

Here's looking at You

Movie distributors have jumped onto the YouTube craze, hoping the site will generate the buzz for new releases



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HOME-GROWN movie Singapore Dreaming (inset pictures) won't hit theatres here until Sept 7, but one of its trailers has been viewed more than 4,000 times on the Internet already.

That's because the people behind the movie have cottoned on to a fast emerging trend - using YouTube, the hottest video-sharing website around, to publicise a new film.

Mr Colin Goh, one of the two directors of the movie about Singapore heartlanders, posted three trailers of Singapore Dreaming on YouTube over the past month, and they have since garnered more than 7,000 views together.

He says that although the movie has its own website from which people can download the trailers, "the reach of YouTube is much further because they are so many people out there watching".

Producers of other Singapore movies like Becoming Royston and Smell Of Rain are also tapping on YouTube to market their movies.

Becoming Royston, an English language drama, has clocked more than 1,100 views since June, when



it was first uploaded, while Smell Of Rain, a Mandarin drama, has seen a similar number of views in the eight months it's been available on YouTube.

"Views" refer to the number of times that a video clip of the movie trailer is freshly requested.

The trend began picking up steam in March, when both small and established Hollywood film distributors started relying on YouTube to create buzz for their upcoming movies.

Trailers, teasers and bonus footage of films like Superman Returns and the Pirates Of The Caribbean sequel have since made their way into the site, where 100 million home videos, ripped footage and amateur short films are watched by users every day.

Deep Focus, a marketing firm for American studios such as The Weinstein and MTV2, started the ball rolling by posting a trailer for comedy Scary Movie 4 on YouTube on March 13.

Within 24 hours, it got 250,000 views, according to Deep Focus chief executive office Ian Schafer in an interview with USA Today.

His company also used YouTube to post the worldwide premiere trailer for Kevin Smith's comedy Clerks II. It got 150,000



views in the first two days.

In June, Warner Brothers posted links to YouTube sites for its TV ads of its summer blockbuster Superman Returns.

Horror website Fangoria.com and Lions Gate, an independent studio in Hollywood, launched a special preview of horror film The Descent in YouTube early this month.

DVD distributors such as Paramount Home Entertainment and Koch Vision have also started posting trailers of their films.

The footage on YouTube is similar to what netizens get from the movies' official websites where exclusive content can be downloaded.

However, YouTube offers the advantages of ease of use and interactivity.

Unlike what is found on official sites, all clips on YouTube are converted into a web-based video format that is streamed to users with little lag time.

Viewers can also post comments on the trailers, and rank the videos according to their taste.

The best part is this: if a viewer wishes to share the video clip with his friends, all he needs to do is to cut and paste the web address and send it as a link to them.

This function helps fuel its effectiveness as what is known as a viral marketing tool, where the promotion of the clip spreads like a virus.

Dr Mark Chong, an assistant professor of corporate communications at the Singapore Management University, says this marketing method is one of the most effective ways to get a message across because it is based on "advocacy".

"You are more likely to believe what your friend recommends to you than what a marketer tells you," he says.

Uploaded, but is it seen?

WHILE YouTube is a good platform for film-makers, Mr Goh says effort is still needed to get the trailer clips seen.

"It is a place for you to share your work, but you still need to get people to the website and see what you have done," he says.

And there is also the murky issue of copyright.

Much of the content available now on YouTube is actually cut-and-paste clips of TV shows and movies that YouTube film-makers have no ownership of.

In February, YouTube had a run-in with American TV network NBC after a clip from its comedy show Saturday Night Live was posted on the site and became wildly popular.

Following complaints, YouTube removed the clip, scoring a public relations coup against critics who feel that the site is cocking a snook at intellectual property rights by allowing free posting of materials.

Still, it will be unusual for film distributors to go after websites that post their trailers, say industry players here.

Mr Low Yuen Ping, the managing director of local distributor Festive Films, says: "Such promotional materials is readily available anywhere. Unless the material is used inappropriately, there is no reason to stop them."

