

Study explores what really makes a movie successful

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Avatar, released in 2009, went on to become the highest-grossing movie of all time. Credit: Flickr

At more than \$20 for a Saturday night movie ticket moviegoers don't want to pick a dud. Now, new research on movie marketing reveals how to pick a winner – both for customers and movie makers.

It costs around \$65 million to produce a major studio movie, plus another \$35 million for marketing and distribution, so getting it right is crucial.

Yet, despite a large number of studies, predictions of box office success are still challenging, says consumer behaviour expert Associate Professor François Carrillat from UTS Business School.

"This is because [movies](#) are 'experiential' so, unlike a Big Mac, you don't know what you're getting in advance – and preferences vary," he says.

Star power, acting expertise, rousing reviews and public ratings are all key factors that influence our decision to see a movie. Researchers from UTS, HEC Montreal and the University of Cambridge compared these factors across 150 studies to boil down the formula for box office success.

The study, published in the *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, found that when a movie is first released it is the "star power" of a popular actor that has a strongest impact at the box office. However, if the movie has been out for a while, the pull of a popular star tends to wane whereas the influence of an actor who has been recognised for their acting abilities remains steady.

In fact, choosing a film where the main actor has received awards and recognition for acting is one of the best predictors of movie success, says Carrillat. "We find a steady influence of [stars](#)' artistic recognition on theatrical success since the early 1930s – it is the most stable dimension," he says.

"The assumption in the industry that stars are losing their lustre is verified only for popular stars but not for artistically recognised stars."

Despite the temptation, movie executives should not try to salvage a low-quality movie with a star actor, says Carrillat. "Evidence shows that the waning impact of stars on the box office is due to the decreasing quality of movies featuring popular stars."

The other key factor in predicting whether moviegoers will be sitting on the edge of their power-reclining seats is reviews, both by professional movie critics and the general public. "There is a widespread assumption that ratings by the general public are gaining more influence over box office performance compared to professional critics' reviews, but we found that wasn't the case," says Carrillat. "So there's no need for studios to switch their promotional efforts to target users at the expense of critics."

The researchers found critics have a dual role, where they both influence consumers' movie choice and predict box office performance by reflecting moviegoers' tastes. And it's not just how positive the reviews are but also the number of reviews that can predict box office success. "The lesson for studios is that they should aim to have their movies reviewed by as many critics as possible," says Carrillat.

"And for moviegoers – if the movie only has a couple of reviews it's perhaps not a good sign."

So if you want to improve your chances of picking a great movie, make sure it has a popular actor – preferably someone who has won an Oscar. Check out the critical reviews, they could well be on the money. For [movie makers](#), Carrillat says it's worth bearing in mind that even with great actors and stellar reviews a movie will not perform well unless distributors are on side – a key determinant of box office success is the number of screens where the movie is released.

And with [box office](#) revenues expected to reach US\$45.9 billion

worldwide by 2018, they will be aiming for as many screens as possible.

More information: 10.1007/s11747-017-0561-6 François A. Carrillat et al. Debates and assumptions about motion picture performance: a meta-analysis, *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* (2017).
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