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“THE BLAIR WITCH PROJECT”

A MOVIE MARKETING CASE STUDY

Introduction

“The Blair Witch Project” was a low budget horror that presented itself as a documentary. The movie was supposedly pieced together from the video shoot of three student film makers who have gone missing in the woods whilst hunting for a mythical witch. (Associated Press 1999) “The town of Burkittsville, once Blair, is haunted by stories about a witch, who for two centuries has lured children to her home and, so the legend goes, made them face the wall while she killed the others” (Corliss 1999)

The film was made in 1998 by Haxan Films - a group of unknown film school graduates from the University of Central Florida. The producers were Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sanchez who cast three other college friends to play the three lead roles. ‘Blair Witch’ was acquired by film distributor Artisan Entertainment for \$ 1.1 million after a midnight screening at the Sundance Film Festival. (Associated Press 1999)

Released nationally on July 16th, 1999, ‘The ‘Blair Witch’ Project’ became a box office smash hit and has achieved instant cult-film status. After a record breaking opening weekend grossing \$1.5 million on just 27 screens, it had grossed over \$135 million after sixty days in release (Box Office Report 1999)

“Where the average studio film today costs at least \$ 25 million to market, ‘Blair Witch’ is an example of how canny positioning, clever publicity – and yes a good movie – can rival any studio juggernaut.” (Carvel 1999)

“The impact of ‘The ‘Blair Witch’ Project’ is utterly unprecedented. Never has a – let’s be honest – weird movie budgeted at a ludicrously low \$35,000 stormed both the box office and the national pop consciousness”. (Corliss 1999) And the marketers at Artisan Entertainment, who built the fervent want-to-see for the film through cunning use of the Internet, have been credited with revolutionising the way films are sold. “‘Blair Witch’ is the must attend social event for plugged-in America” (Corliss 1999)

Movie Marketing – an overview

Marketing movies in Hollywood has always been highly competitive. The motion picture industry now faces more competition for the entertainment dollar than ever before.

The “home entertainment” boom was facilitated by the introduction of video in the late seventies / early eighties. In response, movie theatre chains worldwide embarked upon a massive program of building multiplex cinemas that continues to this day. (Poulter 1998) Today consumers have more choices on more screens, and in exciting entertainment environments and the industry has never looked healthier. (Howard-Williams 1997)

“The marketplace is so crowded nowadays that a good movie with weak marketing will undoubtedly fail. But a bad movie with great marketing? Hell, that's called *Batman & Robin*, and it grossed \$107 million”
(Anonymous, *Fortune* June 8 1998)

“*Star Wars*” released in 1977, began the revolution in special effects. Innovations in new technologies now provide “movie story opportunities that have never been dreamt of before” (Muren 1996). This has led to a current trend to bigger and bigger “high concept” event movies (Wyatt 1994) dominated by special effects like “*Jurassic Park*” and “*Godzilla*”.

Leading industry analyst Paul Kagan says the economics of the movie business have changed fundamentally in the nineties. Ancillary market revenues from non-theatrical revenue streams (video, TV, cable etc) have now grown so large that even the production and marketing budgets from movies that fail at the box office are now in most cases recouped. Kagan states that Hollywood studios have accordingly shifted their production strategy. They are now only producing 4-5 mega movies like “*Titanic*” each year. They cost over \$ 100 million each and the global marketing costs can often exceed the production budget. (Anonymous, “*Canadian Business*” 1998)

Profit margins from maintaining a larger production slate in-house are now not high enough due to rising production and marketing overheads. The major studios find it is more profitable to “pick-up” the other 20-25 “mid-range” movies needed to feed their distribution companies. These are

acquired from independent producers who raise production finance and marketing budgets through private investors.

“The current film environment is characterised by numerous film releases each year, all fighting for available screens. This has led to a trend characterised by substantially increased expenditures to cut through the clutter and marketing costs for new films that are running out of control” (Zufryden 1996)

The recent ‘Godzilla’ marketing campaign “represents the sum total of all the trends and tactics commonly employed in modern-day movie marketing - and takes them to new heights” (Jensen May 4,1998).

It had a teaser campaign that wherever the trailers played “the crowd went nuts, whooping and shouting and cheering”; made extensive use of outdoor advertising; used a huge TV media buy; a massive publicity campaign using holding / withholding tactics to create hype in the media; and a promotional program involving 220 licensing partners worldwide to help generate interest through merchandising tie-ins. “These promotional partnerships are mutually beneficial - the products get to associate themselves with (they hope) a huge hit, and the studios get plenty of free advertising” (Anonymous, Fortune June 8 1998)

“No campaign ever stoked the fire of controversy or elicited the cries of overkill like that around “Tomorrow Never Dies”. It forged global links with Smirnoff, Visa, Ericsson cell phones, L'Oreal, Heineken, Omega watches, Avis. And, for the second Bond film in a row, BMW. Television ads from Visa introduced the movie, and the familiar Bond theme music, which all partners had to license for their campaigns, became the soundtrack for a fourth-quarter TV and radio blitz. The movie's release date was hammered home in every partner ad, per their contract with the studio.” (Stanley 1998)

For all the criticism, ‘Tomorrow Never Dies’ opened day and date with ‘Titanic’ and the campaign with its \$100 million worth of cross-promotional tie-ins drove the movie to achieve a global \$345 million in box office takings. (Stanley 1998)

The primary demographic for movie going in the US is younger audiences. “For the most part, the movie industry has placed its bets for 40 years on the

people most likely to go to the show – teenagers and young adults. Since the 1950's, most frequent movie goers skew younger. When they go to the movies its usually a date or an event. Adults aged 18-24 are significantly more likely than average to go to the movies at least once a month". (Dortch 1996)

“If a movie develops good word-of-mouth among urban teens, it is practically destined for success, But without a strong reputation, teens – especially boys – will wait and watch it on TV” (Fost 1994)

Most Hollywood movies now have dedicated web sites. “Rather than using the Net as a new entertainment medium, a new place to pull in eyeballs with proprietary content, the Web remains, for most studios, a pure promotional vehicle for movies.” (Sacharow 1997)

‘The Horse Whisperer’ web-site pushed Cable & Wireless products through an on-line tutorial showing women how to use the web (Campbell 1998). ‘You Got Mail’ raised \$ 4 million in financial contributions from partners towards the launch through promotional tie-ins with AOL (featured in the movie); E-Trade and 1-800 Flowers (Warner 1998) ‘The Mask of Zorro’ and ‘The Fifth Element’ web sites were notable because both extensively used interactive games as a key feature to promote interest in those movies. (Maddox 1998; McCormack 1998)

The “Batman Returns” website was specifically designed to entertain. “It opens with a home page featuring the Gotham skyline. It has a post office (the Batman version of an interactive message board) and Radio Gotham, (allows for sampling from the Batman CD). "I used essentially the same tools that I would use in marketing the movie, certain images and certain words," Don Buckley, Warners VP Advertising & Publicity says. "Then I'm guided by the Web itself and the audience it serves. We've made it a journey, as opposed to a passive viewing experience." (Sharkey 1995)

Despite intensifying movie promotion in cyberspace, a recent survey indicates that the web has little influence on an audience's choice of movies. “Only 9 percent of on-line users said the Internet and on-line sites were very important” (Kuchinskas 1999).

