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Disney Domination: David Kornblum to accept studioâ??s â??Distributor of the Yearâ?? Award

Description

Posted by Larry Gleeson

The notion of longevity in Hollywood is getting rarer and rarer as old stars fade and most traditional studios change their ways. But longevity is what springs to mind when the subject is David Kornblum, VP of theatrical sales and distribution, APAC/Russia and global acquisitions, The Walt Disney Company Asia.

Kornblum will accept the CineAsia â??Distributor of the Yearâ?• Award being given to Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures International at the final-night Awards Ceremony on Dec. 8 at the Grand Hyatt Hong Kong.

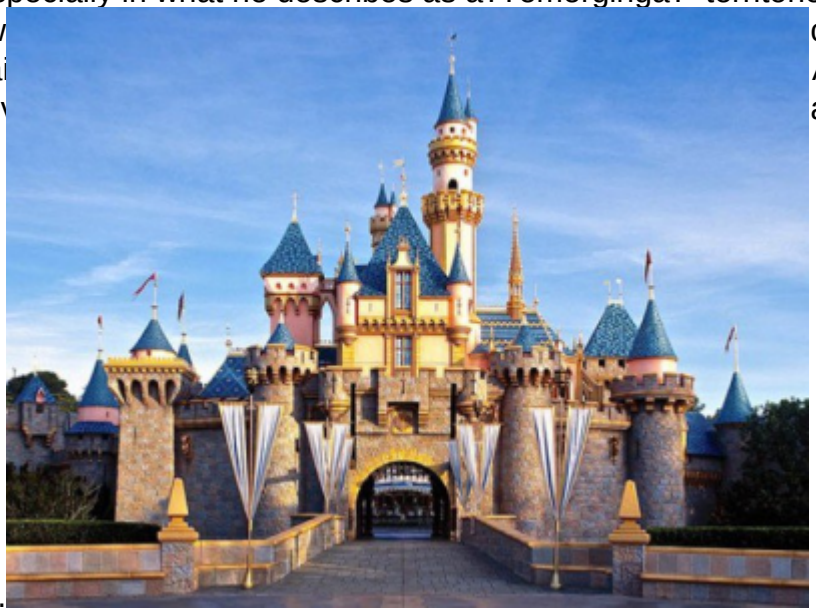
A 27-year Disney veteran based in the companyâ??s Burbank offices, Kornblum oversees 12 direct distribution offices while keeping an eye on a number of sub-distribution offices there handling Disney product. His oversight covers approximately 35 markets (including several quite small) across a vast swath of territories comprising APAC (Asia-Pacific) and Russia. These include China, Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, India, Australia/New Zealand and on and on to places like the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States like Kazahkstan, etc.), Singapore, Malaysia, etc.

Just as Kornblum is no stranger to Asia, heâ??s also no stranger to industry recognition, having been honored in 2013 as recipient of CinemaConâ??s Passepartout award.

So what changes over these years has Kornblum seen that have impacted Disneyâ??s business? Remember, this is the legendary Disney, which has barely tampered with its â??secret sauceâ?• throughout its long history as a giant of the industry.

One change is the familiar plot turn that began early in the past decade or so with Chinaâ??s economic rise and its attendant film boom, which continues to play out (in spite of some softening earlier this year in film attendance). But China remains robust and Disney continues as a chart-topper. Says Kornblum, â??Chinaâ??s growth has now made it the global territory with the most screens [as announced in mid-November], having surpassed the U.S. with more than 40,000 screens. To put this growth in perspective, in 2012 Chinaâ??s overall box-office take was $2 billion and should conclude this year at just shy of $7 billion.â?•

Overall in his territories, improvements to exhibition infrastructure have been â??a boon to business,â?• he observes, especially in what he describes as â??emergingâ?• territories like China and Russia that are relative new



ce. Being the newcomer, Kornblum explai Australia or New Zealand, where older mov and even aging populations have an impact.

