

Case Study

Left Behind: The Case Study

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Cafferky offers a closer look at the marketing management process for “Left Behind: The Movie.” He also analyzes the movie producer’s faith-life integration ideas and the results of the marketing plans.

Abstract

The product in this case study is the film *Left Behind: The Movie*—a screenplay about the end-time rapture. It was produced by Cloud Ten Pictures in partnership with Namesake Entertainment. The events that form the basis of this case occurred between 1996 and March 2001.¹ This case study places the teaching-learning experience in the context of the marketing management process for a consumer entertainment product. The emphasis is on distribution management and promotion. This case study is comprised of three sections:

1. Background information leading up to the point of strategic decision-making by Cloud Ten Pictures;

2. Analysis of the case, including a discussion of the strategic decisions that Cloud Ten

Pictures made and implications of this case for faith-life integration;

3. Results for Cloud Ten Pictures in their marketing of *Left Behind: The Movie*.

At a more fundamental level, this case touches on the tension the Christian feels at the points where the sacred and secular connect. It is about living in this world while being a citizen of the next world and communicating the gospel in terms that contemporary culture can understand while confronting the culture of “this age.” At a still deeper level, this case ultimately is about how we gain access to God, who is both transcendent and immanent, a God who is eager to use the frailties of human relationships to transmit that which is enduring.

I. Background Information

Peter LaLonde hung up the telephone after a long

conversation with a movie marketing consultant. LaLonde had a few minutes to spare before the appointed time for the final marketing strategy session that was to take place down the hall. The executive of Cloud Ten Pictures sat at his desk thinking about the events of the past three years. When Peter LaLonde and his brother Paul LaLonde, producers for Trinity Broadcasting Network’s syndicated Canadian television program *This Week in Bible Prophecy*, walked out of their television studio for the last time, they were not turning their backs on Christian media. The two brothers, co-authors of several books on the popular “dispensational premillennial” or rapture view of the second coming of Christ, had a new, larger vision they wanted to fulfill—launch the first-ever Christian film studio.

Like the prophet of ancient times, the company that the LaLonde brothers created took on the role of telling an apocalyptic story designed to bring people to a decision about their future with God.¹ At the press conference, Peter LaLonde explained, “Movies are the story-telling medium of our generation. They are the vehicles through

which culture and values are passed on. For too long, we in the Christian community have pointed out the shortcomings of Hollywood without offering real, viable alternatives. With Cloud Ten Pictures we want to change that.”² LaLonde believes that while the Hollywood film studios can produce great special effects and explosions, a Christian film studio is uniquely positioned to capture eternal truth in a way that the secular studios cannot.³

Their first project in the new company was a direct-to-video full-length film titled *Apocalypse* that became a best-seller among Christian videos, selling more than 300,000 copies. After the LaLondes cut their video marketing teeth on a \$1 million budget for *Apocalypse* in 1997, they produced in 1998 a second video for \$5 million (*Revelation*) and then a third video, (*Tribulation*) costing \$9 million.⁴ Combined, all three videos sold more than a million units.⁵ For LaLonde, it was the success of the *Tribulation* project that “started the revival in Christian filmmaking.”⁶

When LaLonde saw the success of *The Omega Code* at the box office in 1999, he knew he had a chance at rivaling *The Omega Code*’s success. An end-

of-the-world thriller starring Casper Van Dien and Michael York, *The Omega Code* was produced by Gener8Xion Entertainment and financed and promoted by Trinity Broadcasting Network. The film was named the No. 1 limited release that year by *Daily Variety*, based on box office sales, and it was among the top ten box office draws the week it opened on just 304 screens.⁷ Its opening weekend, *The Omega Code* grossed \$2.4 million dollars. By the time the film had been pulled off the screens, it had grossed more than \$11.5 million.⁸

If Cloud Ten Pictures had any hope of producing a product that could rival the success of *The Omega Code*, LaLonde knew he had a steep marketing road to climb. He knew that distribution would be one of his most challenging obstacles to success.

The Film Marketing Industry

In North America, a handful of giant film distribution houses rule the movie marketing world. They have so many movies

flowing through their well-greased marketing channel that it is difficult for newcomers to break in. Those who break in do so by unconventional means.

Theatrical screening of movies is a \$7 billion dollar business annually, not to mention the massive video rental segment, video sales, and pay-per-view television. Every year in North America, thousands of new films are produced. Even with more than 33,000 theater screens on the continent, there are not enough places for all these new films to be shown.⁹ The reason: most films do not attract the size of audience that will bring in box office revenues needed for theater owners to survive.

Consumer Movie-Going Behavior

At LaLonde's request, Cloud Ten's market research team gathered information from *Screen Digest* magazine to present at the marketing strategy session.¹⁰ The charts they put together for the strategic planning session lay on his desk (see Charts 1-5).

Chart 1

Cinema Admissions in the U.S. & Canada (in Millions)			
	1995	1996	1997
Canada	87.45	90.12	98.14
U.S.	1,262.60	1,338.60	1,387.70

Chart 2

Avg. Cinema-Going Per Capita in the U.S. (visits/yr.)					
	1960	1980	1990	1995	1997
U.S.	7.5	4.7	4.2	4.7	5.16

Chart 3

Cinema Screens in Canada and the U.S.						
	1960	1970	1980	1990	1996	1997
Canada	1,278	1,156	1,037	1,713	2,034	2,164
U.S.	16,354	14,000	17,590	23,689	29,731	31,640

Chart 4

Percent of Total Film Expenditures on Feature Films (1996) in the U.S.				
	Theatrical	Video Rentals	Video Sales	Pay TV
	23.9%	32.4%	19.7%	21.9%

Chart 5

Spending on the Movies in the U.S. (in Millions) 1988 - 1996					
	1988	1990	1994	1995	1996
Theatrical	4,458	5,022	5,396	5,494	5,944
Video Rentals	6,061	7,551	8,564	8,160	8,078
Video Sales	1,469	2,346	3,683	4,384	5,436
Pay TV	4,215	4,842	4,586	5,157	5,448

In addition, the research team gathered box office data from the preceding years. They were looking for the weekends during the year that traditionally had low attendance. They took the box office revenues from the top 15 films each weekend and then ranked the weekends with the

lowest box office revenues at the top. Chart 6 (next page) shows the ranking of each of the 15 lowest box office weekends compared with the average (index) for all the weekends of the year across several years. Conducting this analysis, they found that the 37th weekend of

the year is when theater seats are most likely empty.¹¹ They had to consider other factors, too, such as their own production capabilities, what films had already been scheduled for release by the Hollywood film studios, and the month of the year that video sales present the most attractive opportunity. The team did a similar analysis (see Chart 7) by month of year comparing the gross box office revenues over a period of several years.¹²

LaLonde’s marketing team already had some experience in

video marketing, giving them an understanding of the ways of the marketplace. This they factored into their approach to theatrical film marketing. Marketing a consumer entertainment product like a book or movie is a never-ending problem that requires attention to the quality of the product, strong methods to create access for consumers, and wise use of limited promotion funds to generate early, vigorous word-of-mouth.

Consumer interests rapidly shift from what was new last

week to what is new this week. To be successful in this type of fast-paced market, the marketing managers of entertainment products need to move faster than the public. Months and weeks before the release date of a new entertainment product, the marketing management team is already beginning to work on their next project.

It is one thing to market a video product to a well-defined niche in the market where you know how to find the consumers and know a lot about their interests. It is quite another thing to attempt to mass market a theatrical film product.¹³ Predicting consumer response to a theatrical screening of a film is like the roll of the dice. Film marketing is a risky proposition, and there are many more losers than winners at the box office.

Another important element that Cloud Ten marketing leaders picked up is the fact that consumer interest in film varies by gender, age, and occasion. They noticed that there are distinctive patterns of movie attendance depending on the genre. Moviegoers who enjoy romantic comedies on a “date movie” are essentially different from the moviegoers who enjoy action thrillers. These consumer

differences needed to be factored into the marketing plan. The only problem was that there is little data to rely on when determining the consumer behaviors associated with attendance at religious apocalyptic thriller movies. To understand who might be interested in this type of movie, Cloud Ten had to depend upon its knowledge of the direct-to-video experiences.

Whether a moviegoer is interested in drama, comedy, romance, thriller, or a documentary, regardless of whether or not his or her tastes change, one thing seems unchangeable: the moviegoer goes to the movie to be entertained with a good story. Moviegoers don’t go to hear a sermon in order to consider the meaning of life.

Core Consumers

Peter LaLonde saw the natural match between the customers of the *Left Behind* books with the potential customers of the movie. It seemed a no-brainer to select the readers and supporters of the books as the primary audience¹⁴ who would support the film version of the story.¹⁵ Victor Vanden Oever, president of Providence Entertainment, estimated the size of the relatively untapped evangelical Christian market at

Chart 6

15 Lowest Attendance Weekends in the Year:

Weekend	Index
37	0.63
44	0.63
18	0.66
43	0.69
38	0.70
17	0.72
49	0.74
19	0.75
39	0.75
16	0.79
20	0.79
50	0.79
51	0.81
4	0.83
5	0.83

Chart 7

Index	Month
1.43	July
1.20	June
1.11	November
1.08	August
1.04	December
1.03	January
0.99	May
0.96	February
0.86	March
0.81	April
0.79	October
0.71	September

more than 70 million people.¹⁶ The power that can come from focusing on a niche like this is in the fact that Christians are relatively easy to find and are highly organized into small cohesive units across North America.