Forrester Research estimates that “10% of the US population is aged between 16 and 22 with almost half of those having Net access.” (Forrester 1999) “Up to 90 percent of college students have access to the Internet and repeatedly research has found that they are very comfortable with new technology and the idea of buying online. (Feder 1999)

“The ‘Blair Witch’ Project” – The Marketing Case Study

The marketing of “The ‘Blair Witch’ Campaign” began in August 1997 when the Haxan producers managed to get exposure on cable TV in John Pierson’s ‘Split Screen’ movie show. It devoted a segment that included an eight minute short by the filmmakers and a mock history of the ‘Blair Witch’. Haxan then used the money it received from ‘Split Screen’ to finance the trip to Maryland for eight days of filming in the June 1998.

“The producers used “method filmmaking” based on army survival training tactics to extract realistic performances from the cast who were sent into the woods armed with hand held cameras and instructions to be at certain places at appointed times. The filmmakers avoided direct contact with the cast - harassed and disorientated the actors, depriving them of sleep and near the end even food. The film’s hyper-realism helps movie goers to suspend their disbelief long enough to be scared witless.” (Boyar 1999)

“To say ‘The Blair Witch Project’ is a convincing experience is only scratching the surface. Because you believe it, because your vision is limited, because the actors are in reality alone in the dark, because it doesn’t even seem to be a movie but rather somebody’s home footage gone terribly, sickeningly berserk, it might be the scariest movie ever made.” (Atkinson 1999)

“It has no sex or even sexual tension, no music of any kind, no demonic power tools. No prowling, voyeuristic camera from the killer’s point of view; this movie is about victims and the victims they make of each other. There are no cuts to the monster. In fact, no visible monster! The audience sees only what the camera does. At night it is sometimes pitch black.” (Corliss 1999)

“In 1998, before a script had even been penned, Sanchez developed a web site (<http://www.blairwitch.com>) about the fictitious ‘Blair Witch’ to show

his friends and showcase the project to potential investors. As web surfers found the site, the myth of the 'Blair Witch' began to grow." (Eskenazi 1999)

"The biggest part of the buzz was that we wouldn't let anyone see it" Kevin Foxe the movie's Executive Producer said "That frustrated the press. People were calling me from the LA Times and Entertainment Weekly saying they'd spent four hours on the site, begging me for an advanced screening. I'd just tell them 'you'll have to wait for Sundance.'" (Eskenazi 1999)

Artisan began planning the campaign at Sundance as soon as they had bought the distribution rights. To pay out a sum of \$1.1 million they must have felt very confident that they had a potential hit on their hands. They also knew that a low budget film with no big name stars and no special effects would need to employ an innovative marketing strategy to turn it into a commercial success.

Artisan deliberately targeted the youth segment as the primary audience for the movie. This is the most regular moviegoing segment in the US (Dortch 1996) Industry research shows that the primary audience for the horror genre is in the 12-24 age range. "Teenagers are the main factor in the success or failure of horror films with the early 20 crowd having a lesser influence. In recent years we have witnessed a skew towards young females in horror movies. Examples of this include 'Scream', 'I Know What You Did Last Summer' and 'Blair Witch' itself." (NRG 1999)

Artisan, a small independent distribution company had limited financial capacity. It knew it could not hope to compete with the major studios in terms of the size of marketing budget needed to attract this target audience. It would therefore have to out-think the competition.

Rather than buy costly network ad time (Carvell 1999), they chose instead to employ very target specific, low budget publicity tactics or what Amir Malin called 'guerilla marketing tactics'. (Corliss 1999) Malin, Artisan's co-president estimated they spent only \$ 1 million to promote the film nationally. (Carvell 1999)

Clever marketing positioned the movie as a pseudo-documentary. This appears to have stimulated heated debates in Internet chat rooms about

whether or not the movie is fact or fiction. This in turn has helped to facilitate enormous fan interest in 'Blair Witch'.

“Artisan is marketing the movie as a true story of horror - a compilation of the "found footage.” (Kaufman 1999) It has played on that "mockumentary" notion, leaving some moviegoers guessing about whether the horror story is real or imagined. Word-of-mouth reviews and the Internet helped fuel interest. (Associated Press 1999)

Producer Myrick clearly believes this when he says “we just started creating this mythology, like the Devil’s Triangle in the woods. It’s a lot like Star Wars in the sense that we had a basic mythology. Now it’s becoming a whole alternative universe.” (Boyar 1999)

Artisan is reported to be “cleaning up” on ‘Blair Witch’ merchandising related to the movie which is being snapped up by eager fans. (Associated Press 1999)

“Even the Internet Movie Database (<http://www.imdb.com>) the Bible of filmic minutiae on the web, played along for awhile, listing the three leads as missing and presumed dead.” (Milvy 1999)

Artisan launched a grassroots campaign on college campuses. It also used hip media channels like the Sci Fi Channel and MTV to ‘create the buzz’ for ‘Blair Witch’. Time magazine reported that the movie was previewed at 40 colleges in 20 key markets across the US in April, two months prior to the official release. (Corliss 1999) “After recent screenings in college towns, the ‘Blair Witch’ website has buzzed with reactions, most of them are favourable” (Boyar 1999)

To fuel the buzz on the film, Artisan’s publicists targeted media “influencers” popular with youth audiences to gain exposure for the film. These included Harry Knowles’ popular ‘Ain’t It Cool News’ (AICN) web site where which premiered the trailer for the movie.