â??In places like China where cinemagoing is relatively new, there are more youthful populations who are attending [a spike that has China now building 27 new auditoriums a day]. These [younger populations] are also in places like the Philippines, where 44 percent of the population is under 20 years of age, or Indonesia where itâ??s 37 percent and India with an astounding 41 percent of the population under 20. But in a â??matureâ?? film-going country like Japan or Taiwan, you have only 19 percent or thereabouts under 20. You can do well in these markets but need the right movie.â?•

And then there are the vagaries of admissions numbers. Like Chinaâ??s, Koreaâ??s admissions slowed down a little this year, notes Kornblum, but Hong Kong and Australia have been up, as has Russia â??at a whopping nine percent.â?•

â??But with young audiences predominant in some markets and older in others, you have to adjust your film releases to that disparity.â?•

Beyond the diversity and beyond so many numbers to juggle, Kornblum is emphatic that â??whether itâ??s a more product-driven mature market that requires even more of an exhibition/distribution partnership or an emerging territoryâ??China being the prime exampleâ??that is more market-driven, itâ??s the product that drives everything. Fortunately, Disney is well-placed in these circumstances, as our storytelling is usually universal and targeting broadly.â•

Another big stimulus for Disney business in Kornblumâ??s territories has been the consummation of the digital transition. â??Only four years ago, digital was still growing, but now most of the regions have been entirely digitized. That makes releasing matters easier but also more complex,â• he explains, â??because of all the quick adjustments we can make to programming in the theatres, and with the increased speed and efficiency we have, we can better manicure our releases.â•

Kornblum also cites the success of Disneyâ??s branding efforts on behalf of its Walt Disney and Pixar feature animation and live-action Marvel and Lucasfilm releases, whose division names (and not just their respective titles) send signals of quality and resonate with audiences. â??This Disney branding effort has now taken rootâ??we call these brands the five pillars of our production philosophyâ??and they give us a calling card to customers around the world.â•

Turning to â??report cards,â• recent Disney stats for APAC/Russia certainly attest to the power of that calling card in these regions and the quality of the films behind the five brands. Thus far in calendar year 2016, Disney titles that predominated as the highest chart scorers for the APAC/Russia region were *Captain America: Civil War*, *Zootopia*, *The Jungle Book* and *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*.

And as gauged by the various markets it serves, Disney this year has commanded dominant market share as number one (whether as Hollywood release or industry release) in just about every key



ar, *Zootopia*, *The Jungle Book* and *Finding Dory*

The big bumps in film-going across the emerging territories in Kornblumâ??s APAC/Russia region have been due, he says, to more â??cinema-literateâ• populations, which translates to more people eager to watch and discover films. This surge in his territories has translated to APAC/Russia now accounting for over half of the worldâ??s international box office.

With so many energizing forces and such impressive box-office results, Kornblum happily reports that â??itâ??s a wonderful time to be in the theatrical distribution business.â•

But theatres too need to continue to do their share, especially as Kornblum reminds, ticket prices inevitably rise. But, praising the new amenities being offered, he predicts â??there will be no negative impact [on attendance] as long as theatres continue to enhance. You can say that theatres need to be like good restaurants. People love to eat at home because itâ??s easier and cheaper. But craving both food and that communal experience, they also love to step out to restaurants.â?•

In addition to theatre advancements and amenities â??doing a great jobâ?• to attract filmgoers and these improvements gaining more of a foothold (3D, premium-large-format screens from IMAX and others, enhanced sound systems like Dolbyâ??s Atmos and Barcoâ??s Auro 11.1, etc.), Kornblum cites â??immersive HDR and laser, the next steps in cinema presentation now happening, and we love these.â?• Heâ??s also a big fan of great seating like that done by AMC and so many others, including the 4DX and D-BOX motion-controlled seating and their immersive scene-appropriate ride thrills or water spritzes.

â??The larger screens are increasingly what audiences like to see and they still vote for 3D especially in China and Russia,â?• which as emerging markets mostly skipped the multiplex revolution of the late 1900s and jumped right into this centuryâ??s better theatres. But mature territories like Australia and Korea have lower 3D consumption, he adds.