Focusing on such a niche market for a mass-marketed product required “out of the box” thinking on the part of the Cloud Ten marketing team.¹⁷ As LaLonde thought more about this in preparation for the final strategy session, this project began to take on more of a public evangelism theme. Perhaps this feeling he had about the market niche was key to finding the right marketing strategy. The more he considered this, the more he thought, “When you have a great product, let your core audience know about it. They are your best evangelists.”¹⁸

Marketing Independent Films

As in the book publishing industry, every new film presents a one-of-a-kind marketing task. Each film is different from the ones preceding it. Every story has a different core idea that becomes the foundation for the entire film and thereby the marketing message required to achieve success. For the independent,

sans the distribution channel relationships of the major studios, this means a gravitational pull toward guerilla marketing tactics—spending dollars on publicity and promotions rather than advertising.¹⁹ Independent film studios have microscopic advertising budgets.

Traditionally, independent films have opened on a lesser number of screens, choosing a regional roll-out rather than a national campaign. Many of the theaters that are affiliated with chains will not take independent films since these normally generate lower attendance and lower box office revenues. This is changing to some degree as the number of cinemas grows, creating an over-capacity and empty theaters. Some regional outlets of the big chains are experimenting with independent films, showing them on one or two of their screens, in effect creating an independent theater within a multiplex.

Facing these obstacles, independent films often distribute to the so-called “art house” theaters that specialize in independent films. Selecting the right theaters is crucial since the early experience of moviegoers fuels the word-of-mouth promotion of the film in

succeeding weeks. Add to this the fact that even art house theater owners must make hard decisions on which films to keep loaded on their projectors. Some independent films must share a screen with another film, thus reducing the level of access to consumers. The amount of time/space available to show trailers is limited, often leaving little or no room for the trailer of an independent film. And, when another blockbuster comes along or is already proven to draw an audience, it is the independent film that is most at risk of being pulled off or kept off the screen. Boil it all down and you find that word-of-mouth becomes the independent film producer’s closest marketing friend.²⁰ When word-of-mouth works, the film “gets its legs.”

Christian Film

What Gener8Xion Entertainment and Trinity Broadcast Network accomplished with *The Omega Code* they did with the help of Providence Entertainment—a film distribution company committed to helping Christian films gain a foothold in the market. The success of *The Omega Code* needs to be placed in the proper context. In the last 60 years of

filmmaking, only a very few Christian films have generated this type of enthusiasm. Most Christian films show in church basements, youth centers, and Christian school gymnasiums, not in the downtown cinema. Christian film producers, as a rule, lack the budgets needed to pull off Hollywood-quality productions. They don’t have the distribution channel connections needed for wide distribution.

Without distribution channels well-greased, it is almost impossible for Christian independent film producers to compete with the Hollywood film giants. And even so, very few of the films with religious themes (such as *The Ten Commandments*, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, *Chariots of Fire*, *The Cross and the Switchblade*) ever made it to box office success. But those that made it did so because the so-called secular audiences thought they were good movies. Though these films were not produced for the Christian market, Christians quickly adopted some of them as their own.²¹ Those they did not adopt they criticized for being unfaithful to the biblical record. In any case, these religious theme films were made to entertain, not to spread an overt Christian message. Roger Ebert, film critic

for the *Chicago Sun-Times*, is quoted by the Associated Press as saying, “Hollywood in general will produce anything that makes money.” But he added, “Overtly religious pictures are not generally moneymakers.”²²

With the plethora of secular films coming out every year coupled with the real financial risks associated with distributing a Christian film that carries a “message” rather than emphasizing top-quality and state-of-the-art entertainment, the major distribution houses couldn’t be bothered to partner with an upstart studio like Cloud Ten. Because the costs for printing and distributing theatrical releases are so high and independent film studios typically are left out of the distribution channels controlled by the Hollywood studios, Christian film producers tend to focus on made-for-television movies and direct-to-video productions. Trinity Broadcasting Network, The Inspirational Network, and World Wide Pictures (Billy Graham) are three examples of Christian film producers who specialize in television movies.²³

As the end of the millennium approached, LaLonde noticed the increased interest in Bible prophecy and Jerusalem-watching

among both Christian and secular audiences. The end of the world is a theme that has been picked up by the secular movie producers, too (*End of Days* starring Arnold Schwarzenegger; *The Book of Life*). In addition to the end-time theme, secular movie houses are also catering to the increased interest in spirituality by weaving spiritual themes into such films as *Dogma*, *The Matrix*, and even *American Beauty*.²⁴ His own interest in end-time events provided him with a ready-made avenue to pursue. Even though some in Christian theological circles criticized the rapture view of the second coming as being “bad theology,” LaLonde and other rapture enthusiasts dismissed the objections, choosing rather to focus on the good these films do in making the Bible accessible to the secular-minded movie audience.²⁵

Gener8Xion Entertainment (the producers of *The Omega Code*) and Providence Entertainment (the distributor) proved that a focused marketing effort on this important niche market could deliver an audience for theatrical showings even if the quality of the movie suffered compared with that of other movies.²⁶ If LaLonde could raise the quality of the film up a notch

or two and deliver the audience, he would be even more successful. To achieve this he would need a strong product—a quality story that had strong potential for the screen.

The Product and Brand Awareness

The *Left Behind* book series was launched in 1995.²⁷ In 1996, when book sales topped 100,000, Namesake Entertainment saw potential and purchased the movie rights. Whatever gamble Joe Goodman, president of Namesake, might have felt in the deal quickly dissipated as *Left Behind* books

rocketed to the top of the charts in the *New York Times* and *USA Today* and on the Web sites of Amazon and Barnes & Noble.²⁸ The book was developing brand equity that could be shared with other media.

An important element in the product is its title. Titling a movie to ride on the coattails of the book’s success seemed like a prudent action to take, and LaLonde determined that the movie title would be *Left Behind: The Movie*.

Another important element for the product and its position is the genre it fits within—it’s better

if a film has a clear genre connection. This prevents consumer confusion. LaLonde determined that a movie version of the book’s story would result in a suspense/thriller type movie. In an interview with Robin Parrish, he identified the movie as “a supernatural thriller.”²⁹

To some extent, brand equity is developed by the collection of actors and director of films. But in this case, with a low budget, the Cloud Ten team was forced to rely on the book’s brand

“Overtly religious pictures are not generally moneymakers.”

equity rather than any equity that the

actors, producers, and director brought to the project.

Competition

From one point of view, one can argue that Cloud Ten Pictures, an independent religious film company, competes only with other independent religious film producers. Cloud Ten competes with Everland, Big Idea, Spring House, and Crossway in the Christian video market. In the Christian film market, Cloud Ten also competes with Signal Hill Pictures, Truth Soul Armor, and Gener8Xion Entertainment. In addition, the

studios such as World Wide Pictures (mentioned previously) that produce made for television movies all are Cloud Ten's competitors. They, too, will welcome the opportunity to enter the theatrical market.

But when LaLonde raised the battle flag claiming that his theatrical film project would be No. 1 at the box office on its debut weekend, he entered an entirely different arena. Not only

was he in competition with other established independent film studios that have experience in the theatrical market, but he was like David going out to slay Goliath. This imagery was not lost to LaLonde's assistants, and the thought of this made them tremble.

To see just how big this Goliath was, LaLonde asked his market research gurus to analyze the distribution strength of the

Hollywood companies. What they found took their breath away. The chart (see Chart 8) of the market shares of Hollywood's largest film distributors lay with the other information on LaLonde's desk.³⁰ In the larger picture, not only was Cloud Ten Pictures about to launch a competitive strike into the territory of these film giants, it was entering the competitive arena of all consumer entertainment options. In addition to going to movies, consumers have the option of staying at home and watching television, bowling, playing racquetball, working on hobbies, reading a good book, and hundreds of other activities.

Distinctive Competency

Before starting Cloud Ten, the LaLonde brothers hosted a weekly television show that dealt solely with the topic of the rapture. In addition, they published several books on the topic. Clearly Cloud Ten Pictures' distinctive competency lay in the area of direct-to-consumer marketing of apocalyptic-genre religious videos. The marketing team cut its teeth on learning how to attract evangelical Christian consumers who share a fascination with end-time events and the rapture in particular.

Most of their marketing channel contacts are in the video-marketing world.

