Toy Story 3
A Case Study Examining Successful Implementations of Social Media and Viral Marketing

Steven Lowry
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Introduction

2010 was a year of shattered records for the *Toy Story* movie trilogy, making over $1 billion in revenue. Yes, *Toy Story* had enjoyed huge success with its first two installments, but what was the tipping point that led its third installment to such success? How did the creators at Disney not just influence youth, but also entice young adults and families – families with and families without kids to make the choice to take the time, and dish out the dollars to want to see a “kids” film? Beyond the creative characters with the mixture of comedy and suspense, *Toy Story 3*’s profound accomplishment existed primarily because of the social media experts who were strategically working every step of the way behind its launch. Stemming from successful uses of social media and viral marketing, as-well-as the already thriving brand of the previous *Toy Story* hits, it was not by mere chance that *Toy Story 3* became the most successful animated film of all time. Lucy Thornton explained that “cute characters, romance, comedy, excitement – and social media – are the ingredients for a great film, and a great product launch (Thornton, 2011).

Analysis

From the start, Disney/Pixar heavily promoted *Toy Story 3* across different age ranges and demographics, saying that individuals in their twenties would be a big target for the film (Warren, 2011). Anyone who has ever seen a Pixar film understands that they usually appeal not only to young audiences, but to older generations as well. Christina Warren credits *The Incredibles, WALL-E* and *Up* for their ability to attract what seems to be more adults than children to the movie theater (Warren, 2011). The humor in these films snaps the attention of adults arguably more than it does the younger audiences. These lessons learned and ideas used were intentionally implemented into the marketing strategies for *Toy Story 3*.
There is no doubt that the usual television and print campaigns for *Toy Story 3* were mainly aimed at families and younger children. That is just one of many target marketing aspects Disney has time tested and is still implementing better than anyone else. The difference maker in the marketing process for this specific movie however, was how Disney also, at the exact same time, targeted twenty-something’s by the use of social media: Facebook, YouTube and movie blogs (Thornton, 2011).

Some examples of how social media was implemented in this scenario include cliff-hanger screenings at college campuses all over the United States, and special screenings of the film available to college students (Warren, 2011). These campaigns were largely derived from Facebook, where students could sign up using their college ID cards and help fuel and participate in the buzz that was created by these special opportunities.

With Facebook in mind, Disney created a built-in-ticket-buying app which allowed customers to connect to news streams, sharing when you bought tickets to the movie (Sniderman, 2010).

Disney did not stop at targeting the twenty-something’s audience. The older audience, Generation X specifically, was hit with a “Groovin’ with Ken” character profile, which modeled a *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* approach, which established the Ken character to the audience (Warren, 2011).

According to Warren, Disney and Pixar then raised the stakes for social media campaigns as we know them with the release of the Lots-o’-Huggin’ Bear “vintage” YouTube commercials (Warren, 2011). The genius behind this vintage commercial is a profound statement on the quality of research done to make such a video successful. Not only did the younger audiences value the fake toy commercials, but their parents could also recall their own childhood toys; an
attitude that fits perfectly with the *Toy Story* brand (Sniderman, 2010). These YouTube videos, which were shot in high-definition, were intentionally made to look like they were filmed in the early 1980’s. This was accomplished by the way they were lit, as well as how the actors were clothed. The sound quality even matches the 80’s quality, by giving them a “VHS” effect. The thought and strategy behind these commercials is nothing short of impressive, and they were an absolute sensation in the social media world. Being viewed more than one million times on YouTube; evidence that this was an effective use of social media indeed!

In addition, these commercials ignited an attraction from the press as well as bloggers. Warren says these ads worked because they gave viewers a look into the alternate reality of animated film – while also acting as a genuinely cool internet video (Warren, 2011). “These videos managed to promote the film without actually promoting it. The advertisements were for a new character in the *Toy Story* universe. This character is integral to the film, however his role in the story is not revealed from the faux ads,” Warren says in her entry on Mashable.com (Warren, 2011). These made-up commercials were actually successful enough to push Disney to release a collector’s edition ‘Lotso’ toy in late 2010 (Warren, 2011).

**Conclusion**

The over $1 billion *Toy Story 3* grossed worldwide made it the most financially successful animated film of all time. Also, the film received five Oscar nods, including Best Picture, Best Animated Feature and Best Adapted Screenplay (Warren, 2011). Looking back at each creative and promotional strategy implemented, both before the release of the film and during its run on screen, one has to appreciate the innovative role *Toy Story 3* had in the promotion of an animated film using a variety of social media. Yes, the film itself had excellent reviews, but beyond its expected “Disney-Pixar quality,” it serves as a great case study model for
effective uses of social media and viral marketing. Zachary Sniderman says, “It all comes down to knowing your product and knowing your brand. In this case, Disney-Pixar hit a home run” (Sniderman, 2010).
References