“Figuring AICN as the best way to get the word out to an obsessive fan base, Myrick and Sanchez apparently slipped Knowles the blurb. In the next six months, the indie film was reviewed 12 more times – and each review was more positive than the last. Some AICN frequent flyers suspect that one of

the 'Blair Witch' reviewers setting the buzz generator on high was someone directly involved with the film. " (DiLucchio 1999)

"These low key approaches helped foster the belief among audience members that they'd discovered the film for themselves – a belief that, in turn, fed traffic to the web site." (Carvell 1999)

"Internet marketing was particularly effective with 'Blair Witch' because the film's younger than 30, techno-savvy audience is the same one that regularly uses the Internet." (Guthmann 1999)

The web site was further developed by Artisan to build on the myth and arouse interest in the movie. It perpetuated the illusion that there really was a 'Blair Witch', by extending the documentary approach of the movie into the visual execution of the content provided at the website.

It was expanded to provide the back story to the film. It also made available seemingly real documents and video clips that continued to update site visitors on any new developments in the 'official' investigation of the disappearance of the three student filmmakers.

A spate of 'affiliated' 'Blair Witch' web sites appeared on the Internet almost overnight. Fan sites are not uncommon for sci fi / horror genre movies like Star Wars, Star Trek and X Files. These films however, already have an established franchise and a loyal committed following of fans. In contrast "'Blair Witch'" was new and virtually unknown. Where did these fans come from?

Website www.salon.com published reports casting doubt on the authenticity of these fan sites. They observed that the design and the language used bore remarkable similarities and consistency and hinted that the producers at Haxan Films or their friends might be behind many of them. (DiLucchio 1999)

"Nearly two months before the film's release, MTV ran a story on the proliferation of 'Blair Witch' fan sites – thereby giving the film cachet with that all important 13-25 year old moviegoing segment." (DiLucchio 1999)

On May 19, 'Blair Witch' went to Cannes where it won the Prix de la Jeunesse. This is a special prize from a panel of young (18-25 year old) judges from all over Europe. On the same day, the second trailer premiered

on MTV. On June 11 a third 40 second teaser trailer screened before “Star Wars: The Phantom Menace”. An advertising campaign began on June 23 targeted specifically at alternative weeklies like ‘The Village Voice’. (Corliss 1999)

In the final countdown to the movie’s national release on July 16th, 75,000 promotional flyers were distributed publicising the ‘Blair Witch’ book launch. ‘Wanted’ posters featuring the actors were disseminated on July 1st. Three days later on July 4th advertising began in mainstream newspapers. The next day July 5th, a radio campaign launched. On July 9th a ‘Blair Witch’ comic book was released and on July 12th a TV special co-produced by Haxan called ‘Curse of the ‘Blair Witch’’ aired on the Sci-Fi channel. On July 13th the ‘Blair Witch’ soundtrack was released on CD and TV promotion for the movie began the same day. (Corliss 1999)

“All of these pieces drove traffic to the web site” says Annette Jones, Artisan’s vice-president of marketing. ‘We didn’t do a grand slam blockbuster media buy, but slowly built awareness permeating the youth culture.’ (Guthmann 1999)

The movie premiered on Wednesday July 14th with advance midnight screenings. These attracted “a line of fans stretching well round the corner of the Angelika Film Centre. “‘Blair Witch’ has been promoted heavily on the Internet for months. Tickets for the three late night screenings were sold out days in advance, but that didn’t stop the truly devoted, who began to line up for seats at 10 am. They wore ‘Blair Witch’ t-shirts and clenched posters, some bragging that they had already seen bootleg tapes.” (Stevens 1999)

Griselda Tomayo, 37 of the Upper West Side arrived twelve hours before the official midnight opening of the movie in New York and said “I’ve seen the movie already, but I was dying to see everyone else’s reaction, I think it is the scariest movie I’ve seen since ‘The Exorcist’ , I was a Catholic schoolgirl at the time, and I had to sleep in my mothers bed because I was so afraid I was going to get possessed.” (Stevens 1999)

“On Blair bulletin boards, fans and foes gather round the Internet cracker barrel to swap certainties. ‘Seeing the ‘The Blair Witch Project’ is the most terrifying experience, cinematic or otherwise, that I’ve ever had in my life’ JJ Spaceboy posted last week.” (Corliss 1999)

“Even the filmmakers have been a little shocked by the intensity of the interest in their film’s mythology. ‘I’ve never really been exposed to this level of obsession that people can bring to a film’ Myrick confessed. (Boyar 1999)

“They’ve really made people get involved with a sense of wanting to be involved with this film, wanting to be a part of the feeling around it.” (Carvell 1999)

Time magazine wrote “Scan their faces as they enter theatres playing ‘Blair Witch’. The anticipation is electric, this could be a fantasy reunion of all four Beatles.” (Corliss 1999)

Artisan’s distribution strategy had deliberately made it difficult for people to actually see the movie because it opened on so few screens. Consequently shows began selling out days in advance. Malin says that it was all part of the plan: ‘It’s a difficult ticket to get, which was part of the concept. People do have the experience of going and not being able to get in...what we’re doing is creating the buzz factor on the film. If you want to be in the know, if you want to be in the right place at the right time, you should be seeing ‘Blair Witch’.’” (Carvell 1999)

The theatrical release was carefully stage managed. The movie opened nationally on July 16th on 27 screens against ‘Eyes Wide Shut’ in week one. It grossed \$1.5 million at the box office which averaged out at an “incredible” \$ 56,002 per screen (Carvell 1999)

“Film critic Roger Ebert notes ‘Had they opened the movie wide, ‘Eyes Wide Shut’ would have been in first place that weekend, and ‘Blair Witch’ would have been second or third. Now they are able to say Eyes Wide Shut opened at No 1, but ‘Blair Witch’ is a sleeper success. With this release strategy, Artisan has created a lot of pent-up demand to see the movie.” (Carvell 1999)

‘Blair Witch’ went onto 31 screens in week two. It was now in direct competition with a big budget horror movie “The Haunting” which had big name stars and was chasing the same target audience. ‘The Haunting’ went straight to number one in the box office charts, ‘Blair Witch’ ranked 17th

“The picture performed extremely well in arthouses in New York and L.A., but its biggest run was actually at the AMC Block 30 in suburban Orange, Calif. The commercial megaplex collected an estimated \$160,000. The film's second highest gross was \$115,000, at the Arizona Mills super mall in Tempe. It's very significant that our biggest grosses were at our most commercial engagements," said Malin (Hindes July 18, 1999)

‘Blair Witch’ was taken into wide release in week three on July 30th to a total of 1101 screens across the US. On August 6th in week five, 1000 more screens were added taking the total to 2412. It was taken wider again to 2538 screens in week six, before contracting to 2352 screens in week seven and then down to 2297 screens in week eight. (Box Office Report 1999)

This release strategy saw the gross box office leap from \$1.5 million on the first weekend to \$55 million by week three. This moved ‘Blair Witch’ into second spot behind the romantic comedy “Runaway Bride” in the box office charts in week three with “The Haunting” slipping behind ‘Blair Witch’ to number four. ‘Blair Witch’ went on to gross \$ 123 million on 2538 screens by the end of week six.