Marketing Goals

Early in the project, LaLonde found it impossible to stifle his enthusiasm for the *Left Behind: The Movie* project. He never wavered from his goal of producing the first Christian film to debut as No. 1 at the box office in America. He also made it clear that he was not talking about being No. 1 for independent films, but rather No. 1 overall in the market.³¹ LaLonde told his brother, "If we can prove that audience exists and we can unite the Christian community behind this film, we can achieve our goal, which is No. 1 at the box office. That's a huge goal. Cloud Ten is too small to do it, but the Christian community is plenty big enough to do it."³²

Only with a national rollout of the film would they have any hope of achieving the primary goal. At various times through the campaign the number of theaters might change,³³ but initially the stated goal was as high as 4,000 screens—another audacious goal that few Hollywood films had achieved.³⁴ Seemingly unaffected by the brashness of his goal, LaLonde stated that he wanted

Chart 8

1999		
Studio	Gross: (in Millions)	Market Share:
Buena Vista	\$1,231.90	16.79%
Warner Brothers	\$1,030.80	14.05%
Universal Pictures	\$985.70	13.43%
Paramount Pictures	\$836.30	11.40%
20th Century Fox	\$783.10	10.67%
Sony Pictures Entertainment	\$624.80	8.52%
DreamWorks SKG	\$330.30	4.50%
New Line Cinema	\$304.40	4.15%
MGM/UA	\$303.40	4.13%
Miramax Films	\$289.80	3.95%
Artisan Entertainment	\$193.60	2.64%
Lions Gate	\$61.50	0.84%
Dimension Films	\$50.80	0.69%
Fox Searchlight	\$40.20	0.55%
IMAX	\$37.30	0.51%
Sony Pict. Classics	\$33.10	0.45%
October Films	\$32.40	0.44%
Others: \$168.4 Million = 2.29% Mkt. Share		
Gross for 1999: \$7.34 Billion		

Left Behind: The Movie to “open on more screens than any movie ever has.”³⁵

With the vision of the film’s theatrical release across the country firmly set before them, they became confident that they could generate at a minimum \$30 million dollars in box office gross revenue.³⁶

Not wanting to leave behind their contacts in the Christian video marketing channels, LaLonde and his team also set a goal of placing 350,000 units of the video through CBA retail stores as well as another 2.5 million units through large secular discount retailers. Since DVD format had firmly taken hold in the market, they planned to place almost half a million units on DVD. The suggested retail price for videos and for DVDs would be the same (\$29.95).

Along with this they dreamed of producing the video *The Making of Left Behind* to sell through CBA retail outlets and use as an incentive premium to sell more videos. Their goal was to sell at least 15,000 units of this “making of” video at a suggested retail price of \$9.95.

In addition to its tangible business goals, Cloud Ten hoped that with a successful theatrical

release, the small religious theme studios finally would be taken seriously as having quality products to offer in competition to the major studios. They wanted to move the screening of religious films out of church auditoriums and youth centers and into the local cinema, and in the process contribute something to the spread of the gospel. Success at the box office would mean millions from opportunities that were bound to come their way in the form of bigger projects, more capital, better scripts, bigger name actors and directors, and a real shot at getting to the big show on a consistent basis.

Breakthrough Strategy Decisions

LaLonde picked up the papers on his desk. He went over the marketing strategy issues in his mind as he walked from his office down the hall toward the conference room where his marketing team awaited him. Today they would make strategic decisions that would drive the entire project toward success.

They needed to choose a debut weekend when most of the theater seats are typically empty and competition from the Hollywood studios was at a minimum. He glanced at the list of potential blockbuster films the

major studios had already scheduled for release in 1999 and 2000.

Cloud Ten also needed the help of a distribution company. Namesake Entertainment had discussions with several Hollywood distributors. They had little interest.³⁷ Cloud Ten was on the verge of signing a distribution agreement with Impact Entertainment to help them through the distribution mine field. Going with Impact Entertainment required new, creative approaches to solving the distribution problem, and LaLonde wanted to make sure his marketing team was together in their strategy before signing the agreement.

LaLonde remembered what Joe Goodman, president of Namesake Entertainment, had told *Christianity Today*: “When you have a project that has good word-of-mouth, the way to go is to start small so that snowflake turns into a huge snowball crashing down the mountain. And that’s what we’re going to do.”³⁸ Today they needed to decide how they were going to accomplish this.

What LaLonde struggled with in his heart was the dilemma of deciding whether to emphasize the entertainment value of the

story or the gospel content of the story. On one hand, if he emphasized the entertainment value of the film too strongly, he risked offending his core audience—evangelical Christians. On the other hand, if he made the focus of his creative energy the overt gospel content, he would almost certainly offend the secular audience. Whatever internal struggle LaLonde might have felt on this issue, knowing his core audience he came down on the side of doing the best he could on entertaining them—without the traditional Hollywood gratuitous sex and violence—while making the message clear, central, and as non-offensive as possible. He remembered his own words to *Christianity Today*: “It [the film] can’t be a thinly disguised sermon. It has to be a story about real people. Much prejudice against Christian productions within Hollywood was not because of content. We didn’t do things at the level of excellence.”³⁹ Cloud Ten’s hope was that they would be able to tell a good story and thereby attract a great number of core consumers while achieving a “cross over” to other audiences.

Closely related to this dilemma were questions surrounding what scriptwriters,

actors, director, special effects team, and other resources to use on a small budget. And, once LaLonde assembled a good team, what would he do to keep all his commitments and keep the project moving swiftly and within budget once production began?

Where to produce the film was another question LaLonde had to answer. If he went to Hollywood to gain better access to film industry support services, it would eat up his meager budget.

Also, the closer he got to Hollywood, the less control he

would have over maintaining the central position of the message of the film. Making the film in Canada aided him in taking advantage of tax and currency exchange benefits while maintaining control over the project.

LaLonde knew that one of his biggest obstacles would be the limited budget he had to work with. Even so, with the healthy profits generated from the sale of the Christian videos, LaLonde put together a budget that would make this project become the most expensive evangelistic

movie in history.⁴⁰ The point about the \$17.4 million budget should not be lost, and though budget was a concern, in the larger scheme of Christian film marketing it need not be a worry. He hoped he could reassure his team about this in their meeting.

LaLonde knew the marketing strategy they developed needed to emphasize their core competency if they were to have the success of their dreams. He decided that they should focus a lot of their

distribution resources on bringing the video version of the film to the tried and true Christian Booksellers

Association retailers. But with the huge success of the book series, he wanted a wider retail distribution than that offered by the CBA, and he was considering offering the video to large discount retailers, too. But, if the huge secular discount retailers priced the video too far below the CBA retailers, the CBA retailers would become offended. This risk could affect not only CBA support of the current project but also their support for future projects.

Another question related to the distribution of the video was

one of timing of the film's theatrical release compared with the release of the video. All successful Hollywood films have a set release pattern—theatrical version first; a few months later, video rentals; a few months later when other courses have been exhausted, video sales;⁴¹ still later, pay-per-view television; much later, broadcast television. Clearly, box office success drives the success in the other arenas. LaLonde was well aware of this, but he couldn't stop thinking about the success he had in the past in marketing direct-to-video products. He wondered whether this was still possible if he came out with a theatrical version of the film. He considered coming out with the video version at the same time as the theatrical version. Another possibility was coming out with the video version first. For other reasons, the timing of the video release can be crucial. Year-end holiday shopping accounts for a major proportion of retail sales. To cash-in on this buying wave requires careful timing regarding the year-end sales season. The risk of releasing the video too soon was rooted in the belief that direct-to-video release would likely cannibalize box office sales and stifle word-of-mouth with too

much product familiarity before the release.

Cloud Ten certainly had ties to the video marketing world, but unlike the producers of *The Omega Code*, Cloud Ten lacked close ties to the Christian media outlet. Trinity Broadcasting Network assisted in the promotion for *Omega Code* through its hundreds of local affiliates nationwide.⁴² LaLonde mulled this over in his mind. He knew something would have to be done to change that.

As he took his place at the head of the conference table, LaLonde's mind summarized the two fundamental problems that his team faced: distribution and promotion. For promotion he knew he would have to rely on time-tested tactics that generate word-of-mouth. But, in LaLonde's mind this key to promotion also was becoming the key to solving the distribution problem. And it was this unique synthesis that he hoped he could verbalize to his team. If he could leverage his contacts in the video marketing world and at the same time mobilize the core audience of evangelical Christians to promote the film, he could generate a grass roots effort that would influence theater owners to screen his film. With this thought

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in mind, he called the meeting to order.

II. Analysis of the Case

Cloud Ten's breakthrough strategy was to use the company's marketing strength with videos to build word-of-mouth for a theatrical release of the film. In other words, they decided to release the video first and the theatrical screening second in a carefully timed sequence. Producing a direct-to-consumer video first and then trying for a theatrical release of the same film second is not unheard of in the entertainment industry. It happens about as often as the winter Olympics and only then by companies who lack a firm foothold in the market. Major film distribution houses don't use ancillary products such as direct-to-consumer videos to build theater attendance. The reason: videos, if released first, likely will cannibalize box office sales. Cloud Ten Pictures decided to defy this law of entertainment. In the process it reversed or (for their purposes) retired the industry-standard ratio of box office receipts to video sales receipts as a tool to track success.

