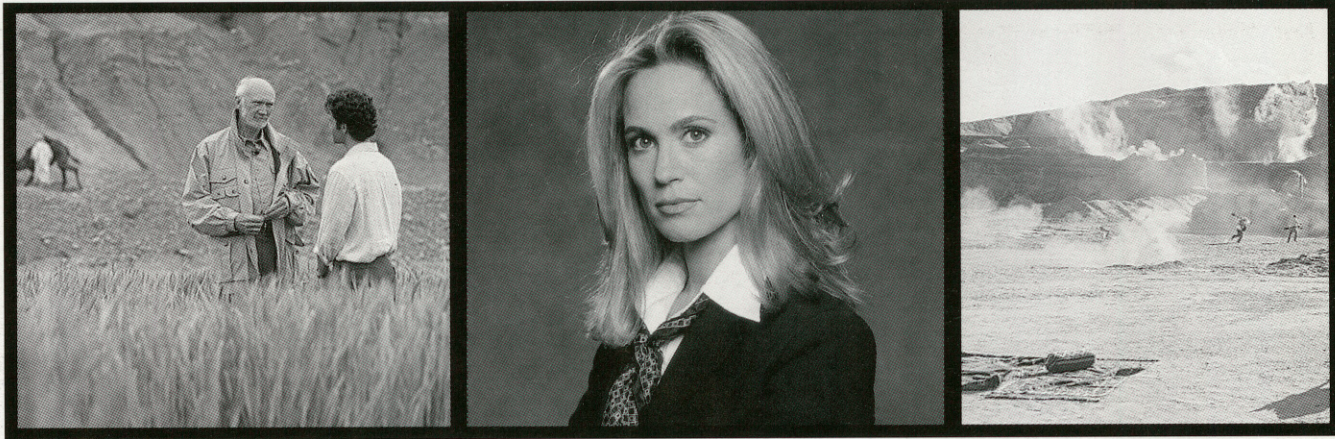


Photos: Cloud Ten Pictures

Marketing the Rapture

by Michael E. Cafferky

For Tyndale House Publishers, marketing the rapture has proved to be an enormous success. Earnings of the Christian publishing house have tripled since the “Left Behind” series of books hit the market five years ago. What started with Tim La Haye and Jerry Jenkins’s *Left Behind* book has now grown to a projected twelve-novel series, with eight on the market already. The publisher has sold over 23 million copies of “Left Behind” items, which include audio books and a children’s series.



Photos: Cloud Ten Pictures

Now Cloud Ten Pictures, which has released the film, is trying to have similar success marketing the film version of the books. In fact, Peter LaLonde, president of Cloud Ten, has set the lofty goals of achieving what no other religious film has accomplished: becoming number one at the box office in its opening week. To do so, he wants to open in every city in the United States.

To accomplish this ambitious goal, Cloud Ten has chosen an unusual marketing strategy. The film was released first on video in November and is scheduled to open in theatres the first weekend in February. Producing a direct-to-consumer video first and then trying for a theatrical release of the same film second is not unknown in the entertainment industry, but it rarely happens. Companies that lack a firm foothold in the market usually try it. Major film distribution houses don't use ancillary products such as direct-to-consumer videos to build theater attendance. The reason: videos, if released first, likely will cannibalize box office sales.

LaLonde's unusual strategy also involves utilizing evangelical Christians in his marketing efforts. To a small distribution house like Cloud Ten, getting in the door at local theaters is like climbing Mount Everest—you need to go there with someone who has been there before. Cloud Ten won't be going there with one of the big film distributors like Sony or Buena Vista.

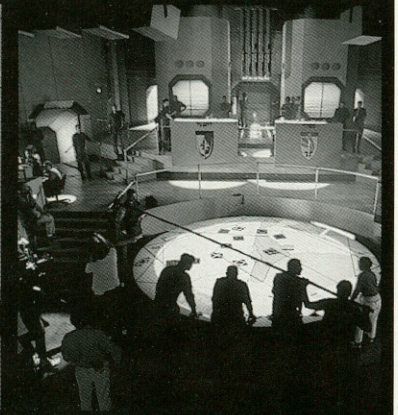
To solve the access problem, LaLonde's team has partnered with Impact Entertainment to mount a direct sales effort recruiting local churches and other organizations to put up \$3,000 apiece to sponsor the screening of the film at local cinemas. Impact Entertainment has targeted a list of about nine hundred preselected theaters across the country. When the sponsoring organization sends its money to Impact

Entertainment, Impact makes the arrangements with the local theater. In addition, Impact sends a media kit to the sponsoring organization that includes posters, fliers, press releases, radio, and television spots. Local sponsors have the option to spend additional money to make their own media buys in their local market.

This program is a form of corporate sponsorship—a tactic well known in the film world. In this case, the corporate entity is a collection of independent religious groups rather than multibillion-dollar businesses that have millions to throw at such projects. Films such as *Hoop Dreams* (sponsored by Nike) and the James Bond thriller *Goldeneye* (sponsored by BMW Z3) have successfully wooed corporations to share in the advertising costs and build audience attendance. Similarly, LaLonde will use local churches to spread the cost of distribution and use them as the primary means to advertise. Informal reviews by video watchers will take the place of formal reviews by critics.

Every local sponsor will receive discount coupons to use in generating audience support. Instead of paying seven or eight dollars for the viewing, coupon holders will pay matinee prices. Individuals who purchase the videos will receive two coupons to give others. Organized much like a massive evangelistic campaign with many locations focusing their prayer power, financial power, and word-of-mouth influence on the same date, this effort will pool the fervor of Christians trying to accomplish more than just the selling of a movie experience.

