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Innovative marketing campaign asks filmgoers to hop in 'Bonneville's' seat and take a ride

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Carol (Joan Allen), Margene (Kathy Bates) and Arvilla (Jessica Lange) hit the road in *Bonneville*, a film made mostly in Utah that is driving to unusual distances to attract filmgoers. (Photo courtesy of SenArt Films)

Posted: 1:39 PM- Conventional wisdom has it that "*Bonneville*," opening in theaters Friday, should tank at the box office. It's a road movie about female friendship and post-menopausal rites of passage, and its marketing budget is less than 1 percent of what most studios spend to do their talent's dry cleaning.

Oh, and did I mention the film is rated PG?

Ding-dong.

Sounds like a death knell, right?

Not to "*Bonneville*" producer Robert May and marketing director Jeff Lipsky. They believe the marketing plan they've cooked up may set an example of a reasonably priced creative campaign for films nationwide.

"We're building a new paradigm," May says.

"Nobody's done this before," Lipsky adds, referring to his and May's innovative, grassroots and sometimes even wacky way of getting the word out to audiences they hope will hop in "*Bonneville's*" seat and take a ride.

Veterans of the biz: Lipsky and May have years in the business. Lipsky is a 30-year distributor who launched his career working for John Cassavetes. Later, he started Lot 47 and October Films, formidable indie film companies.

May founded the New York-based production company SenArt and produced critically

acclaimed films such as "The Station Agent" and the Errol Morris Academy Award winner "The Fog of War."

"I remember," May reflected on a recent visit to Salt Lake, "that when we shopped 'The Station Agent' around, everyone kept saying, 'Couldn't you just make the little guy tall?'," referring to the main character, a little person played by actor Peter Dinklage.

"All our projects have been pretty soulful," Lipsky says, meaning they haven't appealed to the biggest slice of demographic pie - men between ages 18 and 29 - and thus are more challenging to market.

But the duo are determined to prove with their latest film, which stars Jessica Lange, Kathy Bates and Joan Allen and was filmed largely in Utah, that it's possible, even in the world of smash-'em-up action films, to build a great movie and "they will come," Lipsky says.

Guerrilla techniques: While big studios have hundreds of bodies in marketing, SenArt's effort is the work of a five-member New York-based team. The five, who include Lipsky, do everything from securing theater venues to designing poster art.

But May and Lipsky have pursued and won partnerships with organizations and corporations nationwide to cross-promote "Bonneville," and the result is what Lipsky calls "a supreme effort of volunteerism. We're like the Peace Corps of independent film," he says, only half joking.

Will it take a force as great for May and Lipsky to reach their audience?

A great deal of ink has been spilled in the past decade about the dwindling number of leading roles for women in film and the dearth of films appealing to women ages 45-60. Just last week, in surveying this year's Oscar nominees, for example, writer Tim Robey of the *Telegraph of London* asked: "Why is Hollywood so scared of women's stories?"

"The problem," May says, "is that no one is making films for this demographic because they believe that mature women won't go to the theater."

"It's a self-fulfilling prophecy," agrees Bay area-based media analyst Maddy Dychtwald.

Dychtwald and her husband, Ken, are the founders of Age Wave, a company tracking lifestyle trends among the baby-boom generation, which, Maddy Dychtwald quickly notes, is a highly underserved group with money.

Especially women.

She points to "Something's Got to Give," "The Banger Sisters," "Ladies in Lavender" and "The Boynton Beach Bereavement Club" as examples of niche films that have lured boomer women out of their living rooms and into theaters.

A 2006 report on increased theater attendance by the Motion Picture Association of America supports Dychtwald's assertions. In 2005, the fastest-growing sectors of audiences returning to theaters were 25-39 and over 60.

External validation: *The Tribune* asked Peter Broderick, president of Paradigm Consulting in Santa Monica, a firm that advises independent filmmakers about alternative modes of distribution, to take a look at the marketing campaign for "Bonneville."

"Obviously, they've spent a great deal of time on their online presence," Broderick says,

surveying the "Bonneville" Web site. "It's clever, complex and inviting."

As for May and Lipsky's guerrilla marketing techniques, Broderick is also approving.

"The key things that make a movie succeed or not is that it's identified its core audience. Take the film 'Bend It Like Beckham,' for example," he says, referring to the 2002 sleeper soccer hit. "With 'Beckham,' "says Broderick, "[the marketing execs] identified their core audience right away - soccer girls, soccer moms and people of Asian Indian descent."

Broderick says that on opening weekend, the weekend that makes or breaks a film at the box office, "Beckham" had a reasonably decent showing.

"But what's more interesting," he says, "is that by the second weekend, the members of the opening-weekend audience were returning with friends with whom they wanted to share the film, and not all of those friends had anything to do with soccer or Indians. By the third weekend," he notes, "when the audience had expanded even further beyond its original core, you had a hit."

Joan Allen, who plays Carol in "Bonneville," said she's grateful for May's efforts to market the film. "I take my hat off to him," she says. "It's an enormous effort."

In the end, Broderick adds, "it doesn't matter if a film is good or not, if it's Academy Award quality. What matters is that you get that film to the people who need to see it, and if they like it, that's all that counts."

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