Their puzzling marketing strategy raises a few questions.

Why would a consumer pay \$8 to see the film in theaters on February 2, 2001 when they had already paid \$24.95 at Walgreens or Barnes & Noble to see it in the privacy of their own home the previous November?

The authors of the *New York Times* best-selling apocalyptic thriller book series *Left Behind* might ask these questions as would the film's director and actors. This is what movie marketing mavens would ask, but not the marketing team at Cloud Ten Pictures, who released the video version of the film October 31, 2000 in anticipation of the theatrical release three months later on Groundhog Day, February 2, 2001.

Few models for this type of marketing exist, but Roger Corman, the king of low-budget, B-movies, used it once on a limited scale with his movie *Carnosaur*. Two months before the release of *Jurassic Park*, Corman came out with *Carnosaur*, exploiting public fascination with mad DNA scientists who create dinosaurs that run amuck. It made some money in a few theaters but never became a blockbuster.⁴³ Even so, he sold truckloads of videos. Now Cloud Ten Pictures appeared to be using a similar strategy, but

their dreams were more grandiose. They wanted to become No. 1 at the box office.

Peter LaLonde commented on the strategy:

When we release this on video in October, the only people who are going to buy it are people who are born-again Christians and people who are fans of the book series. What we want them to do is see the film, see the quality of the film, get excited about the film, and then join with us in our major outreach objective, which is to win the box office when we open in February.⁴⁴

We want a Gideon's Army here. And we need to literally have that one percent of the population go crazy with this, if you will, and say, "This is our opportunity to have one of the greatest outreaches in history," and to also send the most powerful message that has ever been sent to Hollywood with the size and scope of audience that comes to see this kind of film. If we're successful in that, we can literally start a bit of a revolution, not just for this film but for all other Christian films and filmmakers, everyone who's vying now to bring these movies into the mainstream. If we build upon

what "Omega Code" did, it's going to resonate throughout the Hollywood world. So, we need to get that one percent totally on fire when they see the quality of this film.⁴⁵

We need a grassroots movement in every city in America to work this thing—as in word-of-mouth, people talking about it. We can make a great movie, but what we need are people on the ground to support that movie. So we're going into each city and [telling] a church in that city [that] for the same price it would cost them to bring in an evangelist, they can help us sponsor the release of this movie in that city.⁴⁶

The Marketing Goals Revisited

With the *Left Behind* video on the market, Toronto-based Cloud Ten Pictures prayed that audiences would flood into thousands of theaters on Groundhog Day to see the film, helping the company return its \$17.4 million investment. And with this success LaLonde hoped to achieve what no other religious film had achieved—becoming No. 1 at the box office in its opening.

Though some films are distributed to 2,000 theaters before the close of the film,

few films open in that many cinemas on the debut weekend. To do so requires an expensive national advertising campaign and a big print budget (for thousands of copies of the film to be available at the same time), something that Cloud Ten couldn't likely do. Only a handful of religious theme films (like *The Ten Commandments*) have become miracle money machines for Hollywood distributors.

The February release date selected by Cloud Ten was in a month that ranked 8th in movie attendance, and the weekend, February 2, ranked 15th from the bottom in attendance over the last ten years. Over the past ten years very few movies (*Mr. Holland's Opus*, *Star Wars—Special Edition*, *Scream 3*) that were destined for success made it into the top ten winter season rankings (mid-November to March) with a late January or early February debut. And these were movies distributed by the major houses such as Fox, Buena Vista, and Miramax—distributors that had other products in the pipeline to offer the theaters. Most winning movies in the winter season open around Thanksgiving or Christmas and continue running for 30 or more weeks with the potential of easily smothering

smaller films that get in their way.

February 2, 2001 was just a few weeks before the official start of the spring film season. Never mind that potential blockbusters such as *Red Planet* (Warner Bros.), *Men of Honor* (Fox), *Vertical Limit* (Sony), *Cast Away* (Fox), *What Women Want* (Paramount), *13 Days* (New Line), and *The 6th Day* (Sony) were released on massive waves of advertising and promotion at the start of the 2000-2001 winter film season. LaLonde must have been banking on these films petering out by the time the February doldrums rolled around.

Also, LaLonde was acting on the belief that once the winter season was well under way none of the big five distributors would release a new film until the start of the spring season. If LaLonde could avoid one of the big studios blasting him out of the box office in early February, releasing *Left Behind* at this time of year might prove to be an astute decision. Never mind that most moviegoers had spent their winter season movie allowances in theaters over the Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year's, and Martin Luther King Jr. holidays and were in the traditional February sales slump. LaLonde and his team were

depending on an army of enthusiastic Christians to bring their movie-going friends and neighbors back to the theater on a cold day in February to see something more than their shadows. Other than the sale of videos, that's about all Cloud Ten could hope for. If word-of-mouth took off from there, they would have the box office hit they desired.

Melissa Richter, publicity manager, explained why the first weekend in February was chosen. "It is just after Christmas. Cloud Ten needed lead time to complete the editing and then launch the video. February is typically a time when there is no major competition from the big houses."⁴⁷

A Plan from Cloud Nine

November was a perfect time to supply the Christian holiday gift market. If the video came out after Christmas, the opportunity would be missed for 2000. By the time Christmas 2001 rolled around, it would be likely that other products would take the spotlight. With the film version released in February, video sales were likely to remain brisk through the spring.

Overcoming the distribution problem for the theatrical release was more significant. To a small distribution house like Cloud Ten, getting in the door at local theaters is like climbing Mount Everest—you need to go there with someone who has been there before. Cloud Ten wouldn't

LaLonde and his team were depending on an army of enthusiastic Christians ...

be going there with one of the big film distributors like Sony

or Buena Vista. To solve the access problem, LaLonde's team partnered with Impact Entertainment to mount a direct sales effort recruiting local churches and other organizations to put up \$3,000 apiece to sponsor the screening of the film at local cinemas. Impact Entertainment had a list of about 900 pre-selected theaters across the country that they targeted. When the sponsoring organization sent its money to Impact Entertainment, Impact made the arrangements with the local theater. In addition, Impact sent a media kit that included posters, fliers, press releases, and radio and television spots to the sponsoring organization. Local sponsors had the option to spend additional money to make their

own media buys in their local market.

Essentially a risk-sharing arrangement with the theater owners as a guarantee in case the film flopped, this program became a unique form of corporate sponsorship of films—a tactic well-known in the film world. In this case the corporate entity is a collection of independent religious groups rather than multibillion dollar businesses that have millions to throw at projects like this. Films such as *Hoop Dreams* (sponsorship from Nike) and the James Bond thriller *Goldeneye* (sponsorship from the BMW Z3) successfully wooed corporations to share in the advertising costs and build audience attendance. LaLonde used local churches and Christian bookstores to get him in the door at local cinemas and to spread the cost of distribution while letting them become the primary means for advertising. Informal reviews by video watchers took the place of formal reviews by critics.

If in each sponsored theater over the life of the film 1,200 people attended under matinee prices, the theater would generate \$6,000 in gross revenue. Add a modest per person sponsor donation to the \$5 matinee price

that each coupon-bearing Christian pays at the box office, and you get a ticket price about the same as what the believer would have paid to see the movie without all the hoopla. LaLonde positioned it as being about the cost of sponsoring a traveling evangelist.

If a large enough audience attended, the sponsoring church would get its money back, making the whole idea a potential win for both the local theater owner as well as the church. Pastors and church administrators would win, since it is unlikely that the \$3,000 would be returned to the individual donors. The successful program, in effect, became a fund-raising event for the church. Church members won by getting to go to a movie with their pastor's blessing. Cloud Ten Pictures also won by collecting a percentage of the box office gross and establishing a relationship with a few thousand film exhibitors. Christian bookstore owners who put up the \$3,000 had the potential of getting loads of free advertising for risking the money.

Every local sponsor received discount coupons to use in generating audience support. Instead of paying \$7 or \$8 for the viewing coupon, holders paid matinee prices. Individuals who

purchased the videos received two coupons to give to others. Organized much like a massive evangelistic campaign with many locations focusing their prayer power, financial power, and word-of-mouth influence on the same date, this effort pooled the fervor of Christians trying to accomplish more than just sell a movie experience. Giving away free tickets is a common marketing tactic used to build attendance and word-of-mouth.

Getting Your Pie from the Sky

The film's title attempts to exploit the *Left Behind* book series brand equity built by retired evangelist Tim LaHaye and his collaborator, Jerry B. Jenkins. Added to this was an increased interest in doomsday, Jerusalem-watching, and new millennium themes among evangelical consumers. After all, Jerusalem is a hotly-contested sacred ground and the new millennium was just beginning at the end of 2000. And, to reach Christians who share a keen interest in these things, LaLonde had the support of several high visibility television ministries and national Christian organizations.

