WHAT DOES THE AUDIENCE THINK?

BY BARBARA FLAGG
Can large-format films elicit cerebral “I never knew that!” responses from audiences without losing the emotional “Wow!”s and the visceral stomach wrenching? Most definitely. But successful “edutainment” films require a sensitivity to audience expectations, interests, knowledge, and attitudes. That sensitivity comes from an experienced and creative film staff—and from audience research.
Inviting the audience in as a player and partner on your writing and production teams has potential payoffs in stronger appeal, increased excitement, heightened involvement, better comprehension and retention, and more frequent word-of-mouth recommendations. Working with your audience is not a guarantee of box office success, but producers who use audience evaluation feel that the opportunity to test embryonic ideas before public exposure—encourages creativity: They feel satisfaction in having their intuitions verified and relief that weaknesses can be addressed before the final version is released.

What should you look for in an evaluation process? What decisions should you be making so that your audience can be a useful partner? How can you make research your tool and not an irritant or waste of time and money?

As in the “vote early and often” admonition for political success, we advocate involving audience feedback early in a project and at frequent intervals in the process. Early and iterative feedback permits budget-sensitive rethinking and revisions.

Basically four phases of evaluation meet most needs of a large-format film production: front-end or preproduction evaluation that occurs before a storyboard or treatment; formative evaluation with a conceptual version of the film—a storyboard, animatic slide show, or some other representation of the film treatment; formative evaluation with a rough cut version or first assembly; and summative evaluation to assess the final film’s impact.

**FRONT END EVALUATION**

A front-end analysis tries to gather all information on the audience that might be considered helpful in producing an entertaining and effective script. The main goal is to help producers and writers appreciate where their viewers stand with respect to their film’s content, before a great deal of time is invested in developing storyboards and scripts. How interested are audience members in your topics? What intrigues them the most? What are their curiosities? What are they not interested in and why? What are their opinions or attitudes toward your topics? What are their expectations of a large-format film about these topics? What do they spontaneously associate with the topics? How much do they think they know about your topics? What do they actually know about your topics? What are their naïve notions? What are their misconceptions? What terminology is understood and what is unfamiliar? What might be objectionable in the film? Are there differences based on demographic or background characteristics?

At the same time, preproduction evaluation can collect audience
feedback on the strengths of proposed ideas, concepts, storylines, characters, music, film titles, and so forth. Our pre-production research on \textit{Special Effects} (a production of Nova/WGBH Boston) focused on students' understanding of the human visual system and visual effects, their familiarity with movies that utilize special effects, as well as their reactions to film titles and script ideas.

The fact that American, Taiwanese, and Dutch students easily recognized recent Hollywood films gave the producers confidence that using special effects clips from American films would play well at international theater sites.

Kelly Tyler of Nova Large Format Films says, "We thought the action and classic space battles of \textit{Star Wars} would have high recognition and appeal, but the testing made it clear that there was also a strong interest in character-driven effects. It helped us decide to include \textit{Jumanji}, with its computer-generated and robotic animals."

Additionally, the preproduction results

"The evaluation helped us finalize the shooting script and the shot list for the film, before our crews headed out on location."

\textbf{Iwerks.
Experience.
Available in 15/70 & 8/70.
2D & 3D.}
on the surround story for Special Effects supported the use of a beast like King Kong in lieu of other tested icons. Tyler says, "We wanted to open our film with a dramatic sequence that would catch people's attention, but we weren't sure whether to use familiar characters, like King Kong or Buck Rogers, or to create a completely new character. The testing at this early stage helped us determine that a sequence using King Kong was far and away the best choice. And, since the cost of producing the sequence was almost a million dollars, we needed to know what would work for the audience before we started filming."

3 CONCEPTUAL VERSION

The target audience can provide valuable feedback in response to early conceptual versions of the film, such as preliminary storyboards, animated slide shows, graphic styles, location video, proposed music, and so forth. Traditional large-format film audiences are most helpful at this stage in the evaluation process because they are most capable of imagining the finished film, given a conceptual version. They know what an exciting and satisfying film should feel like, sound like, and look like, and their feedback draws on that knowledge. A national sample of 50 adult museum members, for example, may have seen upwards of 25 different large-format films.

