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## On The Road

Thursday, February 1, 2007

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Five years ago, when DVD and video sales were high, adult performers traveled from city to city across the country making personal appearances in what has come to be known as the "in-store signing."

Now that DVD sales are shrinking in the wake of video-on-demand and other online services, have retailers drastically cut back on in-store signings?

The answer is yes and no.

While the overall number of in-store signings definitely has declined, some retailers have actually increased these personal appearances during the past year and plan to add more to their schedules in 2007.

One of these chains is Castle Megastores, which operates 17 outlets in the western U.S., including stores in Oregon, Washington, New Mexico, Arizona and Alaska.

"We're absolutely going to continue," says Stephen Milo, Castle's operations manager. "We did about eight of them last month and we're going to do another eight or nine this month. And probably we'll continue that for the foreseeable winter months. You don't want to saturate the market and do too many at the same store, so we move them around. We've done about 100 signings in the last two years."

Like Castle, some production companies such as Zero Tolerance also have stepped up their signing schedule.

"For us, it's all about branding," says Scott Stein, director of public relations and marketing for Zero Tolerance. "We're promoting our company with our No. 1 performer, Courtney Cummz."

Stein, Milo and everyone else still involved in organizing in-store signings have come to the conclusion that star power is the key to success in these sometimes costly and logistically difficult personal appearances.

"The most important thing is to get a big name," Milo says. "If you have a name and do it around a big release date, those tend to work a lot better. If you get a no-name girl and try to promote it, a lot of people won't show up."

Jimmy Flynt, president of Hustler Entertainment, agrees that name value is the key ingredient in successful store signings.

"I'm very fortunate," he says. "I've still got one of the strongest drawing cards in the business, that being Larry [Flynt], who always draws a nice crowd. And believe it or not, Ron Jeremy will draw stronger than girls. You hire a good-looking girl who's been around a little bit and put her with Ron, and you'll get a decent crowd. Ron is an icon. People who are 50 know him, and people who are in college know him."

Jimmy Flynt's son, Jimmy Flynt II, Hustler Hollywood's vice president of marketing, echoes his father's opinion.

"Our most successful signings have been with Larry Flynt, Jenna Jameson, Ron Jeremy and Jesse Jane," he says. "Our Hustler contract girls draw strongly, too. It's usually the names that people know that tend to pull more crowds in. We have had signings with lesser-known talent and it gets people out to meet the girls, but it's nothing like when you have a big name."

Of course, it takes a lot more than a well-known performer to ensure success on these promotional junkets, and no one knows that better than Ed Quiller, advertising and marketing executive for Castle Megastores. Quiller is on the front lines of these in-store signings — organizing everything and traveling with the performers — and he's done more than 150 of them since joining Castle.

"The big thing is if the girls are contract or non-contract," he says. "The situation with us is that we basically buy direct from the companies, so we have a lot more pull than a lot of people. So if, say, you want a Vivid Girl who would normally cost \$5,000, I can get her for \$1,000. Usually with signings, you're talking four hours plus expenses. I'm responsible for air fare, hotel, transportation, food and, depending on the situation, a talent fee."

In cases where the performer is under contract to make personal appearances, Castle sweetens the pot by allowing the star

to keep 100 percent of the fees earned for posing for pictures with fans, which is called "Polaroid money."

"Polaroid money is a big draw," Quiller says, "because when you do the signings, everybody wants to get something signed and they also want a picture with the girls. Sometimes, if you're lucky, you can work out a deal where you charge \$20 for each Polaroid, but if the customer buys two DVDs, I give the Polaroid to them for \$10. But that usually doesn't happen because Polaroids are where the girls make the majority of their money. You've got to remember that if you do a signing on a Friday or Saturday night, these girls could be out dancing and making \$4,000."

For the retailers, the expense of these signings can be harrowing. Although all the companies involved refuse to quote an average cost for just one in-store signing, Quiller admitted that it's "definitely" into the five-figure range.

"Obviously the biggest expenditures are the traveling, the hotels, air fare and car rental," Milo says. "Sometimes there's an expense for the girl and sometimes there's not, depending on who the manufacturer is and whether the girl is a contract person."

Every case is different in terms of whether we split the expenses with manufacturers. It depends on all kinds of variables."

Jeff Mullen, president of All Media Play, says these expenses are the main reason why the signings have decreased overall. Mullen's company continues to send out its star performers like Hillary Scott on these promotional stops but does not share any of the costs involved.