“Movie industry analyst Robert Bucksbaum from Reel Source Inc said ‘I’m at a loss for words on what this film has done for the whole industry’. Playing in barely one third as many theatres as ‘Runaway Bride’, ‘Blair Witch’ averaged \$ 26,528 a screen, nearly 2.5 times that of the romantic comedy according to Exhibitor Relations Inc which tracks ticket sales. And while ‘Runaway Bride’ took in \$ 35.1 million, about half of its production costs, in just one weekend, ‘Blair Witch’ has grossed \$36.1 million – 100 times what the film-makers and their distributor spent to produce it.” (Associated Press 1999)

Artisan “spent \$ 10 million on distribution and promotion which is cheap by Hollywood standards.” (Associated Press 1999) and “both Universal and Warner Brothers have shuffled their schedules, at least in part, to move films away from ‘Blair Witch’.” (Carvell 1999)

“The weekend the movie opened, Artisan took out a full page advertisement in Variety. Such ads traditionally tout a movie’s opening gross; this one was slightly different. ‘Blairwitch.com’ it read, ‘21,222,589 hits to date’.” Geoffrey Gilmore, the co-director of the Sundance Film Festival says ‘I’ve never seen an advertisement, ever, in which the company takes out a Variety

ad about the number of hits to their website. That says something about how the campaign for this film has worked.(Carvell 1999)

The Nielsen Net-Ratings show that the 'Blair Witch' web site had almost 650,000 visitors for the week ending August 1st. The Nielsen research also shows that the average person visiting the site spent 16 minutes before logging off. These numbers make Blairwitch.com the 45th most popular site on the web. (Cummings 1999) By mid August, the web site "has received more than 75 million hits to date." (Guthmann 1999)

Casey Jones, Vice-President of Marketing for Landmark Theatres said "Internet marketing was particularly effective with 'Blair Witch' because the film's younger than 30, techno-savvy audience is the same one that regularly uses the Internet." (Guthmann 1999)

"An informal exit poll of theatre managers indicated that audiences were predominantly in the 18-35 year age group, and split evenly in terms of gender" (Hindes Aug 2,1999)

"Much of this (the film's success) has been due to the word-of-chat, and the film's innovative web site, which upholds the 'mockumentary' aspects of the picture." (Milvy 1999) "Artisan took over the web site, revamping it and turning it into an interactive serial about the witch. Web surfers followed the story through bi-weekly instalments providing further clues. - The film generated a strong following among college students 'we found that it was the best students who were creating the buzz about the movie' ," Kevin Foxe, the film's Executive Producer said 'And, because it was so interactive, it became more than a movie, it became a game.'" (Eskenazi 1999)

Ray Price – President of American Zoetrope Studios says "There is nothing new about using the Internet to market films, mounting grass roots campaigns on college campuses or creating such market specific tie-ins as comic books and TV specials. Hats off to those guys at Artisan, but they are not doing stuff that other people who do marketing haven't been doing for a while. They're not the first one to get a lot of hits on a web site." (Guthmann Aug 29,1999)

"We've all had web sites for all our movies for years" says one studio marketing head "But this was a web site that was an entertainment

experience in itself. The movie was an extension of the web site, not the other way around. That's what was new." (Ansen & Brown 1999)

Tom Bernard, co-President of Sony Pictures said "'Blair Witch' is the first time someone used the Internet to draw an audience into theatres – as opposed to just providing information. It's woken up the studio system and the independent world to the Internet as a marketing tool that's much more powerful than a billboard. (Guthmann 1999)

Newsweek said "the real lesson of "'Blair Witch'" is in its marketing, which has taught Hollywood the awesome power of the Internet." (Ansen & Brown 1999)

Time magazine wrote "If the product was eccentric so was the peddling, - if Artisan can create an avid audience on cable and in cyberspace, why is Fox or Warner Brothers spending tens of millions advertising in the papers and on prime time? No wonder Hollywood, looking at 'Blair Witch' says both Wow! And Uh -oh!." (Corliss 1999)

"There's no good lesson to learn here" says Pierson, the indie guru whose cable show helped get the Blair rolling. "It's not an independent film phenomenon. What you really have is a convergence of old and new media." And a film that blends the thrill of the unseen with the art of the sell." (Corliss 1999)

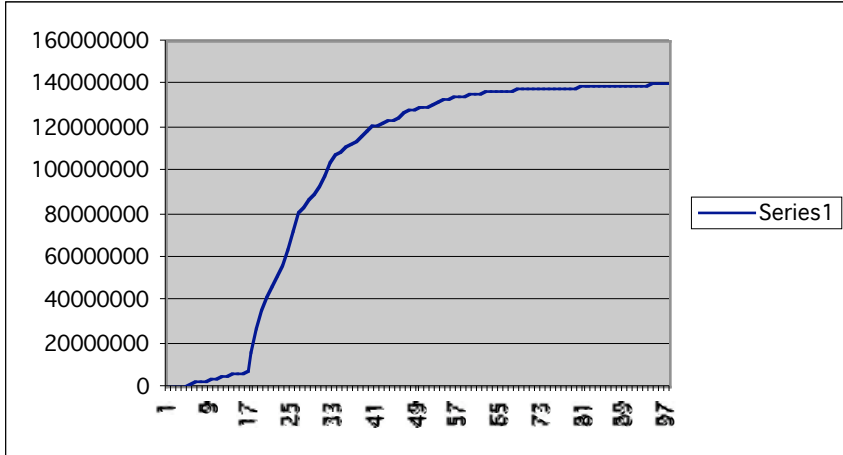
The Blair Witch Project is on course to be one of the most profitable films of all time. "During the seven-year cycle of the franchise, including sequels, it is expected to generate \$500 million in revenue and \$150 million in profit for distributor Artisan Entertainment. Costs and revenue estimates for the current release: Costs Production: \$450,000, including \$30,000 production, \$100,000 finishing costs, \$320,000 for sound and colour correction, 35-mm blow-up Acquisition fee: \$1.1 million Prints/advertising: \$25 million