Our research on The Greatest Places (a production of the Science Museum of Minnesota) presented animatic video versions of the film treatment to audiences. Feedback included quantitative and qualitative information about appeal, clarity, what was liked and not liked, and what was surprising and curiosity-provoking—yielding a wealth of information about viewers' reactions that could be drawn upon for writing, shooting, and editing decisions.

"It is easy to make assumptions about what audiences know and don't know and what they like and don't like," says Mike Day, executive producer of The Greatest Places. "We like to test those assumptions. When we scouted the potential places to go in our film, we shot color slides, resulting in a bank of thousands of quality images. We used those shots to create animated video versions of the film. By showing generations of animatic versions of the film to adult and student audiences in multiple cities, we got a tremendous education, including what should be the most appropriate principal and secondary themes for the film and what images and information people responded to most. The evaluation helped us finalize the shooting script and the shot list for the film, before our crews headed out on location."

3 ROUGH CUT VERSION

A rough cut film version for evaluation should be produced at a point when there are still possibilities for changes in editing, script narration, music, sound effects, and possibly interviews.
and supporting graphics. In response to a rough cut, respondents can address issues of acceptance, appeal, clarity, credibility, density and pace of information, engagement, interest, learning, and motivation.

Our formative evaluation of the rough cut for Everest (a production of MacGillivray Freeman Films) worked with adult and student audiences to explore appeal, clarity, confusions, density of information, entertainment quality, expectations, pace, and visual excitement, as well as pre- and post-viewing interest in and understanding of the film's main science themes. Producer Alec Lorimore says, "Our extended post-production schedule allowed us to test Everest with audiences in video, 35mm, and large-screen formats more often than with any other film we've produced. Our biggest challenge was determining what we could cut from the film, since we had footage and a story that could easily hold the audience's interest for 60 minutes or more, yet we had to get it closer to 40 minutes for market considerations. Test audiences showed us that we could cut inner-body photography, for example, without sacrificing the high-altitude physiology lessons of the film. Audiences didn't need to 'see' red blood cells multiplying to understand the process of acclimatizing."

MacGillivray Freeman Films also kept an open ear to audience's reactions to the film's characters. The rough cut evaluation revealed that adult viewers wanted to better understand the climbers' motivations. Further testing also showed that viewers of all ages were not yet making important connections between the characters.

"For example," says Lorimore, "some people did not grasp the significance of Jamling's relationship with his father, so we shot a scene of Jamling as a little boy in the temple with his father, to add depth to his character and purpose to his motivation to climb Mount Everest. Audience testing—from the rough cut through fine cut stages of the film—contributes immensely to the creative process and ultimately to the public's enjoyment of our films."

A SUMMARY EVALUATION
A summative evaluation looks at the impact of the finished film (and sometimes ancillary materials) on the audience. All of the large-format films that we have worked with are funded in part by the United States National Science Foundation (NSF), which requires that projects be assessed for impact. Of course, box office impact—number of theaters showing the film and number of tickets sold—is a critical measure of success for distributors, but NSF wants to know if the film's impact went beyond a rich visual and visceral experience to have a measurable impact on attitudes, learning, and actions.