"First of all, the store has to sign our contract," he says. "Basically, the contract says they agree to pay all the costs associated with the signing. It states the signing hours. It states the fee they'll be paying the talent. It guarantees a room at a first-class hotel and other things such as per diem and meals. The expenditure is all on the store, so think about the investment the store has to make. By the time it's all said and done, the signing has to pay off in excitement and prestige for the store and hopefully lead to a spike in sales."

The cost of in-store signings also is the main reason why Hustler has cut back on these promotional gigs.

"Five years ago, when Jenna [Jameson] and some other girls were very popular, and before the signings got so expensive, it used to work pretty good," Jimmy Flynt says. "There's not a lot of strong drawing cards out there now, as far as I'm concerned. Now it's hard to make a buck on the signings unless the studio helps you out. I had Jenna Jameson asking for a crazy number. Some of these bigger clubs pay her a lot of money for cross-promotional appearances, but a retail operation can't afford to do that."

And yet, Hustler has not completely abandoned the in-store signing as a promotional tool. In the past year, Hustler Hollywood has organized signings at stores in Lexington, Ky.; Nashville, Tenn.; Tacoma, Wash.; and Tempe, Ariz. — all of which were surprisingly successful.

"In those markets where they don't see a lot of celebrities or well-known talent, you seem to get a stronger draw," Jimmy Flynt II says. "We just had a signing at the grand-opening celebration for our new Tempe store, and we had several hundred people come out for that. The one up in Tacoma three months ago had about 500 people show up. It still works for us in certain markets, but in places like Los Angeles and Miami, where they already see a lot of celebrities, it's not as strong a draw for us."

In addition to the expenses, the signings produce other headaches. The logistics of moving performers around on tight schedules and dealing with star personalities have left their share of scars on the organizers.

"It's a nightmare because some of the girls tend to be flaky," Milo says. "You expect to have a certain person at a certain store at a certain time, and you spend a lot of money promoting it, and at the last minute something comes up and they miss their plane or they double booked themselves and can't get to that location."

However, Milo adds, of the more than 100 signings Castle has organized in the past two years, only one performer missed her plane. Quiller believes it's because they've changed their hiring practices. "When you deal with the A-list girls, it's a lot more professional," he says. "Everything's written out in the contract. When you start dealing with the B-level girls and you're bringing in multiples, that's when you start having situations. If I'm bringing five girls to, say, Seattle, I guarantee at least two of them are missing the flights, and one of them is going to flake out totally. It's always something. It could be a fight with a boyfriend. If you can keep their boyfriends out of it, that's the best. We've had everything happen, but our signings have become so smooth that there are really no incidents anymore."

Jimmy Flynt agrees.

"When you get a bunch [of girls] together like that and you don't have somebody holding their hands from point A to point B, you're gambling," he says. "They may show up and they may not."

And when they do show up, they're not always in the best of shape.

Mullen had this experience with a girl he'd sent to St. Louis for a signing. While Mullen was in nearby Louisville, Ky., he received a call saying she was "completely out of control." Mullen decided to see for himself. "Her first show was at 8:30 that night, and when I saw her, she was hammered, staggering, couldn't walk," he recalls.

Mullen, like other organizers, has learned to use only the most dependable and professional girls for the tours that All Media Play books now.

But in the face of all the expenses and the nightmarish logistical problems, are the in-store signings really worth it? What are retailers and production houses getting for their trouble?

"Branding is the whole thing," Quiller says. "It's not so much making the money back that night, although sometimes we do. It's just that everybody will know who Castle is, and it allows us to step on our competitors. If they bring in one girl, I'll bring in four. Say there's a huge release, like when Digital Playground did 'Island Fever 4.' The name girls all did their signings at Castle. But if you're doing the signings just to make back the money that one night, then no, it's definitely not worth it."

Quiller's cohort at Castle, Milo, says a monetary return on in-store signings is impossible to measure but that it doesn't matter.

"If we break even or even come up a little on the wrong side, that's not a bad deal because there's a lot of residual value you expect to get," he says. "It's just hard to measure that residual value. What we hope to do is attract people to the stores who aren't normally coming to the stores, so they'll realize how inoffensive the stores are, and so they'll come back at a later point and make some purchases. So it's really tough to gauge from the front end. It's more of a residual thing for us."

Mullen adds that the in-store signings produce another very important benefit.

"It's a valuable tool to have the girls connect with their fans, and also with the buyers," he says. "People think that porn buyers and distributors don't get excited about porn, but they only see the boxes. They rarely see the girls."

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