Even so, he and other local distributors like MediaCorp Raintree Pictures are cautious about putting their promotional material on YouTube, even if it is free.

Mr Gary Lipkowitz, associate director of Raintree, explains that films are sold to various companies to distribute in their respective regions, and these come with conditions that restrict online marketing.

Besides, he adds, the audience in YouTube might not be the one that Raintree's movies are looking at.



Hot Internet icon

YOUTUBE is not without its competitors. There are more than 200 video-sharing sites like Google Video and iFlicks that offer similar services where videos - be they home videos or trailers of big movies - can be posted for free.

But it remains the leading Net video download site, cornering more than 29 per cent of the US multi-media market, reports BBC News.

And to think the site started out as a means for people to send out their videos to friends.

In January last year, Americans Chad Hurley and Steve Chen had

trouble sending photos of their dinner party to friends via e-mail because the files were too big.

Together with a colleague, Jawed Karim, the three former employees of Paypal, an Internet payment service, designed a simpler software to allow this, and in the following month, YouTube was founded.

Mr Jawed left the company later to pursue an advanced degree in Stanford.

The company got the backing of venture investor Sequoia Capital, which has pumped in US\$11.5 million (S\$18.2 million) since it started.

It has since become an iconic



company, often mentioned in the same breath as other recent Internet successes like MySpace, a social-networking site, and search engine Google.

YouTube's video catalogue, boasting millions of works, ranges from spoofs of movies and current affairs to short films by budding animators and film-makers. Many also upload footage of their everyday life using digital cameras and mobile phones.

In June, it struck a deal with NBC Universal to air promotional video clips of some of its TV shows, including Saturday Night Live and The Tonight Show With Jay Leno.

In a phone interview with The Sunday Times' LifeStyle section in January, Mr Hurley, who is now the chief executive officer of YouTube, said: "We started out small, and so never thought to grow so big."

But while YouTube, like recent upstart MySpace which has since been bought over by media mogul Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, is hot, industry players are wondering if it can survive.

The company needs to find a business model that is profitable or may face a fate like many dot.com upstarts that went bust.

Advertising on the site, which operates out of California, remains limited, and there's a reason for it.

Mr Hurley told USA Today in April that it needs to be sensitive towards its millions of users when it comes to marketing. "Because we really are a community, we want to build things for our users



and not alienate them," he said.

Industry watchers also say that while film distributors are using YouTube, time will tell if it will, one, become a mainstream form of promoting new movies, posing a threat to the advertising revenue of traditional media like newspapers and TV, and two, whether distributors will still use it if they have to pay to put their trailers on it.

Ms Ching Su-yin, the distribution marketing manager of Golden Village Pictures, says that although YouTube is free, it does not mean distributors would undiscerningly upload their trailers there.

Distributors all have marketing strategies and the site might not give them the film's target audience.

Films that are thought-provoking would work better in YouTube because the site facilitates discussions.

Dr Chong from SMU adds: "Because it is consumer-based marketing, you can't control the discourse which can backfire on the marketer."

General Motor's Chevrolet learnt that the hard way. Earlier this year, it launched a contest to let consumers use images and music to make their own commercial of their Tahoe vehicle.

Some people took the opportunity to create anti-SUV messages about global warming and uploaded them on YouTube.

But movie-maker Nicholas Chee, who uploaded the trailer to his film Becoming Royston, sees the site as an encouraging platform for aspiring film-makers like himself.

"People have posted comments to say how they liked the trailer. Even if the feedback is not that great, we can learn from that and improve on our work," he says.

Movie-makers also have to contend with how it is likely that their trailers will be used - or misused - to create spoofs.

Still, those like Mr Goh say more publicity is better than less.

"We should be more broad-minded in this regard," says the film-maker, who is himself behind the satirical website talking-cock.com

"It is a tacit recognition of your work. I hope my movie is spoofed."

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