The film's actors added some weight to Cloud Ten's marketing efforts. While not the most

expensive actors, the image package that the likes of Kirk Cameron (*Growing Pains*), Chelsea Noble (*Growing Pains*, *Full House*, *Days of Our Lives*), and Clarence Gilyard (*Walker—Texas Ranger*, *Die Hard*) and others brought to *Left Behind* would help. Going on the talk show circuit to talk about *Left Behind* would help even more. The value that actors and directors bring to the marketing table is the ability to raise awareness among the primary target audience.

By beginning his marketing efforts for *Left Behind* with the release of the video, LaLonde turned to the familiar, to what had brought him success thus far—Christian video distribution. Through his experience in this market, he developed a choir of contacts in the religious video world that he turned to for support of *Left Behind: The Movie*. Though his contacts were a different set than the names and addresses the major film distributors had, they still were an absolute must for distribution success. If this project succeeded with even 1,000 theaters screening the film, the contact list would change overnight. And with this new contact list, Cloud Ten Pictures

would have a foothold in the big market. If LaLonde could follow *Left Behind* with a winner, local cinema owners might have reason to screen his future products whether or not local congregations sponsored the film.

Another strength that

LaLonde's marketing team used was a focused effort on a single market

niche, developing relationships with leaders in the evangelical Christian churches. Evangelical opinion leaders are easy to find. The evangelical Christian market is highly organized into recognizable local entities. Clearly this local niche element is key to success. Direct sales efforts and promotional programs targeted to these organizations will drum up financial support to sponsor a film at local cinemas. Once believers belly up to the bank and collectively donate the sponsorship amount, they do not want to see their gospel investment go to waste. The donation sets up an immediate urgency to bring out the audience.

The sheer size of the evangelical Christian demographic group was in Cloud

Ten's favor. It had been a long time since Christians had had a film they could go to at the theater without feeling guilty that they were supporting an industry that exploits evil for entertainment. More than this, the evangelical's belief that promoting a film like

The evangelical Christian market is highly organized into recognizable local entities.

Left Behind is a contribution to spreading the gospel would be the fire behind

congregations talking it up among themselves. The film probably would generate attendance by people sympathetic to rapture-believing evangelists.

Of Mountains to Climb

Cloud Ten had a good chance to succeed. Even so, it had a few mountains to fly over en route to the big box office hit.

Left Behind: The Movie could use a few rave reviews in the *New York Times*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *Washington Post*, and in every major city they hoped to conquer. It is all but impossible to get reviews published in newspapers read by the general public if the film is not yet released, and there is even less of a chance if the video is released first. Reviews published in obscure religious

publications will drive some Christians to acquire a video or see a film, but *Left Behind: The Movie* would need more than the reviews by the actors, directors, and a few evangelical leaders if Cloud Ten expected to pique the interest of a wider market. The movie was reviewed online by *Christian Spotlight on Entertainment*, *Preview Family Movie*, and *TV Review*.

Bringing out the video before the film meant that *Left Behind* had no opportunity for the traditional sneak preview at theaters. Indeed, the video became a surrogate for this oft-used marketing tactic designed to build word-of-mouth.

Videos were designed to produce free screenings (in the homes of believers or in churches) that produced word-of-mouth. The risk was that the video would create too much audience experience ahead of the theater release, decreasing the want-to-see level of desire before February 2, 2001. Videos may sell like hot cakes, but would people go to the theaters to see the big screen rendition?

Left Behind needed a dynamic trailer, the preview of film attractions coming in the next season, that local theater owners could use to entice the

audience to come back again. The only question was whether or not local theaters would use a *Left Behind* trailer between November 2000 and February 2001. Films are getting longer, leaving less time between showings to show trailers. The trailer is an important element of promotion that is under the complete control of theater owners. If they believed that *Left Behind* would have a run of more than just one or two weekends, theater owners may have wanted to use trailers during December and January. If, however, they were interested in partnering with a local congregation merely to reduce the risks of trying an independent religious film, but they didn't believe *Left Behind* actually would go anywhere, using the trailer for *Left Behind* would not help them much. Nor would screening a *Left Behind* trailer help theater owners promote a Sony or Buena Vista potential blockbuster that might be scheduled for the spring season. The Sony and Buena Vista trailers would be the odds-on favorites to show in December and January.

Another hurdle would be the presentation of the story line in the movie. The *Left Behind* books were proven best-sellers.

This doesn't automatically translate into a great film. The quality of the acting, the plot, special effects, and overall presentation of the script were vital if the film expected to get its word-of-mouth legs to success. The risk was that in trying to mimic the big studios and compete with monster budget films by creating a mainstream X-files type drama about the end of time, the movie would come off as a low-budget "me-too" production.

Cloud Ten's lack of experience in distributing film to theaters might have been its single biggest obstacle. In movie marketing success, the key is distribution, distribution, distribution. Cloud Ten was not using the major distribution houses to launch the film in theaters. Instead, the marketing team put a new twist on the idea of using videos and a novel form of "corporate sponsorship" (organized along the lines of an evangelistic campaign) to place the film in theaters. Did the cinemas selected have an opportunity to view the film before signing an agreement?

Left Behind: The Movie, like any one of the many new films that are produced each year, faced competition for screen time and

trailer space. With scores of new films coming out every week on the average, there are just not enough screens to show them all and not enough time to show all the trailers available to promote these new films. Add this fact to the awareness that only ten to 15 percent of all films make it to the box office big-time, and you have a recipe for selectivity by the local theater owner. Independent films often have to share a screen with another film, reducing its availability to the public. Large multiplex super cinema chains screen mainly films distributed from the proven winners. In addition, the big distributors have the clout of ten to 15 more films in the pipeline and can demand the showing of their less successful films as well as the blockbusters. The end result: independent films easily get edited off the marquee. It's a cruel market, with theater owners pulling the low money earners off their projectors in favor of new, more hopeful titles.

Limited screen time available corresponds with the restricted number of column inches available for critics to show their thumbs the week before February 2, 2001. Even if *Left Behind* obtained reviews in

publications fit for the general public, would the reviews get enough space to have any effect on attendance in February? With a decentralized distribution strategy involving local churches, it was questionable to what extent the film would get local reviews in time to crossover to the so-called secular audience.

The question also remained whether *Left Behind* would generate enough buzz among the general public to launch past the initial momentum given it by local believers. Pleasing the conservative and sometimes critical evangelicals who want the gospel appeal to be central and overt in ministry was another mountain to get around. The other side of this risky coin was the task of convincing the unchurched moviegoers that the film was not just another religious propaganda piece. Put another way from the point of view of evangelists, Cloud Ten's task was to entertain both Christians and non-Christians, especially those who might be skeptical of and offended by attempts at proselytizing. From Cloud Ten's point of view, all they really needed to see was a few million believers attending the show during February and March.

Faith-Life Integration Issues

Regardless of our vocation, Christians are by definition the "salt of the earth," the "light of the world," a bright city on a hill that "cannot be hidden."⁴⁸ That is to say, because we are Christians, we can do no other than be lights. Whether we know it or not, our witness cannot be hidden. It is a reality that is as certain as the Lord who is the greater Light of the world.

Paul restates this same truth in the indicative: "you shine as lights in the world."⁴⁹ God does not want the salt to lose its savor.⁵⁰ This applies as much to a film producer as it does to the minister of the gospel, and in this regard there is really no difference between the two professions. Workers in both professions are challenged to "do all to the glory of God"⁵¹ and in whatever they do "do it with all your might."⁵² Whatever our task, we are admonished to "work heartily, as serving the Lord and not men."⁵³ The challenge that anyone faces, whether a minister of the gospel, auto mechanic, or filmmaker, is the challenge to be salt without losing savor.

Some Christians speak in terms of living in this present world (the secular) while being a citizen of the heavenly world

(the sacred); we are merely sojourners here but we belong elsewhere. The Bible clearly teaches that at the same time Christians are called out of the world they are called into the world.⁵⁴ We are called to be in the world in such a way that others with whom we communicate are influenced for the cause of the gospel. Yet while we are in this world, hoping for the world to come, we stand along with those to whom we minister under the unifying reality of God. Some wish to artificially separate the elements of our life into sacred and secular, but as Dietrich Bonhoeffer says, there are not two realities (sacred and secular), but one—one reality under God.⁵⁵ Ray Anderson concurs: “Religion tends to reinforce its authenticity and power through the boundaries which are drawn between the sacred and the profane, while faith lives only before God in a world with no boundaries.”⁵⁶ If Bonhoeffer and Anderson are correct, this means that the sacred gospel must be allowed, in an ironic way, to become Spirit-blessed secular without watering down its message. That is, it must be placed fully and completely right in the middle of the secular context in which our lives are

lived. Only in this way can it truly have power to transform lives. Unlike people in many other professions, a Christian filmmaker such as LaLonde has an unusual opportunity to be at the same moment both squarely in the middle of contemporary culture and under the sacred rule of our Lord, using an art form that speaks to both believers and nonbelievers.

