Movie industry embraces an old enemy: the cellphone

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Looking to buck the line at the Regency Bruin in Los Angeles' Westwood neighborhood? It's fine if you bring your smartphone.

Within a few weeks, you'll be able to skip the box-office line and head straight to your seat by swiping your mobile device over a scanner. It can read the bar code of an electronic ticket purchased with an app that also gives show times, movie reviews and seating information.

Phones in the theater were once regarded as a nuisance, or worse - the embodiment of a mobile revolution that was dragging consumers away from the multiplex.

These days, theaters welcome them. Along with better seats, 3-D projectors and upscale snacks, smartphones, iPads and other tablets are changing the century-old exhibition business, presenting opportunity for growth in an industry trying to stay relevant in the digital age.

"With box office having been down last year, it's important to use technology in every possible way to drive the industry forward, and we think mobile is the core of that," said Nicholas Lehman, an NBCUniversal executive who oversees several digital properties, including the online ticket service Fandango.

"It puts more people into seats, sells more tickets and creates a better experience for users."

Already there are dozens of [phone applications](#) that help consumers get to the movie theater, share their movie plans with friends and family, and receive special offers on concessions. A new app called MoviePal enables users to store trailers on their cellphones while sitting in the auditorium, and then sends them a reminder when the movie from the tagged trailer is being released.

Movie Night Out suggests things to do before and after the film and recommends restaurants and clubs. RunPee tells you the best time during a movie to take a bathroom break - to "help you enjoy your moviegoing experience and relieve your bladder at the same time," according to the company's website.

For theater chains, which have been spending millions upgrading theaters to install digital and 3-D projectors, mobile devices represent another way to reach younger, tech-savvy audiences that have not been going to the theater as much as their parents did. Although ticket sales have rebounded so far this year, domestic box-office revenue fell 3.4 percent to $10.2 billion in 2011, while theater admissions dropped 4.2 percent to 1.28 billion - the lowest level since 1995, according to Hollywood.com.

Whether all of the apps are driving more people to the multiplex is unclear, but they are making the process more efficient.

Ben Cook, a 29-year-old film production executive, frequently uses the ArcLight cinema chain's app to make last-minute ticket purchases on his iPhone and reserve seats at the Hollywood and Sherman Oaks theaters so that he and his wife can sit with friends. He also uses the Flixster/Rotten Tomatoes app to get cinema scores and watch trailers.

"I don't plan too far ahead, so being able to make decisions on the fly about what movies we're going to see and where we will be sitting in the

theater is a great experience," Cook said. "It makes planning to go to the movies a lot easier."

Cook said that he and his wife took in a double feature at the ArcLight in Hollywood, deciding at the last minute to watch "Chronicle" after viewing "Safe House." Because the movies were only a few minutes apart, to save time they reserved their seats for "Chronicle" while the end credits rolled for "Safe House."

In Westwood on a recent Saturday night, Bruin owner Regency Theatres was testing one of the mobile ticket scanners being installed at most of the chain's 29 theaters in Southern California as part of a new deal with Fandango.

Regency is hoping that the mobile scanners will help target students from the nearby University of California-Los Angeles and breathe new life into the 75-year-old theater.

"These students are on the Internet and they're on their phones," said Lyndon Golin, chief executive of Regency. "If they want to see 'Dark Shadows,' they can call it up on their phones, check the showtimes, purchase a ticket and guarantee that they will have a seat without having to wait in line at the box office. It's about offering more access and making the moviegoing experience more convenient."

Mobile access is paying off for some movies in particular, such as "The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn Part 1" and "The Vow," the romantic drama starring Rachel McAdams and Channing Tatum. On Valentine's Day, 50 percent of Fandango's ticket sales for "The Vow" came from mobile devices.

Mobile ticket sales also contributed to record first-day box-office revenue for the upcoming movie "The Hunger Games," which already

has sold out hundreds of showtimes in advance of the film's March 23 release.

"Customers are starting to gravitate toward mobile technology," said Amy Miles, chief executive of Regal Entertainment Group, the nation's largest theater circuit, which won approval from Apple last week to offer its own movie app. "I do think it's going to be an avenue of growth because it offers a more convenient way to access our theaters."

A survey released last month from mobile advertising network Greystripe found that 53 percent of smartphone users and 27 percent of iPad users search for movie listings, times and locations on their mobile devices.

"Not only are mobile users going to the movies more frequently, they are using their mobile devices at every step of the process, from learning about new movies and watching trailers to scouring times and locations, finding the theater and even completing the process with a purchase," said Jim Zarley, CEO of Greystripe parent company ValueClick, one of the world's largest digital marketing companies.

The theater industry has been relatively slow to roll out mobile scanners, which are available at only a fraction of theaters nationwide. The technology is already being used by airlines.

The number of screens offering mobile ticketing in the Fandango network will increase from 1,200 (most of them Regal theaters) to about 5,000 this year alone, said Rick Butler, executive vice president of Fandango. (The service includes a surcharge, about $1.25 a ticket in the Los Angeles area, for online ticket purchases. Fandango shares that revenue with theaters.)

Executives with Fandango say its mobile ticket sales grew 73 percent last

year and now account for a quarter of the company's sales. The company says its mobile apps and website for mobile phone users draw nearly 10 million unique visitors a month. Rival online ticket service MovieTickets.com of Boca Raton, Fla., says mobile activity jumped about 60 percent in January compared with the same month a year earlier.

As Hollywood goes mobile, several startups have launched to meet the demand. Among them is MovieGoer, created by La Jolla, Calif.-based Nettle Inc. Launched in 2010 for the iPhone, MovieGoer is backed by Google Ventures and Shari Redstone's National Amusements Inc., one of the nation's oldest movie theater chains. It uses social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter to enable users to find out what movies friends and family are seeing and to record and share their own movie reviews.

"Our firm belief is that social networking in a mobile app is a very powerful tool set," said Brian Dear, CEO and co-founder of Nettle. "It can help you make a decision about what movie you're going to see but, because of peer pressure, also cause you to go more often."

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