Estimated Revenues U.S. theatrical: \$150 million Foreign theatrical: \$50 Million U.S. home video: \$60 million (6 million to 8 million units wholesale) DVD: \$6 million Broadcast, cable: \$35 million Pay-per-view: \$3 million to 5 million License/merchandising: \$7 million Source: Industry estimates." (Eller and Natale 1999)

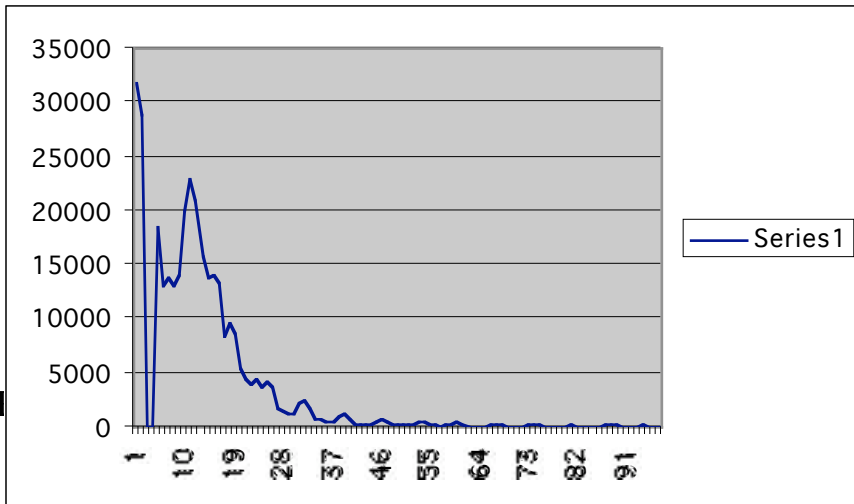
Blair Witch US release 1999	Daily gross box office US \$	Number of screens	per screen average
14-Jul	31000	1	31726
15-Jul	60000	1	28843
16-Jul		27	
17-Jul		27	
18-Jul	1572000	27	18556
19-Jul	1924000	27	13028
20-Jul	2299000	27	13895
21-Jul	2653000	27	13110
22-Jul	3061000	27	13960
23-Jul	3682000	31	20031
24-Jul	4389000	31	22814
25-Jul	5039000	31	20968
26-Jul	5531000	31	15857
27-Jul	5958000	31	13788
28-Jul	6394000	31	14068
29-Jul	6803000	31	13194
30-Jul	16083000	1101	8492
31-Jul	26671000	1101	9617
1-Aug	35722000	1101	8600
2-Aug	41573000	1101	5433
3-Aug	46470000	1101	4447
4-Aug	50911000	1101	4033
5-Aug	55711000	1101	4336
6-Aug	63516000	2142	3644
7-Aug	72291000	2142	4097
8-Aug	80050000	2142	3626
9-Aug	83491000	2142	1608
10-Aug	86896000	2142	1589
11-Aug	89755000	2142	1335
12-Aug	92380000	2142	1225
13-Aug	97445000	2142	2100
14-Aug	103274000	2142	2417
15-Aug	107280000	2142	1661
16-Aug	108896000	2142	670
17-Aug	110607000	2142	709
19-Aug	111983000	2142	571
19-Aug	113238000	2142	520
20-Aug	115820000	2538	1017
21-Aug	118663000	2538	1120
22-Aug	120646000	2538	781
23-Aug	121430000	2538	309
24-Aug	122300000	2538	343
25-Aug	123005000	2538	278
26-Aug	123858000	2538	336
27-Aug	125115000	2352	534
28-Aug	126814000	2352	722
29-Aug	128077000	2352	537
30-Aug	128486000	2352	174
31-Aug	128931000	2352	190
1-Sep	129280000	2352	148

2-Sep	129619000	2352	144
3-Sep	130353000	2297	320
4-Sep	131500000	2297	499
5-Sep	132662000	2297	506
6-Sep	133389000	2297	316
7-Sep	134130000	2297	127
8-Sep	134342000	2297	92
9-Sep	134635000	2297	128
10-Sep	135041000	1933	210
11-Sep	135851000	1933	418
12-Sep	135267000	1933	215
13-Sep	136379000	1933	58
14-Sep	136525000	1933	75
15-Sep	136653000	1933	66
16-Sep	136782169	1933	67
17-Sep	137009000	1437	158
18-Sep	137337000	1437	228
19-Sep	137642473	1437	154
20-Sep	137716149	1434	51
21-Sep	137802567	1434	60
22-Sep	137873964	1434	50
23-Sep	137941911	1434	47
24-Sep	138063000	945	128
25-Sep	138254000	945	202
26-Sep	138433816	945	130
27-Sep	138473818	945	42
28-Sep	138522326	945	51
29-Sep	138565260	945	45
30-Sep	138606754	945	44
1-Oct	138674000	588	114
2-Oct	138778000	588	177
3-Oct	138880282	584	118
4-Oct	138902073	584	37
5-Oct	138930451	584	49
6-Oct	138954453	584	41
7-Oct	138981858	584	47
8-Oct	139103000	924	131
9-Oct	139304000	924	218
10-Oct	139468795	924	174
11-Oct	139534445	924	71
12-Oct	139588611	924	59
13-Oct	139639962	924	56
14-Oct	139691780	924	56
17-Oct	140012961	696	144
19-Oct	140089139	696	60
20-Oct	140128647	696	57
21-Oct	140169831	696	59