It is in this unified reality, this integrated whole of life, that we influence others for good. This is the context in which the leaders of a company attempt to serve God. And, in a way not completely unlike that of the apocalyptic prophets Ezekiel, Daniel, and John, Cloud Ten Pictures portrays to contemporary world culture its interpretation of eternal truth. For modern day prophets to be heard, they must have credibility; they must speak in a way that is intelligible to contemporary culture. Thus, in a unique way, Cloud Ten Pictures and all other Christian film studios stand at the crossroad between sacred and secular in a highly visible and sometimes controversial way.

At a much deeper level, this case reflects how Christians live with the problem of how to gain access to God, who is at the same

time transcendent and near. Ironically, just as Cloud Ten Pictures struggled in developing a distribution strategy that created access to consumers, so in its larger role under God it has made an heroic effort to create access to God and its interpretation of truth through film. Just as God directed Moses to erect the ancient tabernacle close to Israel’s camp, a spectacle of Divine worship, so Christian filmmakers have a unique opportunity to erect a spectacle that will draw their audiences to the Divine.

Scripture describes God’s transcendence in many places. “You are from below; I am from above.”⁵⁷ “He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High, who abides in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the Lord, ‘My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust.’”⁵⁸ “How unsearchable are His judgments and how inscrutable His ways!”⁵⁹ Because of His transcendence, human beings have a problem of access. One might even say that access is at the core of a problem that needs to be solved if we are to

glorify God and enjoy Him forever.

Without a connecting link, God is unapproachable. Jesus, through His person and work, is that connecting link. Only through His righteousness can we gain access to God’s throne, and because of this righteousness our

... Christian filmmakers have a unique opportunity to erect a spectacle that will draw their audiences to the Divine.

access is described as bold.⁶⁰ “In the beginning was the Word, and

the Word was with God ... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”⁶¹ In addition to the access created by Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit is designated as the One to guide us into truth.⁶² The Spirit helps us in our weakness, speaking on our behalf when we cannot put words to the deepest cries of our soul.⁶³ In addition to Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit as the primary connecting links, believers everywhere are God’s “ambassadors,” a “nation of priests.”⁶⁴ This is none other than a form of decentralized distribution. For many unbelievers, it is their contact with a believer in the context of their work or as a result of their work that opens access to God.

It is in this way that filmmakers can play a unique, dramatic role by captivating the imagination, thrilling the senses. Is it possible that through the medium of film God's immanence is portrayed in a way unlike any other?

One viewing of the film may move people to think about their place in the final judgment, but exactly what would people be talking about when they left the theaters on Groundhog Day? Would the evangelicals be talking about anything other than the contribution the film might be making to the spread of the gospel? Would there be two or three sound bites to drop in conversations? Would there be one or two poignant moments in the film that would linger in the imagination, captivating conversations the next morning while people shoveled February snow with the neighbors? Would the skeptic who attended out of personal goodwill with an evangelical friend or neighbor have anything to say when he drove home? Personal reflection on one's position in the Kingdom of God is often a private matter. Cloud Ten's strategy was bound to have some success in getting an audience out once. Whether or not a buzz would take hold was quite another matter. Depending

on who you talked with, the answers to these questions was mixed.

Additional Faith-Life Integration Issues

At a time in history when the U.S. Senate Commerce Committee was grilling Hollywood executives regarding marketing films to children, *Left Behind: The Movie* had its own marketing challenges as it tried to break in where film giants thundered around it. People question the ethics of Hollywood in its marketing approaches with R-rated films, but Cloud Ten was not immune from ethical issues. The issue of exploiting the mission of well-meaning believers to promote a product offered by a for-profit organization has its ethical side. Certainly the cynical skeptics in the *Left Behind* audience would complain about this if they knew all the financial arrangements. Certainly they would feel cheated by an entertainment experience that did not measure up to a blockbuster's standards.

LaLonde stated that "the big studios can do the effects, they can do the explosions, they can do all the marketing and the publicity. But to capture eternal truth on film, I think that's

something we can do as a Christian film studio that they cannot do."⁶⁵ I wonder whether this was just another example of Christian arrogance seeping through. I find it difficult to accept that LaLonde really believed his own words. Hollywood film studios can make any film they want to espouse any ideology desired portrayed by any screen story they see fit. And, they can do it in a style that is unmatched by any other source. Hollywood has not wanted to produce a film that captures the evangelical Christian views on "eternal truth" in ways that evangelical Christians find acceptable. If capturing eternal truth is the most important criteria for success in a project like this, why did LaLonde spend so much energy defending his desire to upgrade the quality of the production on a par with what Hollywood can produce? Why would so much energy be placed on the top goal of being No. 1 at the box office? LaLonde was very clear on this point: his first priority was to attempt to make a good movie, and the second priority was to achieve box office breakthrough success into the arena where Hollywood studios usually roam at will.⁶⁶ Lesser priorities must have

included the interest in portraying a Christian message in a non-offensive manner.

Consider LaLonde's perspective on the interface between Christianity and culture. He said, "Here's the thing. We in the Christian community have pointed out the errors of Hollywood for how many years? We're not offering any viable alternatives. It's really time, if we're going to battle for our culture, to get out there on the front lines and do it. We're not quite at studio level yet, but boy, we're coming like a freight train."⁶⁷ And again, "If we are going to compete with the most powerful institution in our world today, then we have to compete with the best of the best to be the best among them."⁶⁸ LaLonde's apparent desire as voiced here was that Christian film studios should completely immerse themselves in the world of film in order to first gain credibility and thereby be heard. It is only by coming close to the culture and then excelling in terms credible to the audience that we are able to gain a listening ear. Many conservative Christian theology pundits will disagree with LaLonde on this point out of fear of defiling the purity of the eternal truth. It seems to me that

though Cloud Ten's attempt was less than perfect, their work was an Incarnation-like ministry.

III. Results

When reviewing the results of the marketing efforts for *Left Behind*, it is important to consider the context in which the movie entered the market. On its debut weekend, the movie competed for attention with several films that had opened in the previous few weeks, including: *The Wedding Planner*, *Save the Last Dance*, *Cast Away*, *Traffic*, *Sugar & Spice*, *Crouching Tiger—Hidden Dragon*, *Snatch*, *Finding Forrester*, and *What Women Want*. Among these, *Cast Away*, *The Wedding Planner*, and *Crouching Tiger—Hidden Dragon* had received major attention and advertising budgets.

In addition to these films that were already on the market February 2, *Left Behind* joined with other new films that received attention, including *Valentine*, *Head Over Heels*, *Amy*, *Fever*, *In the Mood For Love*, *The Invisible Circus*, *Nico & Dani*, and *The Million Dollar Hotel*. The last six of these films

were limited releases while *Valentine* and *Head Over Heels* were national releases just like *Left Behind*.

Theater Sponsorships

Between October 31, 2000 and March 4, 2001, the author monitored the Impact Entertainment Web site that listed the sponsored theaters by city and state. This information he analyzed on a spreadsheet. Also, the author monitored the weekly reported box office revenue figures as published on the *Yahoo! Movies* Web site between January 26, 2001 and March 4, 2001. These figures are probably not complete since some theaters do not report gross sales.

Even so, since all movies playing during this competitive time period were

considered in the review, any underreporting for *Left Behind* would probably be matched at least to some degree by underreporting for other movies.

By the time October 31, 2000 rolled around, Impact Entertainment had published their vision of sponsoring almost 900 screens across the U.S. and

Canada—short of the 2,500 theaters goal that LaLonde pronounced when the film was under production. By November 6, 54 percent of the targeted theaters had received sponsors.

By late January 2001, 874 sponsorships had been arranged. In spite of this, Impact Entertainment ended up showing the film on just 670 screens opening weekend. Christians in approximately 200 cities were disappointed when some sponsored theaters had “holdover films” that they selected in place of *Left Behind*. After calculating the expected revenue from the holdover film and comparing it with the expected revenue from *Left Behind*, these theaters opted for a holdover product that was still producing a positive revenue stream.⁶⁹

Geographical Distribution of Sponsorships

Twenty-two states represent 80 percent of the vision for sponsored theaters, with Texas, California, Illinois, Michigan, Ohio, New York, Florida, Pennsylvania, and Georgia comprising the top ten. LaLonde talked about his desire to screen the film in every major U.S. city, but the Impact Entertainment list

of target cities suggests a different approach was taken, i.e., showing the film in cities where the film was welcomed by a local congregation eager to promote the rapture story or in independent theaters not under the influence of the large film distributors.

Twenty-nine percent of the total sponsored theaters signed up during the last month. These late arrivals came from among the strongest states.

Impact Entertainment exceeded its vision significantly in the following states: Florida, Ohio, New York, Virginia, Indiana, Massachusetts, Kentucky, South Carolina, New Jersey, and Washington.

