial. Oftentimes, the message of faith-based films is either controversial, such as in *October Baby*, or overtly Christian and uninteresting to non-believers as in *Courageous*. In light of this information, Lovell realizes they have to capitalize on high interest, and in this industry, the highest levels of interest will be in the Christian market (N. Lovell, personal communication, January 31, 2012). Alex Kendrick; writer, producer and lead actor in *Courageous*; admits their “target audience [for the film] is the faith audience first” but he realizes there may be “a good bit of bleed-over” (King, 2011, para. 5) into a demographic of people who do not adhere to a faith of their own.

If Christian films produced by these companies are already attracting some non-Christians, and mainstream news sources are picking up on the companies’ miraculous production stories, why are they not taking advantage of the publicity and marketing the

film to non-Christians? Simply put, they cannot reach everyone. One of the first tasks in creating a communications campaign is to define the target. Christian entertainment companies define their target market as the group of people they know will respond positively and, in essence, keep them in business. The movies' numbers after the first weekend are one of the evaluative measures taken to judge the success of faith-based films. These numbers validate their work and help determine future endeavors. Based on this target market, it can then be said that these organizations and their communications specialists like Lovell-Fairchild are, indeed, successful in reaching their target market.

However, it would almost seem as if the faith-based productions companies do not care about non-Christians and are content to take a laissez-faire approach in reaching out to them. When their tactics, such as press releases, cross the border and penetrate the mainstream culture, it is only a result of the "bleed-over" (King, 2011, para. 5) Kendrick addresses. This decision to concentrate marketing efforts on the Christian audience contradicts the ideas previously stated about the organizations' desire to not only encourage believers in their walk with God but to also influence the culture ("Courageous Dads;" n.d.). Christians cannot reach the nations or even their neighborhoods, let alone impact the culture with the gospel, if they are content to stay inside comfortable, Christian circles. In light of this fact, the success of the Christian entertainment companies no longer appears to qualify as success in terms of their original mission to impact the culture. This begs the question: should these companies readjust their target market to fit that mission?

Conclusion

Ironically, though this may not be the original intention of faith-based filmmakers, by selecting the Christian organization as their target, these production companies are indeed influencing the culture. They rely heavily on buzz marketing as their ultimate tactic to reach Christians and church attendees across the United States and the world. With their current target market, they provide influential leaders and their followers with tools that aid them in their journey to live more like Christ and to start conversations about their faith with those in their communities.

Based on similar tactics used throughout the industry, this is a strategy most of the successful Christian entertainment companies have chosen to use. Just like the Erwin brothers describe as the goal for *October Baby*, films cause conversations. These conversations can be used by Christians as a gateway to broach topics in which non-Christian friends and family members would not normally engage. It can be done more easily and in a non-threatening way. Essentially, these films equip Christians with a strategy to engage in those tough conversations with loved ones. By reaching out to Christian organizations, those organizations will reach their members with the film's message (K. Fuhr, personal communication, February 3, 2012). In turn, when these movies are produced well, members can attract their own neighborhoods and communities to quality entertainment. Once they are sufficiently entertained, the audience is more readily engaged in the film, and its message becomes more believable and relevant. According to Jon Erwin, "if lots of people go see the movie [and begin conversations] then Hollywood takes notice" (J. Erwin, personal communication, January 31, 2012). It starts a movement and then the culture has to respond.

Is this strategy really working? Does it take too long? Are people taking advantage of using the movies as conversation starters? Results from this strategy will continue to come in slowly. So far several titles have made Christians and non-Christians alike take note. With the progression of each film, these organizations are brought one step closer to their goal: for the church to once again be one of the “top cultural influences” (Catt, n.d., para. 5). What better way to impact the culture and fulfill the Great Commission than by enabling the individuals to whom it has been charged to go to their respective Jerusalem’s and spread the message themselves? In order to change a culture, the attitudes and values of the people who comprise that culture have to change first, slowly but steadily.

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