

Huge Research Firm Shows Off Talents for Hollywood

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One of the world's largest research firms is aiming for Hollywood.

Synovate, a subsidiary of Aegis Group, a European communications conglomerate, will compete with its own clients and others in its newly formed media and entertainment research unit, which has opened in Encino.

As movie studios and related companies based in and around the Valley begin to put a higher premium on research, they will be able to turn to Synovate, which is more known for its research in financial and health industries, said Jerry Brandt (photo), a marketing veteran who will head up the new research unit.

"We believe we can get a share of that market because we have the resources attractive to companies in the media and entertainment areas," Brandt said.

Although he has been at his job about 10 weeks, and is only beginning to lay the groundwork for things to come, Brandt is already starting to hear from potential clients. He has had discussions with about a dozen movie studios and TV networks.

Later this month, Synovate will introduce new technology for the networks, which will enable them to gather information about video releases. It will be unveiled at Digital Hollywood, a trade show.

Synovate's Encino office has 25 staffers, but most of them only do "ad hoc work" in the entertainment industry. Brandt is helping to grow Synovate using capital and human resources available in the company's Chicago headquarters in addition to the 80 other offices worldwide. Altogether, the company employs 3,000 researchers.

Brandt said innovations are on the way to the research market in several areas.

"We're developing products that have applications for trailer casting and for preview research for motion pictures," Brandt said.

One example is a study of audiences in Asia, called the Pan Asia-Pacific Cross Media Survey, forthcoming in the months ahead.

"The study that exists now is sold in Asia and now we're going to try and replicate that success in the U.S.," Brandt said.

Brandt chose to step down from his own marketing company in favor of Synovate, he said, because Synovate presented tremendous resources that can be tapped.

Synovate isn't the only company conscious of what Hollywood is looking for. There are

smaller firms, such as Los Angeles-based Film Buzz Marketing, and they are getting business as well.

Bruno Pischiutta, president and CEO of Canada-based Toronto Pictures and a filmmaker, said he looks to Film Buzz to tell him about audiences by gender and race. Toronto may not be as large or well known as major Hollywood studios, but it takes its data research seriously. Pischiutta said he believes about one to two percent of a movie's budget should be spent on research. And his reasons are pragmatic:

"If I discover that my film is 90 percent for men and 10 percent for women, I'll target advertising accordingly," he said.

Relying on research

Toronto Pictures is planning to premiere a film about eating disorders in L.A. next month and is relying on research that has taken more than three years to assemble into a strong script, Pischiutta said.

The same is being done with another Toronto production, this time about modern China. Calling it a film that "would basically ... open the eyes of the Western world," Pischiutta said millions are being spent on collecting information about the film's potential audiences.

Pischiutta believes it will pay off in the end.

"If I bring a report done by a research company, the distributor and investor will take me seriously," he said.

Brandt said the studios are competitors as well as clients of his firm, because they do market research themselves relying on in-house researchers. Further, they are shifting employees from packaged goods consumer product research to market research, Brandt said.

"People who were in the packaged goods industry are bringing some of the techniques they used there to media and entertainment," he said.

The studios, though, Brandt said, don't "have a panel of a million people from which they can draw responses (nor) research offices throughout the world where they can test a movie when it is released."

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The Movie Pictures Industry Association, the industry trade group, also has a research arm.