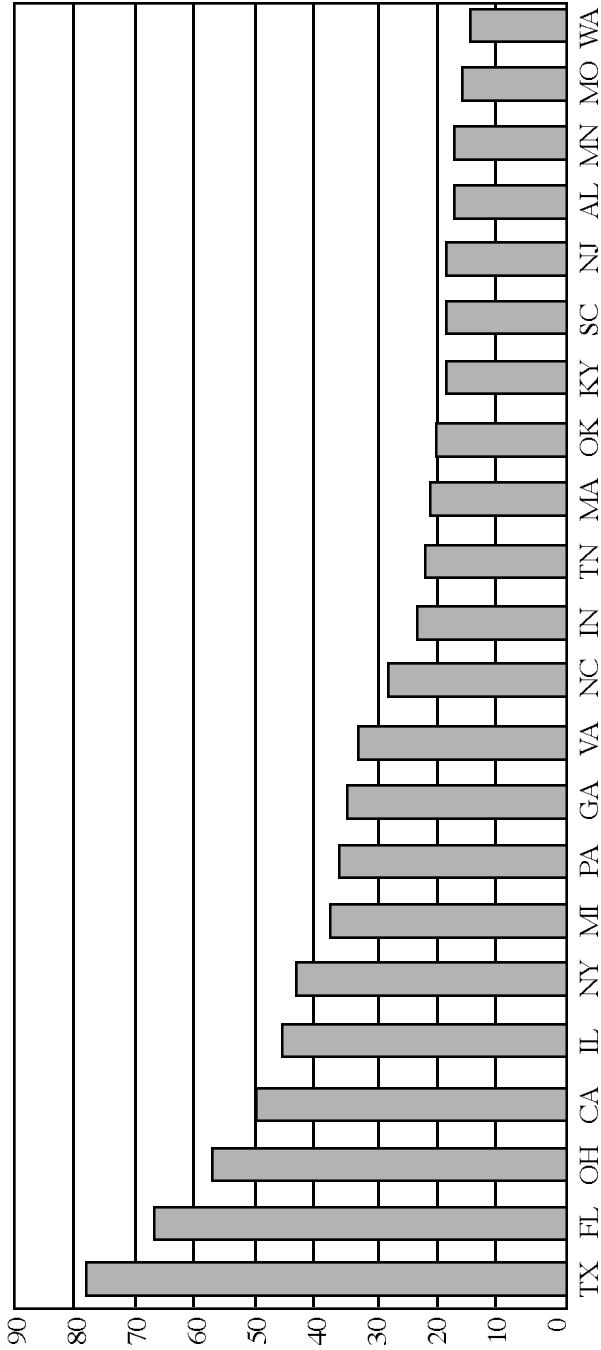
Eighty percent of the sponsored theaters on opening weekend were located in 22 states. Chart 9 (next page) depicts the top sponsored states. Fifty percent of the sponsored theaters are located in the top nine states. Every state in the U.S. had at least one screen sponsored by the time the debut weekend came. More than 750 cities were reached, with one tenth of these having multiple screens sponsored.

Reviews

Cloud Ten received generally positive reviews from supportive

Top States Representing 80% of the Total Theater Sponsorships as of Feb. 2, 2001

Data from Impact Entertainment Web Site, Feb. 2, 2001



believers. Positive opinion leader support came from many Christian celebrities, including Billy Graham, Jack Van Impe Ministries, Focus on the Family, and Promise Keepers.

Reviews among the secular critics were mixed but tended to give the film low ratings for its entertainment value. For example, the *New York Times* and *TV Guide* were less than flattering as were reviewers at the Associated Press, Mr. Showbiz, and film.com. Melissa Richter explained in an interview with the author that Cloud Ten Pictures did not attempt to obtain reviews from the major film critics “because they wouldn’t understand the biblical premise.”⁷⁰ I doubt that these film critics will agree with her assertion. Some might even be offended, since it places them in a less-than-credible position of not being able to understand a film’s premise. *Left Behind* is not the only film that has been produced the last few years dealing with an end-of-the-world premise. The critics didn’t miss the premise of the other films. Sidestepping the critics just because they might not understand the premise suggests that Cloud Ten expected a less-than-favorable response from critics. If Cloud Ten wanted to be

No. 1 at the box office, did they really think they could get there without the support of the major film critics?

Publicity

The publicity department successfully placed actor Kirk Cameron on several talk shows in the weeks preceding the debut of the theatrical screening. He appeared on *Pure Oxygen*, *Rosie O’Donnell*, *Celebrity Spotlight*, *Fox News*, and several local morning shows, including *Good Morning Texas*. He appeared on local CBS, ABC, and NBC affiliates, *Good Day Atlanta*, *CNN Showbiz*, *Moneyline*, and was featured on *CNN News*.⁷¹

The Box Office

The week following its debut, Cloud Ten Pictures’ publicity department moved quickly to interpret the results. In their news release of February 8, they stated that the release of *Left Behind* “proved to be a ‘minor miracle,’ ranking as the number one independent release for the weekend according to AC Nielson’s EDI.”⁷² They were quick to point out that the selected weekend proved to be more competitive than expected: “With a solid box office, up 42 percent over the

same week last year, other top grossing, held-over releases such as *What Women Want* and *Snatch* left limited screen availability.⁷³

In the debut weekend of February 2-4, 2001, *Left Behind* ranked 17th. It ranked third among its debut cohort group that entered the market at the same time. By March 2, 2001, the box office receipts for *Left Behind* had topped \$4 million. Based on the results through the month of February, Cloud Ten Pictures expected to generate a cumulative

total of about \$5 million in box office receipts.⁷⁴

During the succeeding weeks after its debut, *Left Behind* slipped from 17th to 22nd, 37th, 44th, and climbed back up to 38th the weekend of March 2-4. Such a drop in ranking is expected for all but the few blockbuster films. Even so, Chart 10 depicts the change in revenue between the debut week and the second weekend. *Left Behind* had the steepest drop in revenue, indicating that public interest in the movie declined faster for it

than for other films that debuted at or near the same time.

It is difficult to explain the fact that *The Omega Code* grossed around \$12 million but opened in less than half the theaters that *Left Behind* opened in. Was it the media support afforded it by the Trinity Broadcasting Network?

Video Sales

Left Behind was the number one video release in America in its week of release in October. As of February 2, 2001, Cloud Ten had placed about 100,000 copies of *The Making of Left Behind*. This far outpaced the original goal of 15,000 copies.

The first wave of videos and DVDs sold between November 2000 and February 2001 resulted in the sale of 1,500,000 units, about what had been expected. Immediately after the debut weekend, Cloud Ten had orders for an additional 1,500,000 units. In its press release to the secular market, Cloud Ten proudly announced on February 8, 2001: “Launched on video October 31st, *Left Behind* catapulted to No. 1 overall as reported by *The Hollywood Reporter*, beating out heavyweights *Toy Story 2* and *The Green Mile*. Sales tipped over 2.5 million units at a suggested

retail price of \$29.95 and continue to rise. In January it was awarded *Best Selling Title of the Year from an Independent Studio* and *Sell-through Title of the Year by an Independent Studio* at the VSDA Home Entertainment Awards in Las Vegas.⁷⁶ Cloud Ten’s core competency shows its true colors in these results. Video sales of *Left Behind* will easily be ten times more than the sales of any of their earlier videos. While Cloud Ten attributes the box office success to a “minor miracle,” one wonders whether the strong emphasis on the video sales prior to the theatrical release did, in fact, cannibalize ticket sales.

Strained Relationships

Dealing in the Hollywood arena sometimes comes with a different kind of price. The success of video sales in the secular market sparked channel conflict between the CBA retailers and Cloud Ten Pictures. Disgruntled retailers watched the results of price-conscious WalMart customers purchasing the video for \$17.88 when they were trying to sell it for full retail value. Some retailers claimed that some discount retailers were selling the video retail for less than the

Chart 10⁷⁵

Box Office Revenues			
Film	Opening Week Rev.	Second Week Rev.	% Change in Rev.
Debut Week of Jan. 26			
<i>The Wedding Planner</i>	13,510,293	10,605,542	-21.5%
<i>Sugar & Spice</i>	5,891,176	3,621,274	-38.5%
<i>Faithless</i>	29,462	27,425	-6.9%
<i>The Legend of Rita</i>	9,318	9,174	-1.5%
Debut Weekend of Feb. 2-4			
<i>Valentine</i>	10,024,648	3,826,454	-61.8%
<i>Head Over Heels</i>	4,804,595	2,611,120	-45.7%
<i>Left Behind: The Movie</i>	2,158,780	717,509	-66.8%
<i>In the Mood for Love</i>	113,280	103,722	-8.4%
Debut Weekend of Feb. 9-11			
<i>Hannibal</i>	58,003,121	33,501,505	-42.2%
<i>Saving Silverman</i>	7,411,852	4,812,228	-35.1%

independent Christian booksellers could buy it wholesale. Citing a letter that LaLonde published in the December 2000 issue of *CBA Marketplace*, one retailer stated that LaLonde's response to CBA retailers' outcries was "too little, too late."⁷⁷ The Cloud Ten press release told how LaLonde would deal with this: "Even with this success, we also faced the challenges that come with it. We made a promise to Christian retailers that as soon as we got past the theatrical release we would begin to work with them to find ways to keep them competitive with the discount retailers."⁷⁸

Relationships have been strained between Cloud Ten Pictures, Namesake Entertainment, and the authors of the book series. The authors filed suit, claiming that Cloud Ten Pictures did not fulfill its promises regarding the theatrical release date and the size of the production budget.⁷⁹

Although Cloud Ten Pictures did not achieve every specific goal it set for *Left Behind: The Movie*, their project is being hailed as a success by many inside and outside their industry.

