

Kidvid Isn't Kids' Play

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The kidvid business isn't as warm and cuddly as filmmakers may think, panelists said at the recent Moondance International Film Festival in Hollywood, Calif.

Faced with an increasingly competitive environment, creators of children's product need to break out of the predictable formulas many have relied upon for so long.

They also need to think beyond DVD and be open to other delivery options, including the mobile market and the Internet.

"The market has lost some of its magic," said Martin Blythe, a veteran industry publicist who worked for years at Paramount Pictures Home Entertainment and, before that, Buena Vista Home Entertainment.

He urged creators to be willing to take chances, as long as there's a good story that taps into children's imaginations. "I really wish children's content producers would push the limits more," he said.

Larry Balaban, founder of the Baby Genius line of DVDs, offered a warning to anyone looking to hook up with a major studio partner.

Product that doesn't sell 25,000 units in a week on a Wal-Mart endcap is largely looked at as a failure, he said, detailing his company's extrication from distribution deals with Warner Bros. and, more recently, Genius Products. Now, Baby Genius titles are brought to market by independent distributor Pacific Entertainment Corp. Balaban is president.

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Baby Genius is readying a new line of Spanish-language DVDs, Balaban said. More than 50% of U.S. births are Latinos, he said. "We're embracing the market," Balaban said.

However, other panelists said Spanish-only titles don't sell as well as those with both English- and Spanish-language options

20th Century Fox Home Entertainment has a separate marketing department for acquired product, such as kidvids. This lets the group focus on smaller titles while the rest of the company may be in a frenzy over the latest "X-Men" title, said David Bixley, SVP of acquisitions.

Fox has tapped the nostalgia factor with its line of kidvids, he said. Titles from "Strawberry Shortcake" and "Care Bears" lines are an easy sell to parents who grew up with the characters.

"We want to put something in the market that is essentially presold," Bixley said.

Fox also markets directly to children, with logos and images from its kidvids on reading materials handed out to schools, he said.

Suppliers that regularly work on smaller niches often can find homes for children's titles outside traditional retail stores and by partnering with other non-retail groups, said Jere-Rae Mansfield, managing partner of Monterey Media.

Monterey debuted its newest family feature at the Moondance Festival. *The Blue Butterfly*, starring William Hurt, is based on the true story of a terminally ill 10-year-old boy whose dream is to catch the most beautiful butterfly on earth. Monterey has teamed up with groups such as the Make-A-Wish Foundation, The Cancer Society and The Butterfly Association for screening and promotions around the title. The Moondance International Film Festival is sponsored by Kids First and the Coalition for Quality Children's Media.