

IN SPITE OF THE COUNTRY 'JFK' IS
MAKING LOTS OF MONEY AS A "WHO DONE IT"
FILM.

THE MEDIA BUSINESS

Advertising | Geraldine Fabrikant

Warner's Unusual Steps To Calm Furor Over 'J.F.K.'

If film executives trying to promote a new movie could have one wish, it would surely be that the movie made the cover of Newsweek and Esquire.

The people at Warner Brothers got that wish, but only to discover that it was a mixed blessing. Everyone is paying attention to "J.F.K.," Oliver Stone's film on the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963, but the film has come under strong criticism from some who say Mr. Stone's research was irresponsible.

The criticism has caused Warner to shift its advertising campaign, in print and in television. A month ago, the studio's goal was to tell people about a star-driven film by Oliver Stone, with Kevin Costner, that would inform and entertain. The degree to which it has altered its strategy is also unusual.

Last weekend, in an ambitious attempt to convince potential audiences that they would like "J.F.K.," Warner filmed exit poll interviews with satisfied customers. The spots center on those interviews will be on the air beginning this week, said Robert T. Friedman, Warner's president for worldwide advertising and publicity. The spots will be carried during prime time on programs ranging from those shown on MTV: Music Television to "Cheers" on NBC.

Mr. Friedman said Warner's research showed that 98 percent of the audiences it interviewed came away with a positive reaction. But he did acknowledge that if a person was interviewed who had disliked the film, "it is unlikely we would put a negative reaction on."

The studio shot interviews in New York, Los Angeles, Dallas, Chicago and Washington. "We want to tell people that this was not a bicoastal movie, but a film that had appeal across the country," he said.

Such an extensive interview campaign is highly unusual. "I want to say that it has been done before," he said. "But it is rare that you do them

on such a broad geographic scale."

Warner's goal now is to tell potential viewers about critics and ordinary moviegoers who have seen the film and liked it, in the wake of the furor over the picture, which included a Newsweek cover article entitled "The Twisted Truth of 'J.F.K.'"

"We think it's important for people to know what others are thinking," Mr. Friedman said. "Forget about what the local op-ed person is saying."

Although a number of reviews have been positive, the one in The New York Times was not. Warner is sufficiently concerned about its impact that it is buying more advertising space in the paper throughout the holiday week than it normally does, Mr. Friedman said. The company is also spending heavily on ads in The Los Angeles Times, where it received a favorable review, because most of the decision makers in the Academy Awards process are based there.

"We are being very responsive to this movie on a case-by-case basis," he said. "We believe it is important to be aggressive. We can't control the political writers. But we want the voice of the public and the movie critics known."

Warner also plans to use television spots with reviews in them, a practice that is not particularly unusual. Often after a film gets a favorable reception, those reviews are the basis of future advertising. But shooting new commercials last week represented the degree to which the studio is concerned about the effect of the furor and its determination to try and promote what positive reactions it can to the the \$40 million film.

Last weekend, the film opened to about \$5 million in business at 1,164 screens nationwide. It did more business per screen than its competitors, earning about \$4,488. Because the film lasts three hours, theaters cannot hold as many screenings as for a regular two-hour movie. Still, a number of movie industry executives said privately that the numbers were somewhat disappointing.

Warner would not say how much it is spending on the campaign, but in an era when the movie business has been soft, it will undoubtedly have to keep investing in the film. In the best of circumstances for a movie studio, word of mouth is so strong that it serves as an advertising campaign, so the studio is not required to spend as heavily.