



Now Starring: Product Placement

By Igor Muravyov

For a film with a limited US\$ 5 million dollar budget, 2002's surprise indie hit My Big Fat Greek Wedding (MBFGW) undoubtedly shocked everyone with its great success. Even the movie's creator and star, Nia Vardalos, expresses astonishment about her film's prosperous run in an interview with USA Today where she admits, "In my heart, all I ever wished was that we would make our \$5 million back."

Although MBFGW had only \$1 million to spend on promotional advertising, the film's charming, lovable characters and universal message of the importance of self-discovery and family, caused many movie-goers to fall in love with the Portokalos "Big Fat Greek" family, sparking a word-of-mouth campaign that proved to be the most effective fodder for creating the MBFGW phenomenon.

Although the movie attracted a small audience and earned only \$822,068 in its first week of theatrical release when it opened in April 2002, the praise of movie patrons resulted in the film's gradual spread from city to city, resulting in MBFGW's long 52-week run in theaters. By late August 2002, the film's weekend gross was topping out at about \$14.8 million, and finally by the end of its 52nd week in April of 2003, the film had raked in \$241,438,208 in US theaters and an additional \$115,099,973 overseas. This "sleeper" not only became the fifth highest grossing film of 2002, but also the highest-grossing independent film ever.

To top off MBFGW's smashing box-office success, DVD/VHS sales and rentals in the US accumulated an additional \$220,000,000. For a film made with such modest expectations, My Big Fat Greek Wedding turned out to be an unexpected gift not only for audiences worldwide but also for those involved in the film's production.

When David Newton, a representative of SC Johnson & Son, was approached by the producers and asked for product clearance for the use of Windex in the film, Newton agreed and simply asked that the filmmakers play up the role of the product a bit more. The marriage became a marketer's dream, as MBFGW, a small independent film, topped 2002 blockbuster films Austin Powers in Goldmember and Men in Black 2. With a worldwide gross of \$606 million dollars, an estimated 144,138,940 viewers worldwide have been exposed to the Portokalos family miracle Windex cure.

With such vast exposure, Newton now notes that Windex's involvement with the indie film is equal in value to a 108 minute commercial. In addition, the product exposure generated by the film has increased the sales of Windex nearly twenty-three percent since the movie's rise to fame and fortune. SC Johnson publicist Theresa Van Ryne adds that recent Windex sales have been "fabulous."

From an aged grandmother under the delusion that the Greeks are still at war against the Turks, to loud-mouthed cousins with big, high hair and gaudy fashion sense, the film successfully draws in audience members with its lovable, amusing characters. Among the mélange of entertaining character quirks, the household glass cleaner Windex takes on its own memorable role. The Portokalos family patriarch, Gus, claims that a quick squirt of the blue cleaning chemical cures all skin afflictions.

As a result, Gus' ever-handy blue bottle appears on-screen seven times in the film, for a total of 29.07 seconds. Despite the Windex brand's less-than-a-minute total on-screen exposure, the brand leaves a lasting impression. The product also receives four word mentions throughout the 95-minute picture in the





form of quick references, to further elaborate the stories praising the miracle curing power of Windex.

Conclusively for marketing purposes, while most often credited for creative achievements and not impressive revenue, many independent films manage to do well in the box office. For example, the 1997 indie Chasing Amy grossed only \$12 million dollars domestically. While this may seem like a small number, in comparison to the film’s \$250,000 budget, investors received a 48% return. And from a potential marketer’s perspective, \$12 million dollars at the box office translates to over a two and a half million-person audience.

Today on average, independent films are grossing more than ever with the same tight budgets. In the past few years, small budget films such as The Blair Witch Project, Good Will Hunting and American Beauty, have grossed hundreds of thousand of dollars. Some films, like Blair Witch, were produced on budgets as small as \$27,000. Even with the inclusion of less successful indies, the average box office gross still hovers around \$19 million dollars, according to a report by Firestone Entertainment Group.

What does all this mean to a marketer seeking to maximize brand exposure and message, across a very cluttered and expensive media-buying environment? Significant value exists in partnering your brand with independent productions. As such, analyzing the relative value of brand exposure via product placement versus a straight media buy is, to say the least, difficult. However, the economic efficiency of brand inclusion marketing becomes apparent once the value of a brand’s inclusion, such as Windex in My Big Fat Greek Wedding, is measured in absolute terms; i.e. number of impressions.

The 29.07 second on-screen exposure of Windex in MBFGW, is reduced to the absolute lowest common denominator across all media venues, number of impressions, in the table below. Treating the entire 29 seconds of on-screen exposure as one impression, and comparing that to the cost of achieving the same number of impressions via a straight media buy on a top-rated TV show (Friends), conservatively computes a “media buy” value to Windex of over \$3 million dollars. Such logic makes partnering with indie films, a “wise” buy.

	Impressions Box Office Domestic	Impressions Box Office International	Impressions VHS/DVD Sales Rentals	Impressions Syndicated TV Release
MBFGW	40,577,850	19,344,538	49,162,011	15,000,000
	Total Impressions			
	124,084,399			
	Viewers per Episode	Cost per 30 second spot	Network cost for MBFGW exposure	Media Buy Value of MBFGW to Windex
Friends (NBC)	18,000,000	\$455,700	\$3,141,403	\$3,141,403

Obviously, not every indie film is as successful as My Big Fat Greek Wedding, and not every brand partnership can boast the success depicted here. However, just consider the opportunity which would have been lost if David Newton had replied to the MBFGW producers with an “I’m not interested in small films.”

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