



Mr. Data

At IHS Markit, David Hancock Delivers Cinema Insights and Intelligence by Andreas Fuchs

The term business intelligence is nothing new, and enterprises have, for decades, relied on strategies and technology to analyze the data their businesses produce—be it reports, inventory counts, Facebook reach, box-office and attendance figures, popcorn sales on our end; the amount of information available today is massive. With the arrival of point-of-sale systems and loyalty programs, plus marketing metrics collected at virtually every touch-point with the consumer, to name but three, the availability of such data has necessitated a more structured approach. Gone are the days of a “gut” feeling, as a glut of data has arrived to be disseminated and analyzed methodically and in great detail. Applying principles and tools from other industries, cinema intelligence has arrived.

In this special focus section, *Film Journal International* has highlighted some of the key players, providing exclusive insight into an area that began with counting admissions at the gate and is currently providing virtual real-time analysis of everything associated with operating a theatrical exhibition enterprise.

Who could provide a better overview of the field than David Hancock? As director, film and cinema technology, media and telecom research and analysis, cinema and home entertainment, at IHS Markit (technology.ihs.com/Categories/450468/cinema), Hancock is no stranger to the exhibition business, as well as a very dear friend to these pages. For many years, he has provided valuable analysis to our readers. On a personal note, this author sees David Hancock as Mr. Data personified, a term he humbly rejects.

Yet, “you are talking to a man who wakes at three a.m. having dreamt of a new way to collect or present data,” he admits. “Data is a mindset, not necessarily a job. I meet people who have a ‘data’ mindset, although that is not their job in the same way that others do not think that way. Much of my job is ‘translating’ data into everyday thoughts and language.”

Whereas “numbers don’t lie,” there is an add-on saying that the people who read them see what they want to see. “A truism,” Hancock concurs, “but you do need to trust the source of data analysis. In my job, I need to make sure that what I say is as objective as possible, presenting as complete a picture as possible. Using selective statistics to back up an argument is not a long-term option in our business. All things need to be considered to make sense of a complex media landscape, and some statistics can seem contradictory until explored.” To anyone who believes that data is boring, Hancock responds, “I do not mind if you don’t get it, it is my job to explain it!”

David Hancock is not only very good at this job, he has



DAVID HANCOCK

also been doing it for a long time—since December 1996, in fact. “This comes up a lot,” he says of his beginnings at Screen Digest, and the name that this author, for one, misses. “For some people, it never went away. I still get introduced sometimes as David from Screen Digest. I do miss the words, but the world moves on and the spirit and ethos of Screen Digest is still alive and well within our work here.”

Founded in 1971 by the film and video correspondent of *The Financial Times* of London and his wife, John and Joy Chittock, the monthly publication did exactly what the name implied—digesting information about screens. As sagely as the name was chosen,

the founders could not have truly envisioned the multiverse of screens available to seekers of entertainment today. With that, however, we should take comfort that “our” screen—the big one in cinemas—started it all, and still defines media enjoyment today.

“We were very few in number,” Hancock recalls about his early days. Screen Digest “fulfilled a need for research-based understanding of media markets, mainly cinema and TV, although anecdotally our first issue reported on a prototype VCR machine from Philips. At this point, Screen Digest had not gone beyond the monthly magazine. When I joined, the idea was to grow the company around publishing reports and undertaking consultancy. There were not many companies specializing in this field of market-level data research—most were trade magazines with news as the focus, or consumer-facing viewers and ratings companies. Box office was being tracked by a few companies, often based in one territory, although what became EDI was around then and was beginning to grow.”

In an industry closely guarding its results, especially box-office performance, how did Screen Digest gain access to information? “We built up close relationships with official data providers in countries, such as film agencies, government statistics offices as well as private companies such as broadcasters and film distributors. These relationships still exist, and they are still a primary source of information for market data. However, since those days, we have built up our own proprietary data sources and market models.”

Elaborating on the role played by said trade associations and government agencies, including NATO (United States), CNC (France), FFA (Germany), BFI (United Kingdom) and MediaSalles

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(pan-European), Hancock adds the European Audiovisual Observatory to our examples. "The trade associations vary in their understanding of data/statistics and what it means. Some are better than others," he opines. "UNIC, for one, has definitely improved their delivery of useful information to the market in the past few years. New para-government film agencies have certainly increased their understanding and provision of data and statistics. When I began at Screen Digest, there were a handful of agencies that collected and published regular statistical bulletins, the gold standard being the CNC in France. We have worked with quite a few over the years to develop their statistical provision and now it is unusual if a film agency does not have a dedicated data team. An aside—and it happens much less now—but certainly until around ten years ago it was a regular thing that people assumed we were a public agency too. Obviously, we have always been a private company, but we did not always come across like that to all people."

Business performance is inherently private too, except if one exhibitor or another is trading publicly. With more and more facts and numbers available to make sound business decisions (as evidenced in our report on Santikos Entertainment on the previous pages), is this industry beginning to see the value in enhanced transparency? "The industry has not truly opened up," Hancock contends. "There are some data exchanges between parts of the industry, but there still could be greater sharing between exhibitors and distributors, for example. I understand the issues behind not fully sharing data, but it could be done whilst protecting data and sources."

And now we are in the age of "big data," of more and varied information from manifold sources, and, quite possibly, more than we can handle. While this "has led to analytics companies bringing a new level of insight to the exhibitor's business and the understanding of consumers in the market," Hancock explains the difference. "Big data is different from our data but allows a more detailed analysis of behavior and patterns. We have not traditionally been in the big data field, although IHS Markit as an entity is involved in it. The cinema data world has broadened out a lot since we first started collecting film production, screens and admissions data. We brought digital data to the global industry, for example, and have carried that on into a broader range of technology data. Other companies have built on demographic data and box-office data."

With all that included, Hancock's division at IHS Markit has not only embraced the concept of cinema intelligence, but helped define it. "We have developed entirely around what our clients need to know. I feel that we have always delivered a rounded service to the cinema industry, but are working on new products and services to increase what we offer, bringing in the skills, data and expertise of other sectors that are relevant."

As his personal goal, Hancock tries to stay ahead of the market. "I work out what my clients will need to know in 18 months' time and work out a way to deliver it." Both his roles at IHS Markit and as a board member of European Digital Cinema Forum involve "staying on top of market and technology developments," he continues. "And to some small extent, being a part of these developments. We work out how we can access data or develop our own data, a process which can take some time. We are very grateful to all those people and companies that help us with this."

David Hancock is equally grateful for being able to do what he does for the cinema industry. "Ultimately, I do it because I love it and because I have a great team around me. I enjoy the daily process of working with data, communicating it to people and, in the process, helping our clients and the industry in general to make sense of what is happening to the film and cinema sectors."

Mr. Data, after all. ❀

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