

Voting at the Box Office

Attending a movie on opening weekend sends a message to Hollywood.

One of the ways Christians can make a stronger impact on the culture—particularly with movies—is to understand the power of opening weekend. In the past, movies opened in a limited number of theaters, then built up a following through word of mouth and expanded into more and more theaters over a matter of weeks and months.

The legendary story of Star Wars is that the studio was very nervous about a space movie, so it opened in only a limited number of theaters—mostly in New York and Los Angeles. It wasn't long, though, before word-of-mouth enthusiasm created a tidal wave of response, and the movie quickly became one of the biggest hits of all time.

But today, largely because of the power of the mass media, instant gratification is the rule, and studios want to know right away if a movie is going to be a success or a flop. That's why the distribution model has changed to opening movies in literally thousands of theaters on its first weekend, in an “all or nothing” marketing strategy.

Simply put, this means that the box-office results on opening weekend determine how long a movie stays in the theaters.

Ralph Winter, respected producer of Planet of the Apes, Fantastic Four and all three X-Men movies, says: “For a filmmaker, seeing movies on the opening weekend is the best possible experience. Moviegoers and fans have chosen to be there, planned to be there and want to enjoy the film. For a

filmmaker, it doesn't get any better."

Winter goes on to say that opening-weekend numbers of most studio releases determine the fate of the remainder of the film's life. "Marketing decisions are made based on the opening-weekend numbers," he explains.

Recently, Winter's production of X-Men: The Last Stand was the highest opening box office of any Memorial Day weekend in history. Reading the X-Men box-office results on Monday morning, Winter told me, "Word of mouth is the most important and most elusive goal filmmakers have today—and the hardest to measure.

"Weighing in on blogs and Web sites that studios read is also important, but the only hard, empirical evidence is box-office results."

I asked Jonathan Bock, founder and president of the publicity and public relations firm Grace Hill Media, about how studios view opening weekend. "Quite simply—it's like voting," he said.

"In politics, if your guy gets the most votes, he wins. If he wins by a landslide, other politicians follow his policies.

"In Hollywood, if your movie has a big opening weekend, that's a major win. And most important—if your movie is a box office behemoth, they make more just like it," Bock explained.

I asked Bock what that means for Christians. He replied: "The best thing Christians could possibly do is start movie clubs

at their churches. Teaching your congregation about how to watch, evaluate and enjoy movies is an incredibly effective way to impact box office and culture. What's more, film is a terrific method to open non-Christians up to eternal conversations, since many films today delve into the great issues of life."

Simply put—if you want to send a message to Hollywood, then go see a film you support on opening weekend because that's when studios decide how long to keep it in the theaters. If for any reason you want to see a movie but don't particularly support it, wait a few weeks to view it.

Your vote at the box office on opening weekend is a powerful way to send a message to Hollywood about the types of films the Christian audience wants to see. So vote wisely.

Phil Cooke, Ph.D., is a media consultant to ministries and churches worldwide. He publishes a free monthly e-mail newsletter, Ideas for Real Change. Find out more at [www.ideasforrealchange.com](#). To read past columns in Charisma by Phil Cooke, log on at [www.charisma.com](#)