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ENDNOTES

ⁱFor improved readability of Part I of the case study, certain details and events not relevant to the case have been altered or supplied when not known. Some attributions of thoughts, words, and actions have been made to individuals in this case. While the details relevant to the case are believed to be factual, some of these other details, events, and attributions have not been confirmed as accurate.

¹The prophets Ezekiel, Daniel, and John the Revelator are examples of ancient prophets that used apocalyptic stories to challenge their own generation.

²Cloud Ten Pictures, Company profile on www.cloudtenpictures.com, March 4, 2001.

³Randall Murphree, Film producers engaging culture for Christ, *American Family Association Journal*, October 2000.

⁴Jeff Jensen and Gillian Flynn, Christian entertainment, *Entertainment Weekly*, December 10, 1999.

⁵Randall Murphree, Article on *Left Behind* published on www.freerepublic.com, June 26, 2000.

⁶Jeff Jensen and Gillian Flynn, Christian entertainment: Part II, *Entertainment Weekly*, December 10, 1999.

⁷Danny M. Boyd, Associated Press article on *Left Behind*, January 31, 2001.

⁸Jeff Jensen and Gillian Flynn, Christian entertainment: Part II, *Entertainment Weekly*, December 10, 1999.

⁹John Durie, Annika Pham, and Neil Watson, *Marketing and selling your film around the world*, (Los Angeles, CA: Silman-James Press, 2000).

¹⁰Charts 1 through 5 from John Durie, Annika Pham, and Neil Watson, *Marketing and selling your film around the world*, (Los Angeles, CA: Silman-James Press, 2000).

¹¹Cumulative gross of top 15 films by weekend, www.boxofficeguru.com, November 2000; analyzed by the author.

¹²Average gross of top 15 films 1990-2000, www.boxofficeguru.com, November 2000; analyzed by the author.

¹³Tiu Lukk, *Movie marketing: Opening the picture and giving it legs*, (Los Angeles, CA: Silman-James Press, 1997).

¹⁴Margaret Feinberg, *Left Behind* goes Hollywood, *Ministries Today*, September/October 2000.

¹⁵Peter Marmon, Cloud Ten Pictures marketing plan for *Left Behind*, cloudtenpictures.com, February 2001.

¹⁶Jeff Jensen and Gillian Flynn, Christian entertainment: Part II, *Entertainment Weekly*, December 10, 1999.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸Gillian Flynn, Deliverance, *Entertainment Weekly*, September 22, 2000.

¹⁹Tiu Lukk, *Movie marketing: Opening the picture and giving it legs*, (Los Angeles, CA: Silman-James Press, 1997).

²⁰*Ibid.* See also John Durie, Annika Pham, and Neil Watson, *Marketing and selling your film around the world*, (Los Angeles, CA: Silman-James Press, 2000).

²¹Danny M. Boyd, Associated Press article on *Left Behind*, January 31, 2001.

²²*Ibid.*

²³Jeff Jensen and Gillian Flynn, Christian entertainment: Part II, *Entertainment Weekly*, December 10, 1999.

²⁴George M. Thomas, More movies take a look at spirituality, *Akron Beacon Journal*, Akron, Ohio, January 19, 2001.

²⁵Peter T. Chattaway, Christian filmmakers jump on end-times bandwagon, *Christianity Today*, October 25, 1999.

²⁶Jeff Jensen and Gillian Flynn, Christian entertainment: Part II, *Entertainment Weekly*, December 10, 1999.

²⁷Berta Delgado, What's ahead for *Left Behind*? *Dallas Morning News*, October 28, 2000.

²⁸Peter T. Chattaway, Christian filmmakers jump on end-times bandwagon, *Christianity Today*, October 25, 1999.

²⁹Robin Parrish, Interview with Peter LaLonde, published on the e-zine www.Christianmusic.about.com, October 5, 2000.

³⁰Peter Miller, Movie box office reports—movie studio market share for 1999, www.movieboxoffice.about.com, March 8, 2001.

³¹Peter Marmon, Cloud Ten Pictures marketing plan for *Left Behind*, www.cloudtenpictures.com, February 2001.

³²Berta Delgado, What's ahead for *Left Behind*? *Dallas Morning News*, October 28, 2000.

³³After the initial statements, LaLonde resized his goal. However, Cloud Ten Sales Manager Byron Jones asserted that they might even distribute to 6,000 screens (see the article *Left Behind* by Randall Murphree, published on the e-zine www.freerepublic.com, June 26, 2000).

As late as October 28, 2000, LaLonde told the *Dallas Morning News* that his goal was to open on 2,500 screens, while at the same time Impact Entertainment was stating that the "vision" was to open in about 900 screens nationwide. See also Berta Delgado's article, "What's ahead for *Left Behind*?" *Dallas Morning News*, October 28, 2000.

³⁴Josh Chetwynd and Andy Seller, Conan could roll with rock, *USA Today*, May 12, 2000.

³⁵*Ibid.*

³⁶Peter Marmon, Cloud Ten Pictures marketing plan for *Left Behind*, www.cloudtenpictures.com, February 2001.

³⁷Michael Smith, *Left Behind* law suit in the e-zine news.crosswalk.com, February 2001.

³⁸Peter T. Chattaway, Christian filmmakers jump on end-times bandwagon, *Christianity Today*, October 25, 1999.

³⁹*Ibid.*

⁴⁰*Ibid.*

⁴¹Gillian Flynn, Deliverance, *Entertainment Weekly*, September 22, 2000.

⁴²Josh Chetwynd and Andy Seller, Conan could roll with rock, *USA Today*, May 12, 2000.

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⁴⁴Robin Parrish, Interview with Peter LaLonde, published on the e-zine www.Christianmusic.about.com, October 5, 2000.

⁴⁵Ibid.
⁴⁶Ibid.
⁴⁷Melissa Richter, Cloud Ten Pictures, Telephone interview with the author, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, March 2, 2001.
⁴⁸Matthew 5:13, 14.
⁴⁹Philippians 2:15.
⁵⁰Matthew 5:13.
⁵¹I Corinthians 10:31.
⁵²Ecclesiastes 9:10.
⁵³Colossians 3:23.
⁵⁴See John 17:15: "I do not pray that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil one." John 17:18: "... so I have also sent them into the world." Romans 12:2: "And be not conformed to this world ..." Titus 2:12: "... live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world ...".
⁵⁵Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1995).
⁵⁶Ray Anderson, *Historical transcendence and the reality of God*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1975).
⁵⁷John 8:23.
⁵⁸Psalms 91:1, 2.
⁵⁹Romans 11:33.
⁶⁰Hebrews 4:14-16.
⁶¹John 1:1, 14; see also Philippians 2:1-11.
⁶²John 16:13.
⁶³Romans 8:26, 27.
⁶⁴II Corinthians 5:20; see also I Peter 2:9.
⁶⁵Randall Murphree, Film producers engaging culture for Christ, *American Family Association Journal*, October 2000.
⁶⁶Robin Parrish, Interview with Peter LaLonde, published on the e-zine www.Christianmusic.about.com, October 5, 2000.
⁶⁷Berta Delgado, What's ahead for *Left Behind*? *Dallas Morning News*, October 28, 2000.
⁶⁸Margaret Feinberg, *Left Behind* goes Hollywood, *Ministries Today*, September/October 2000.
⁶⁹Melissa Richter, Cloud Ten Pictures, Telephone interview with the author, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, March 2, 2001.
⁷⁰Ibid.
⁷¹Ibid.
⁷²Melissa Richter, Cloud Ten Pictures, *Left Behind* gets down to the business of winning souls, Press release for Christian market, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, February 8, 2001.
⁷³Ibid.

⁷⁴Peter Marmon, Cloud Ten Pictures, Telephone interview with the author, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, March 2, 2001.
⁷⁵Data for Chart 10 taken from *Yahoo! Movies* Web site for the time period indicated in the chart. Data analyzed by the author.
⁷⁶Melissa Richter, Cloud Ten Pictures, *Left Behind* gets down to the business of winning souls, Press release for secular market, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, February 8, 2001.
⁷⁷Bob Painter, Letter to the editor in "Open Forum" section of "CBA Voice of the Industry" on the online version of *CBA Marketplace*, March 2001.
⁷⁸Melissa Richter, Cloud Ten Pictures, *Left Behind* gets down to the business of winning souls, Press release for secular market, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, February 8, 2001.
⁷⁹Berta Delgado, What's ahead for *Left Behind*? *Dallas Morning News*, October 28, 2000. See also Michael Smith, *Left Behind* law suit, in the e-zine news.crosswalk.com, February 2001.