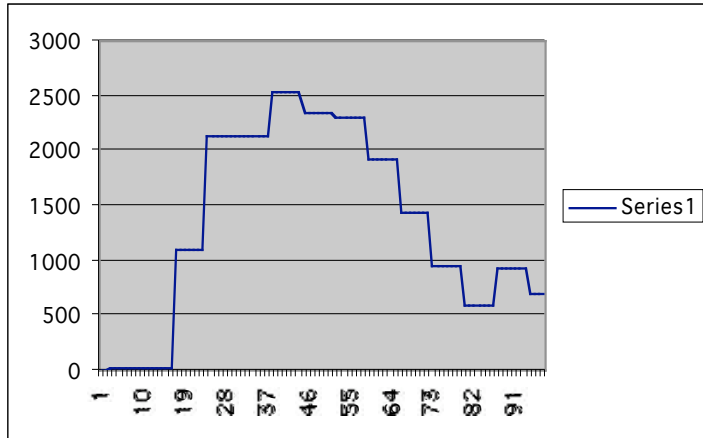
BLAIR WITCH DAILY BOX OFFICE



PER SCREEN AVERAGE TAKINGS



NUMBER OF SCREENS



INSTRUCTORS BOOKLET

QUESTIONS

- 1) What was the core strategy employed to market 'The 'Blair Witch' Project'?
- 2) What was the segmentation rationale for the movie? Did it work?
- 3) How did Artisan position 'Blair Witch'? Why was this strategy so successful?
- 4) Can involvement theory adequately explain why 'Blair Witch' instantly became a cult movie and a must see event?
- 5) What was it about the 'Blair Witch' web site that made it so effective?
- 6) What was the key point-of-difference where the 'Blair Witch' campaign differed from a typical Hollywood marketing launch?
- 7) Is the success of 'Blair Witch' really likely to 'revolutionise' the way Hollywood markets its movies? Discuss.

QUESTION 1

What was the core strategy employed to market 'The 'Blair Witch' Project'?

The campaign rationale was to create a 'buzz' about the movie, to arouse curiosity about the 'Blair Witch' mythology to create demand and transform it into a must-see movie event. If the target audience 'want-to-see' was high then the market would make the movie their first choice. Artisan opted to use a low budget below-the-line publicity and promotion strategy to target the youth segment to achieve their goals

A program of college screenings was specifically used to generate positive word-of-mouth and the "hip" Angelique Film Centre was also used for the three midnight advance screenings to generate word of mouth before the opening day. Large crowds had queued for over twelve hours outside the

theatre. Time says the movie instantly became “a hot ticket as long lines form” (Corliss 1999)

Artisan’s selection of media channels through which to promote the movie was very target specific for the 12-24 year old segments. The Internet, cable TV and preview screenings were the primary vehicles used to reach the target audience. Trailers were used to promote the movie at the popular web site ‘Ain’t It Cool News’; on MTV and before “Star Wars: The Phantom Menace”. The Sci Fi channel screened the “Curse of the ‘Blair Witch’” TV special and the advertising campaign was targeted specifically at alternative weeklies like ‘The Village Voice’. (Corliss 1999)

The filmmakers and Artisan both used classic withholding tactics to arouse curiosity and stimulate demand. Each denied access to the film to both media and public alike. The producers refused to show the media the movie before the Sundance Film Festival. It played to a packed house at Sundance and an ‘enthusiastic response’. Artisan bought the film after the midnight screening at Sundance so the tactic worked to get the producers a distribution deal. Then Artisan’s strategy was to make tickets hard to get. The limited release to only 27 and 31 screens in weeks one and two created pent up demand so that when the movie opened wide it packed audiences in.

QUESTION 2

What was the segmentation rationale for the movie? Did it work?

Determination of the primary market segment was not a difficult exercise.

The youth market is the most regular movie going segment. "Since the 1950s, most frequent movie goers skew younger" (Dortch 1996) Movie industry insiders know from past experience that the youth market is the primary audience for the horror genre.

Any doubts on that score would have been quickly dispelled by cross checking with NRG’s data base of audience research. The National Research Group (NRG) is the specialist entertainment market research company used by all the Hollywood majors and mini-majors to conduct recruited audience screenings to test market their movies.

Audience feedback from the 40 college previews and the reaction by the panel of 18-25 year olds judges at Cannes who awarded the Prix de la Jeunesse would have confirmed the movie played well to the youth market.

The success of Artisan's segmentation strategy was also confirmed when exit polls confirmed the films core demographic was 12 –24 years of age. (NRG 1999)

QUESTION 3

How did Artisan position 'Blair Witch'? Why was this strategy so successful?

Artisan positioned the movie in an extremely clever way. They clearly differentiated it from the mainstream movie fare by blurring the line between fiction and reality. They used the film's "documentary style" and the website content to create the impression that the 'Blair Witch' legend was over two centuries old and that the disappearance of the three student filmmakers was a real event.

In terms of product differentiation, 'Blair Witch' is just not the typical Hollywood studio movie. It cost only US \$ 35,000 to make – under 1% of the average studio movie. The cast features completely unknown actors with no marquee value. The film has an improvised script containing only scene descriptions and no dialogue.

'Blair Witch' is convincing because the shooting style was grounded in realism. Without foreknowledge, it is not inconceivable that someone seeing the website or the movie for the first time could be persuaded that the events were true and that the 'Blair Witch' myth had existed for over two centuries.

This positioning stimulated debate. Internet chat rooms ran hot and the controversy enhanced the 'buzz' on the movie. People everywhere were talking about 'Blair Witch'.

QUESTION 4

Can involvement theory adequately explain why ‘Blair Witch’ instantly became a cult movie and a must see event?

The phenomenal hype surrounding the film has elevated ‘Blair Witch’ to the cult status of franchise movies like Star Trek and Star Wars. The hordes of fans that queued for the midnight screenings like Griselda Tomayo are exhibiting the same kind of tribal characteristics and fanaticism as ‘Trekkies’ and ‘Trekors’.

Faith Popcorn describes this phenomena as ‘clanning’. She regards this as a major societal trend where consumers saying “I’m part of a group, and proud of it, I belong.” Popcorn’s ‘CyberClanning’ means ‘seeking in cyberspace’. She observes that the most popular on-line attractions are those that facilitate interactivity like chat rooms, news groups and e-mail, (Popcorn 1997) all of which played important roles in the ‘Blair Witch’ campaign.

The literature on involvement theory helps to explain why the marketing campaign was so successful in turning ‘Blair Witch’ from just another small horror movie into a must-see big time event.

“For the most part, researchers have agreed that an involving, persuasive communication is one that is personally relevant and important to an individual (Krugman 1965; Zaichowsky 1985). There is also emerging consensus that involving communications attract more attention or cognitive effort (Celsi & Olson 1988; Greenwald & Leavitt 1984). Thus, higher levels of consumer involvement result in persuasion when a message is potent – that is, able to resist recipient scrutiny and counter arguing (Greenwald & Leavitt 1984; Petty & Cacioppo 1983).” (Pratkanis & Greenwald 1993 pp 221-222) Analysis shows that Blair Witch’s campaign and website deliver on all three counts.

