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## SCENE STEALER

# Ad Budget Tight? Call the P.R. Machine



Universal Pictures

Universal flew reporters to Bora Bora as a promotion for the comedy "Couples Retreat." Above, crew members prepared for a shoot during the trip.

By [BROOKS BARNES](#)  
Published: November 21, 2009

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Casey Rodgers/AP Images for FHE  
An ice sculpture of Scratch, star of "Ice

Hobbled by a depressed DVD market and drooping sales of movies to foreign television networks, Hollywood studios are finally reining in runaway marketing budgets. Lionsgate, already one of the leaner operations, boasted that it cut marketing expenses by 66 percent in the second quarter from a year ago, while [Disney](#) dismissed about a dozen marketing executives early this month in an effort to shrink spending.

But don't think that Hollywood believes it can get by with less promotion. This, after all, is the place that perfected the hard sell. As studios cut "paid media" (newspaper ads, television spots and billboards) they are leaning more heavily on armies of publicists generating what they call "earned media," free coverage in magazines, newspapers, TV outlets and blogs.

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Age: Dawn of the Dinosaurs," at a recent event in Santa Monica, Calif., for the film's Blu-ray and DVD release.

The biggest movies are still backed by megawatt ad buys. On the other hand, Paramount Pictures did not buy a single billboard to promote "[Paranormal Activity](#)," its recent

horror film. The studio also saved tens of millions of dollars by forgoing a national television campaign. Instead, Paramount depended on its publicity arm to fan interest on blogs and in traditional media. The flack attack worked: the film, made for just \$10,000, has sold \$104 million in tickets.

Over at Disney, publicity executives are coordinating their efforts more closely with those of their advertising counterparts: If the P.R. team for the company's ABC unit can land an article about "Dancing With the Stars" on the cover of TV Guide, for instance, the network will make certain not to also buy advertising space in that issue to push the show.

Disney recently went so far as to develop a computer program to help it determine how much monetary value was coming from such publicity efforts. It can quickly plug in data — "Access Hollywood" had a 30-second interview with a star of "The Middle," a new ABC comedy — and the program spits out what that same 30 seconds would cost to buy.

There is another advantage to a publicity machine on overdrive. "At least with publicity — placed stories — there is a feeling that the message has gone through a filter," said Paul Pflug, the co-owner of Principal Communications, a public relations firm that specializes in entertainment. "Journalists and their editors had to consider the pitch worthy of space. The message has been vetted in some way." He said an article was more valuable to the studios because it is more credible to viewers than an ad.

Social networks like [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) have also changed the publicity game in Hollywood. The P.R. apparatus has largely assumed the responsibility of monitoring, shaping and creating attention on that part of the Web. Movie characters now have Twitter profiles and Facebook pages, for instance. Guess who updates the accounts?

The Web has also given studios a way to bring consumers into the movie-making process long before the first ads roll out. Casting announcements are one example. Five years ago, nobody but the trade newspapers cared who was cast as the third lead of "[Inglourious Basterds](#)." Now teams of digital publicists convey every little pip and squeak of the early process to hundreds of bloggers.

And because one errant blog post can start an online brush fire, publicists do reconnaissance on bloggers — What is their audience reach? Is their writing snarky? Which other blogs pick up their links? — and manage accordingly.

Universal Pictures, looking for a way to bolster coverage of "[Couples Retreat](#)," a comedy starring Vince Vaughn about an island vacation, decided to stage a lavish junket, one of those all-expenses-paid promotion-a-thons for writers and TV reporters. Instead of hosting the event at a Los Angeles or New York hotel, as is standard practice, Universal flew the participants to Bora Bora.

It cost about twice as much as a standard junket, but generated at least four times as much media coverage, the studio estimated. (The New York Times and many other media outlets ban the acceptance of these freebies on ethical grounds, because there could be an appearance of buying favorable coverage.)

"You've got to remain responsible with your resources while continually finding new ways for your campaigns to stand out," said Michael Moses, Universal's executive vice president of publicity.

Standing out on the cheap often means staging silly stunts that entertainment news outlets are happy to consume. The divisions responsible for pushing DVDs, particularly desperate for attention now that sales are declining, are big fans of this tactic.

Trying to drum up publicity for the DVD of "[Ice Age: Dawn of the Dinosaurs](#)," 20th

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Century Fox invited reporters to witness the construction of a 48-foot-tall ice sculpture resembling the star of the movie, Scrat the squirrel. To promote the DVD release of “Tinker Bell and the Lost Treasure,” Disney publicists went so far as to get the [United Nations](#) to name the character an “honorary ambassador of green” to help promote environmental awareness among children.

AT a time of supposedly stark cuts, studios still send loads of giveaway items to the news media in the hope that it will prompt coverage. Disney just shipped jars filled with 90 toy soldiers to promote “Toy Story 3,” which doesn’t open until June. (“Attention troops!”) The studio, which has lost money in the last two quarters, also found the cash to send one-pound boxes of beignet mix to promote its animated musical “The Princess and the Frog,” which is set in New Orleans.

And to support “[The Informant!](#)” earlier this year, [Warner Brothers](#) shipped, at four pounds each, gallon-paint canisters filled with popcorn kernels. We guessed that the tie-in was that [Matt Damon](#)’s character in the film works for a company involved with corn syrup, but we still aren’t sure.

A version of this article appeared in print on November 22, 2009, on page BU7 of the New York edition.

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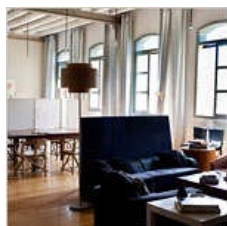
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