Our summative evaluations of Special

---

You Have A Choice

We Are Listening
We Listened to Them:

Arizona Mille Mail IMAX 3-D Theatre, Tempe; Iwerks 8/70 Theatre, Arizona Science Center, Phoenix; The UltraScreen 15/70 3-D Theatre by Iwerks, Ontario, CA; Minnesota Zoo Imation IMAX 3-D Theatre, Minneapolis; Hearst Castle 8/70 Theatre, San Simeon, CA; Children's Museum of Indianapolis Iwerks CineDome 15/70 Theatre; Huerka Science Center 8/70 Theatre, Finland; Orlando Science Center Iwerks 15/70 CineDome Theatre, FL; The Iwerks 8/70 Theatre at Dansk, Deadwood, SD; New Mexico Museum of Natural History 8/70 Theatre, Albuquerque; Washington Pavilion of Arts & Sciences 8/70 Dome Theatre, Sioux Falls, SD; Planetarium Theatre, Rochester, NY; San Francisco Cinemax 5/70 Theatre at Pier 25; Iwerks 8/70 Theatre, National Bowling Stadium, Reno; Iwerks 8/70 Theatre, Singapore Discovery Center; Chicago Navy Pier 15/70 Theatre; Blockbuster Iwerks Turbo Kid; Pan Yu T.T.T. Exploring Iwerks Theatre, China; Central Playland Iwerks Turbo Ride, Thailand; Iwerks 8/70 Theatre, Chile; Japan; Iwerks 15/70 Theatre, Zion National Park, UT; Beijing Huaxia Exploring Iwerks Theatre; Iwerks 8/70 Theatre, Ministry of Science & Technology/ Expo '95, Japan; Iwerks 3-D Theatre, National Museum of Natural Sciences, Taipei; Paramount's Carowinds Iwerks Turbo Ride Theatre, Charlotte, NC;

---

Thorburn Associates
ACOUSTIC AND AUDIOVISUAL CONSULTANTS

Over 1500 Projects and Still Listening...

Tel: 510-886-7826
Fax: 510-886-7828

TA@TA-Lnc.com
www.TA-Lnc.com
"Audience testing contributes immensely to the creative process and ultimately to the public's enjoyment of our films."

*Effects* and *Stormchasers* (a production of the Museum Film Network and *Nova/WGBH Boston*, produced by MacGillivray Freeman Films), for example, involved random samples of viewers going into and coming out of the theater. Sampling included weekend and weekday adults and student groups on field trips. The evaluations focused on four major outcomes: to what extent did the film appeal; to what extent did the film achieve its intended viewing goals; what did viewers perceive that they learned from the film, if anything?; and, did seeing the film influence the audience beyond the theater visit?

Viewers of *Stormchasers* particularly liked the photography and unusual qualities of severe storms, the "you-are-there" feeling, and the novel activities of the stormchasers. The film was highly engaging as audience members spontaneously associated the film with other informal learning experiences (such as watching the Weather Channel), with personal storm experiences, and with their own interests and previous knowledge. Viewers of *Stormchasers* came away knowing significantly more about the elements responsible for our weather patterns; the methods and tools used by scientists to study, track, and predict severe weather; and the relative predictability of storm systems.

The most unexpected result, however, was that the audience members changed their understanding of scientists themselves. Viewers learned that scientists get actively involved with storms, they are dedicated to their work, they are human, and they risk their own lives to gather data that will affect the viewers' well-being. The resulting image of "scientist" directly contradicted the stereotype of a lab-based white-coated "nerd."

*Special Effects* viewers were blown away by the realism of the special effects and by the complexity of creating them. They particularly liked that the film was both entertaining and informative. The film significantly influenced viewers' knowledge about how filmmakers produce effects of movement, scale, 3D explosions, and realistic computer images. Even more impressive was the increased number of respondents who could provide examples of how science or math are used in creating special effects in films.

For both films, some of the audience members were interviewed a week after their visits. Viewers reported having spoken to others about the films, having recommended the films to others, and having read or seen something on television that triggered memories of the films. Clearly, large-format films have a life beyond the 40 minutes in the theater.

"We wouldn't make a large-format film without audience testing at all stages of the production," says Susanne Simpson of *Nova Large Format Films*. "Our summative evaluation told us that 98 percent of the adult audience liked *Special Effects*, and those are the kind of results we're hoping for with every film we make. Audience feedback helps us get closer to that end."

Barbara Flagg is director of Multimedia Research, Bellport, New York, and author of "Formative Evaluation for Educational Technologies."