Andrews, Durvasula and Akhter have developed a useful framework for conceptualising involvement. It proposes that personal relevance (personal needs, goals and characteristics) and situational and decision factors are the antecedents of involvement. Other factors can constrain the involvement state. These are opportunity to process (eg media or distractions) and the ability to process (eg knowledge or familiarity) (Andrews, Durvasula and Akhter 1990)

Andrews et al define involvement as an individual, internal state of arousal with three properties. These are intensity (arousal to engage in specific information processing or goal related activity); direction (towards a stimulus) and persistence (duration of the involvement intensity). The consequences of involvement in their framework are search behaviour, information processing and persuasion. They believe that this internal state can be separated from its numerous antecedents and consequences and that its properties are grounded in motivation. Motivation derives from forces/drives that move one from an initial state to a desired state and help direct arousal or activation levels towards stimuli,”(Andrews et al 1990)

There is evidence of the personal relevance and situational / decision factors that comprise the antecedents of involvement coming into play in relation to ‘Blair Witch’.

Personal relevance is foremost. As the three lead characters in ‘Blair Witch’ are college students, the youth market, particularly students, would closely identify with the characters and their story.

Sherif & Cantril’s work into ego-involvements supports this view. They postulate that “we see ourselves in movies. The enormous appeal of motion pictures is due in no small part to the vicarious satisfactions they provide. By projecting ourselves into the characters and situations, we can momentarily escape” and audiences are attracted to “people with whom they can most easily identify” (Sherif & Cantril 1947)

Movie going is an important social activity within youth culture. Involvement theory supports the view that consumers can feel that particular product categories can be “specially relevant to their lives”. (Flynn & Goldsmith 1993 pp 357)

Fanatical fans queuing over long periods for movie tickets dressed in ‘Blair Witch’ merchandising are clear indicators of strong feelings of personal relevance and felt-involvement (Zaichowsky 1986 pp 9; Celsi and Olson 1988 pp 210-211) and of people making strong personal connections to the film through its advertising. (Krugman 1964) This is highly motivated behaviour directed towards “hedonic/experiential benefits.” (Engel, Blackwell & Miniard pp 252-253)

The social consequences of not being part of the movie event of the year present a situational and decision factor that could be severely detrimental in some social circles. This factor makes attendance highly personally relevant.

Opportunity to process and ability to process were other key factors that interplay with the antecedents of involvement and can serve to constrain the involvement state. Artisan did not rely on mass media for its advertising. It strategically placed its efforts into media channels with minimal opportunity for distraction – alternative weekly newspapers, cable TV shows popular with youth and of course the Internet. The web tends to be an individual experience which can be totally consuming if the flow construct state is achieved.(Hoffman & Novak 1994)

Artisan's strategy was to drive the target audience to the web site to provide sufficient information to facilitate involvement and desire to see the movie. In terms of opportunity to access the web site, the Forrester Research estimates quoted above, demonstrate that youth do have access to the web and feel comfortable using it.

After 75 million hits on the website; the box office success and the reported audience composition at theatres, there is no doubt that the youth market was highly involved in terms of intensity (arousal to engage in 'Blair Witch' information processing and goal related activity) , direction (towards a stimulus – the web site and the movie) and persistence (duration of the involvement intensity – average 16 minutes on-line) as per the Andrews et al involvement framework.

The consequences of involvement are search behaviour, information processing and persuasion. "The nature of search activity is closely tied to involvement" (Kassarjian and Robertson 1991 pp 309). 21 million hits on the web site by opening day bears testimony to the fact that the target audience was sufficiently involved to engage in search activity and cognitive information processing. The box office success suggests large numbers of young consumers were persuaded to see the movie.

Engel & Blackwell place normal moviegoing activity mid-range on their problem solving continuum. They don't therefore consider it to be an extreme problem solving situation (EPS) requiring high consumer involvement. (Engel, Blackwell & Miniard 1990 pp 29)

A counter argument can be offered. 'Blair Witch' is a unique movie event and is therefore elevated to EPS status. Visitors to the web site spent an average of 16 minutes on-line before logging off to find out more about 'Blair Witch'. The movie is a terrifying experience which will make some people think long and hard about whether they will be brave enough to see it. The intrigue of the 'Blair Witch' myth and the hip must-see social status associated with being part of the event make it an unusual movie decision. A decision that demands much higher than normal consumer involvement.

High involvement can be associated with resistance to rather than acceptance of persuasion". (Greenwald and Leavitt 1984; Zaichowsky 1996) Under high involvement, attitudes were influenced by the quality of the arguments in the message.(Zaichowsky 1986 pp 12) The most appropriate advertising strategies for high involvement are a communication trying to modify beliefs with verbalised propositions (Greenwald and Leavitt 1984) and an emphasis towards print media with long messages of high information content and low repetition. (Rothschild pp 82)

The 'Blair Witch' website is widely reported to have been a key factor in persuading youth audiences to see the movie.

QUESTION 5

What was it about the 'Blair Witch' web site that made it so effective?

75 million hits and crumbling box office records suggest that the design is sound. But why? The website reflects the movie's positioning. It presents a convincing case using persuasive text, supporting images and video clips within a computer mediated environment (CME). These provide information about the myth of 'Blair Witch', the story of the three lost filmmakers and the ongoing investigation.

The nature of the web medium itself helps enormously. Hoffman & Novak's process model proposes that "flow is the central construct for understanding network navigation within a hypermedia CME" (Hoffman & Novak 1994)

They define flow in this environment as "the process of optimal experience" achieved when a sufficiently motivated user perceives a balance between his or her skills and the challenges of the interaction, together with focused attention. Flow activities in the web facilitate concentration and

involvement. The authors describe flow as the glue holding the consumer to the CME. It is induced by telepresence and interactivity. They theorise that the marketing implications are that consumers are no longer passive and that unlike mass media, web interactivity gives them control through self-directed network navigation via hyperlinks. (Hoffman & Novak 1994)

The opening frame of the 'Blair Witch' website positions the movie: "In October of 1994, three student filmmakers disappeared in the woods near Burkittsville, Maryland while shooting a documentary. A year later their footage was found." (<http://www.blairwitch.com>)

The site is a very simple design with a shallow menu. The black and white thematic design of the advertising 'sell' permeates the site.