Getting back to â??restaurants,â?• Kornblum points to in-theatre dining as a popular amenity (pioneered by Village Roadshow and Hoyts in Australia) that has clicked. Also important (and pardon another restaurant reference), he believes itâ??s vital that theatres offer a varied menuâ??i.e., different kinds of films to customers. Kornblum points to repertory offerings that Disney can provide from its rich library of beloved cinema classics. â??We have significant successes working with our exhibition partners on these repertory programs, introducing both kids and adults to new and old programming and often on theatre â??offâ?? nights.â?•

As Disneyâ??s man in Asia and Russia and traveling the silk and other roads of his territories about 15 to 20 weeks a year, Kornblum says, â??Iâ??ve been doing this for twenty odd years and itâ??s the way I roll!â?•

The regions are a long haul from where he lives in Southern California and where he grew up. Kornblum was driven to the business by a familiar force: a love of movies. And his innate wanderlust fueled his desire to hit foreign roads. â??As a kid, I loved seeing films in theatres on the big screen,â?• he emphasizes, â??because we all know itâ??s the very best way to see them. But I also learned back then to love all the numbers and statistics relative to this business.â?• Then came a love of travel and learning about and connecting to cultures outside the U.S. â??After I graduated UCI [the University of California at Irvine], I went off to Europe and that did it.â?•

Prior to Disney, Kornblum worked in corporate finance at Paramount and for the independent Atlantic Entertainment. In earlier Disney roles in international sales and distribution, he oversaw sales planning, strategy and analysis. During his tenure at Disney, the company first crossed the $1 billion annual box-office threshold, with that figure growing dramatically.

As if his vast Asian and Russian expanses were a Lilliputian Liechtenstein, Kornblum for years has also had parallel chores for Disney with acquisition duties, hunting in places like South America for local productions to acquire for his territories that flow through the Buena Vista International pipeline. Like some kind of â??marvelâ?• of a superhero, he shrugs off the workload: â??This is another business for

me.â?•

Back wearing his distribution cape, Kornblum says that this yearâ??s biggest surprise for him was the success of *Zootopia*, which â??exceeded all expectations because of the great humor and its appeal to both young and old. It was also a fantastic production and also the subtext of segregation and profiling which was very astute and reflected our society today and appealed to adults. *The Jungle Book* was another surprise. With the latest in visual effects that also provided an immersive experience and fantastic storytelling from Jon Favreau, we were able to reinvigorate a tale that was over 100 years old. We had another movie we loved, *Queen of Katwe*, that was terrific but underperformed and reminded that in todayâ??s world there still remain challenges in bringing great movies to people.â?•

Regarding the recent U.S. election with its message that the powers-that-be, including the media, need to get closer to the natives and understand them, Kornblum responded to a question about how he and Disney manage to get a grip on local tastes and cultures in the APAC/Russia markets. â??We have a decentralized approach, so we have local managers and they are the experts and run the business for us. They have fingers on the pulse of what is happening and they drive our business in their respective territories. They really do it all.â?•

Marvelâ??s *Doctor Strange* became Chinaâ??s number-one grosser in mid-November, and at press time expectations were high for the gorgeous animated South Sea tale *Moana*. Says Kornblum, â??We expect great things from all of our brands now, beginning with *Moana*. We also have for later this year *Rogue One*, our first-ever *Star Wars* standalone, which is not associated with the Skywalker saga but is in the *Star Wars* universe with its story about a man on a mission. For early 2017, thereâ??s the live-action *Beauty and the Beast*, which stars Dan Stevens [who broke through in â??Downton Abbeyâ?•] and heâ??s great. And in early spring comes Marvelâ??s *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2*, follow-up to the first *Guardians* hit.â?•

With Disney productions perennially strong across so many industry changes, years and territories, the question arises (as does that restaurant analogy) if Kornblum can reveal the studioâ??s â??secret sauce.â?• He reiterates that itâ??s the universal storytelling that engages and that reaches movie fans from eight to 80. â??Itâ??s what Walt Disney wanted of the company and what the Disney brand signifies. Ours are movies for the whole family and for others, and our five brand pillars exemplify our strategy.â?•

He ends with some soothing words for the industry: â??Anything wrong with the movie business can be resolved by a good movie.â?• Some might quibble that itâ??s easier said than done, but Disney, with help from people like Kornblum, constantly does it.

(Source: http://www.filmjournal.com)

Category

1. distribution

Tags

1. Art
2. Asia
3. China

4. CineAsia â??Distributor of the Yearâ?• Award
5. Cinema
6. CinemaConâ??s Passepartout award.
7. Competition
8. creativity
9. David Kornblum
10. Disney
11. distribution
12. entertainment
13. Film
14. Filmmaking
15. inspiration
16. Internet
17. Larry Gleeson
18. marketing
19. Media
20. News
21. platform
22. Programming
23. Russia
24. Society
25. television
26. Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures International

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