

**MEDIA**

# *Hollywood Tracks Social Media Chatter to Target Hit Films*

By **BROOKS BARNES** DEC. 7, 2014



BEVERLY HILLS, Calif. — Hollywood has long relied on consumer surveys to answer a question about soon-to-arrive movies: To what degree have marketing materials made a film a must-see?

It used to be easy for studios to use that data, provided roughly a month before release, to improve ticket sales for a film’s opening — a creative tweak to an ad, for instance, or more male-focused TV spots. But movie campaigns have grown considerably longer and more complex. Now, by the time the old tracking system kicks in, studios say they can do little more than brace for impact: Consumers have already made up their minds.

To help studio marketers get back ahead of their customers, United Talent Agency and [Rentrak](#), an entertainment data company, are introducing a service called PreAct. It joins an array of Hollywood upstarts peddling “social listening,” a growing field that uses algorithms to slice and dice chatter on social media.

PreAct begins unusually early. It closely monitors marketing efforts at least a year before opening weekend. At any moment, studios using the service can log in to a portal and receive various charts that detail how consumers are responding to promotional efforts.

“Every studio wants actionable information, and that is what we are providing,” said David Herrin, the head of research at United Talent, which developed PreAct at its headquarters here before teaming up with Rentrak to bring it to market.

The rise of social media has created a data boom in almost every major industry, and motion pictures are no exception. Among the new studio-focused services: [Fizziology](#), a five-year-old Indianapolis company that offers reports assembled by human analysts and not just by algorithms; [Moviepilot](#), which studies social data and box-office trends; and [ListenFirst Media](#), founded in 2012 and now a large supplier of “fan engagement” information to television networks.

Other newcomers include [Piedmont Media Research](#), which provides demographic data and looks at films when they are still just concepts, and C4, a firm led by the experienced Hollywood researcher [Vincent Bruzzese](#).

For studio marketing executives, the result can be an alphabet soup of competing analyses. Most studios, hoping to cover all bases, subscribe to a variety of these reports and try to make decisions by extrapolating from them. But that strategy can be expensive, with some services — PreAct among them — charging the biggest studios hundreds of thousands of dollars a year.

Since its introduction in January, PreAct has signed up studios that control roughly 40 percent of the North American box office. Clients include 20th Century Fox — currently the No. 1 movie operation in Hollywood, as measured by domestic box-office market share — and Sony Pictures Entertainment.



“It’s not a perfect tool, but it allows us to be really long-lead, and it provides information in close to real time, both of which are extremely helpful,” said Dwight Caines, Sony’s president for domestic marketing. Mr. Caines credited PreAct in particular with helping inform promotional decisions for this fall’s hit movie “The Equalizer,” including how best to use an Eminem soundtrack song, “Guts Over Fear,” to generate interest among young men.

When studios began to widely use tracking data in the 1980s, a single company provided it — the [National Research Group](#), which relied on telephone polling. Back then, studio marketers followed a standard playbook: Trailers played in theaters, and TV commercials, print ads and billboards arrived a few weeks before release.

Now that kind of campaign would get a marketer fired. A promotional campaign often starts more than a year in advance, as soon as actors are cast, and can reach high gear six months before release. It is not unusual for a studio to release three trailers for a big movie and multiple online “featurettes.”

PreAct started in 2011 as a way for United Talent to arm its celebrity clients — including Johnny Depp, Angelina Jolie and Channing Tatum — with better data about their films. PreAct’s vast array of social-media information is collected by one of United Talent’s corporate clients, Crimson Hexagon, a Boston analytics firm that uses monitoring technology invented at Harvard.

“My jaw dropped when I saw this product,” said Steve Buck, Rentrak’s senior vice president for business relations.

PreAct essentially takes information that is culled continuously from Twitter, YouTube, Tumblr, Facebook, Instagram, movie blogs and other sites and provides coming movies with scores in various categories. The system, for instance, looks at the size of the online conversation and how much of it is positive or negative. It also tracks how much activity is organic and how much is the result of specific studio efforts.

Because PreAct has already collected this information for roughly 500 movies, it generates scores for new films by making comparisons against existing ones. Moreover, PreAct subscribers have access to scores for any movie headed toward theaters, meaning studios now have the ability to understand the health of competing releases.

“We’re going to continue to use it,” said Mr. Caines of Sony. “I love that all of the studios could be speaking in one language.”

Warner Bros. and Walt Disney Studios, the two biggest studios that are not yet on board, declined to comment.

Traditional tracking companies like the National Research Group, which is now owned by Nielsen and still sells “competitive positioning” reports to every major studio, are aggressively defending their turf.

“Our tracking remains very sensitive to moviegoer intent,” said Tina Wilson, general manager of Nielsen Content, which includes National Research and Nielsen’s social-media-monitoring services. “We are thoughtful, and we have a real vigor, which allows our clients to make multimillion-dollar decisions based on our data.”

Ms. Wilson noted that National Research “plans to continue to expand” its movie data offerings to include information from earlier in the marketing cycle.