Java enabled computers have greater access to more multimedia aspects of the site. There is a feedback mechanism by e-mail enabling visitors to subscribe to updates. This provides visitors with the incentive of being the first to know about the movie. There was also interactivity in the sense that consumers can shop for merchandise at BlairWitchDirect.com

Telepresence is defined as the mediated perception of an environment i.e. it draws you in and is induced by vividness and interactivity as well as focus. The site technically rates low on telepresence, however the intriguing nature of the myth and the story make up for lack of technical enhancements.

Hypermedia which combines elements of radio, TV, newspaper, magazines and the computer with hypertext links to form a unique CME. The 'Blair Witch' website contains some hypermedia features and resources. It provides timelines, text, still photographs, video interviews, news clips relating to the official investigation into the disappearance of the students. It also provides links to related sites.

Network Navigation best described as the process of self directed movement through a hypermedia CME. Navigation throughout the site was easy and logical, consistent and no dead end pages were found. There are clear menu buttons and site content was organised under the following menu headings – mythology (showing historical timeline); the filmmakers (photos with brief captions); the aftermath (evidence / search / interviews / news – mostly video clips and stills); the legacy (discovered footage / audio / Heather's journal); chat; updates consisting of home button / reviews / theatres /

trailers / links / screensavers / book soundtrack / comic / opening day / premiere / merchandise / exclusives It also has e-mail 'sign-up' for updates

Perceived Behavioural Control depends on non-motivational factors such as ease of access and the consumers' confidence to use the computer facilitated by the design and resources made available at the web site. The site subjectively scores well on PBC in terms of ease of use and sense of control

Flow is the process of optimal experience and occurs when the user perceives a balance between the skills and challenges of the interaction and becomes totally focused. The 'Blair Witch' site provides no technically advanced reason to stimulate flow. Rather, flow is likely to occur when the site visitor becomes engrossed in the text descriptions of the myth or the mystery or to related video clips. Hence a 16 minute average site visit time.

In interactive marketing theory, Hoffman , Novak & Chatterjee (HNC) suggest that interactivity is the key to commercial success in electronic commerce. This is because "the interactive nature of the medium is especially conducive to developing customer relationships. HNC state that marketing communications perform three functions: to inform, to remind, and to persuade" and argue. They state that the nature of the Web itself is superior to the old "one-to-many" mass model because its key weakness is the "undirectionality of traditional mass media". " (Hoffman , Novak & Chatterjee (1995)

The 'Blair Witch' site has no technical interactivity other than hyperlinked text. It does however provide an ongoing serial about the story of the 'Blair Witch' and the missing filmmakers which does interactively by involving visitors in a search for additional information.

HNC classify commercial web sites into two major categories. "Integrated Destination" sites designed to attract consumers and Web Traffic Control sites designed to generate repeat business. (Hoffman et al 1995) Leland's web communications model is very similar but has three main classifications - Visibility Facilitator websites designed to attract an audience; Relationship Magnets to create new connections with consumers and Direct Sales Channels which are on-line store fronts.(Leland 1999)

The 'Blair Witch' site has elements of all of HNC and Leland's categories. It was designed to attract consumers and to generate repeat traffic. Artisan kept

updating the story in instalments on a regular basis to entice visitors to return to the site.

It also provides consumers with the opportunity to buy the movie's merchandise on-line from BlairWitchDirect. This matches Leland's store front criteria. The website is a true 'Relationship Magnet' it demonstrates the ability to create new kinds of connections with customers by offering something of real value. It delivers by providing 'Blair Witch' fans with a continuous flow of "inside" information about the movie, its backstory and the aftermath of the investigation. In other words it continues the soap opera before and after the events within the movie, thus adding additional value.

QUESTION 6

What was the key point-of-difference where the 'Blair Witch' campaign differed from a typical Hollywood marketing launch?

Is 'Blair Witch' really different? Yes and no.

Yes, because it was virtually a home made low budget movie that presented itself as a documentary in both its construction and positioning. Artisan did not use a major mass media campaign to launch the film, which is standard procedure on big studio movies. It was also different because Artisan launched merchandising tie-in products in the wake of the picture's success rather than as a fundamental tool to promote the movie. (Lyons 1999)

No, because many independent films have been driven by publicity rather than with a big mass media spend. And, no because every one of the below the line tactics that Artisan used, have been used before by Hollywood. Withholding tactics – i.e. not allowing film critics to see the movie is classic Stanley Kubrick ('Eyes Wide Shut'). Targeting alternative press is done by every art film without a large budget. Targeting hip youth culture media outlets on cable TV was used extensively for the latest Star Wars campaign and almost every sci fi movie.

So what makes 'Blair Witch' really different? The use of the web? The college previews? The studio executives quoted above said no. The role of website in the overall campaign was to serve as a critical vehicle for publicity and promotion, to facilitate a high degree of arousal and involvement. The same however could be said of the 'Star Wars' web site

which has been functional for over two years, has had millions of hits and used all of the same kinds of design features as 'Blair Witch' to launch 'Star Wars: The Phantom Menace' earlier in 1999.

So what then was it about 'Blair Witch' that makes it revolutionary?

The really revolutionary thing about the marketing of 'Blair Witch' was that it relied on the Internet as its primary marketing channel to cut through the clutter of a message dense environment to communicate with its audience.

Unlike the major studios who have substantially increased their advertising expenditures to cut through this clutter, (Zufryden 1996), 'Blair Witch' did not rely on the weight of a heavy mass media campaign to launch the movie. Still it grossed over \$ 135 million in sixty days. That is the real difference and the really revolutionary idea. It is a high risk strategy and flouts conventional practice.

QUESTION 7

Is the success of 'Blair Witch' really likely to 'revolutionise' the way Hollywood markets its movies? Discuss.

Will 'Blair Witch' revolutionise the industry? Will the major studios stop spending so much to make and market movies?

This is unlikely. The 'Blair Witch' campaign strategy will not suit every movie. And, films with the box office magic of 'Blair Witch' are also very rare.

Paul Kagan's persuasive case about the new economics of the industry explains why. Hollywood knows that big budgets can drive a weak movie to some degree of box office success. This sets up a platform to recoup from other media and ancillary markets.

Hollywood is conservative. What studio marketing chief will take the risk of relying only on an Internet driven campaign without an extensive mass media buy to ensure that their next blockbuster movie opens well? If it works they become a hero, but if it fails? Try explaining that to Mr Spielberg.

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