If twelve hundred people attend any given theater and pay matinee prices, that theater will generate \$6,000 dollars in gross revenue. Add a modest per person donation for the sponsorship to the five-dollar matinee price that each coupon-bearing Christian pays at the box office and you get a ticket



Photos: Cloud Ten Pictures

price about the same as what the believer would have paid to see the movie without all the prayers and hoopla. If a large enough audience attends, the sponsoring church will get its money back, thus making the whole idea a potential winner for the local theater owner, as well as the church. Pastors and church administrators win because it is unlikely that the \$3,000 dollars will be returned to individual donors. The successful program, in effect, becomes a fund-raising event for the church. Church members win by going to a movie with their pastor's blessing, and Cloud Ten wins by collecting a percentage of the box office gross receipts.

LaLonde and his team are depending on an army of enthusiastic friends and neighbors going back to the theater on a cold day in February. If word of mouth takes off from there, they will have the box office hit they desire.

Choosing One's Time Wisely

Over the past ten years very few movies (*Mr. Holland's Opus*, *Star Wars—Special Edition*, *Scream 3*) destined for success have made it into the top ten winter (mid-November through mid-February) season rankings with a late January or early February debut. And these were movies distributed by the major houses such as Fox, Buena Vista, and Miramax—distributors that had other products in the pipeline to offer theaters. Most winning movies in the winter season open around Thanksgiving or Christmas and continue running for thirty or more weeks with the potential of easily smothering smaller films that get in their way.

LaLonde needs a weekend late in the season, when most theater seats are empty. His choice for the film's release date might be good since, as a month,

February ranks eighth in the year for movie attendance in the United States. February 2 is just two weeks before the official start of the spring film season. Never mind that potential blockbusters such as *Red Planet* (Warner Bros.), *Men of Honor* (Fox), *Vertical Limit* (Sony), *What Women Want* (Paramount), *13 Days* (New Line), and *The 6th Day* (Sony) were released on massive waves of advertising and promotion at the start of the 2000-2001 winter film season. LaLonde must be banking on these films losing momentum by the time February doldrums roll around, and he is probably correct.

Also, he is acting on the belief that once the winter season gets well under way none of the big five distributors will release a new film until the start of the spring season. If LaLonde can avoid one of the big studios blasting him out of the box office in early February, releasing *Left Behind* at this time of year may prove to be an astute decision.

Meeting Financial Goals

Before it gets to number one by screening the film in major U.S. cities, Cloud Ten wants to sell more than a million videos (through selected high-volume discount retailers, Christian bookstores, and direct marketing through Promise Keepers and such rapture-friendly television shows as Jack Van Impe Ministries). If the company achieves this goal, Cloud Ten will be well on its way to meeting its financial objectives. In fact, one might argue that video sales alone will generate more than half the real money the company makes on the project, helping it recoup its \$17.4 million investment.

Adding to its business goals is Cloud Ten's hope that, with the movie's theatrical release, small religious theme studios will finally be taken seriously as



Photos: Cloud Ten Pictures

having quality products to offer in competition with major studios. The company wants to move the screening of religious films out of church auditoriums and youth centers into the local cinema and in the process contribute something to help spread the gospel. Success at the February box office will generate millions from opportunities bound to come its way in the form of bigger projects, more capital, better scripts, bigger name actors and directors, and a real shot at the big show. If Cloud Ten achieves its dreams, more independent producers will copy its tactics and we will likely see other films marketed in the same manner.

Left Behind: The Movie, like any of the five hundred new films produced each year, faces competition for screen time and trailer space. With an average of eight to ten new films coming out each week, there are just not enough screens to show all the films and all the trailers. Furthermore, only 10 to 15 percent of all films make it to the box office big time, all of which forces local theaters to be selective. Independent films must often share the screen with another film, thus reducing the availability of the independent film to the public. Large multiplex super cinema chains mainly screen proven winners. Big distributors usually have ten to fifteen more films in the pipeline and can demand that their films be shown, which often causes independent films to be overlooked. It's a cruel market out there, with theater owners often pulling the low money earners off their projectors in favor of new, more hopeful titles.

The question also remains whether *Left Behind* will generate enough discussion among the general public to launch it past the initial momentum that local believers will supposedly give it. Pleasing the conservative and sometimes critical evangelicals who want the gospel appeal to be central and overt

in ministry is another obstacle. Another risk involves convincing unchurched moviegoers that the film is not simply another piece of religious propaganda. Put another way, Cloud Ten's task is to entertain both Christians and non-Christians, especially those who might be skeptical of and offended by attempts at proselytizing. From Cloud Ten's point of view, all it really needs is a few million believers attending the show. However, movie consumers—whether on a date movie, watching an action adventure, or taking in a romantic comedy—want first of all to be entertained.

Cloud Ten might reach its goal of becoming number one at the box office if interest in holiday films flags by February 1 and enthusiasts of the rapture come out in force. If that happens, the momentum just might carry over another week or two. However, if the general public considers *Left Behind* a mediocre film or views it as a poor piece of propaganda, the momentum will be lost in the rush toward the next blockbuster.

Michael E. Cafferky is chief financial officer and chief operating officer at Quincy Valley Medical Center, in the state of Washington. He holds a Ph.D. in marketing and a Master of Divinity degree from Andrews University Theological Seminary. He is the author of the word-of-mouth marketing book *Let Your Customers Do the Talking* (Upstart). Cafferky can be reached at miccaf@bmi.net