

MOVIE MAKER

THE ART AND BUSINESS OF MAKING MOVIES

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Enhance Your Education with SmartFlix

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Looking to boost your moviemaking know-how, but not sure if film school is right for you? SmartFlix may be just what you're looking for. A rental-by-mail service, SmartFlix specializes in instructional videos, and with a wide assortment of film-related titles, customers can check out videos on subjects ranging from screenwriting and directing to special effects to claymation and puppets. Whether you're new to moviemaking or just want to build up your knowledge in a specific area, SmartFlix is the place to start. Started by Travis Corcoran in 2003 with just one rental its first month, SmartFlix now carries 5,817 videos in 228 categories.

MovieMaker spoke with Corcoran, who recommends popular instructional videos for moviemakers and shares what's in store for the growing company.

Carla Pisarro (MM): How did the idea for SmartFlix originate? What made you believe there was a market for specialized how-to videos? Was there something you felt was missing from other rental-by-mail services like Netflix?

Travis Corcoran (TC): I've always been interested in a lot of hands on hobbies: Woodworking, animation, metalworking, mixing music. About five years ago I started looking into video instruction for some basic guidance and instruction to get started. I figured some videos might be the best way to learn, being more interactive than books. No one had these videos for rent, so I had to buy them... and yet, the prices on these videos were pretty steep.

I realized that there must be many others in the same boat, so I built a very simple Website to hopefully rent out these videos to other enthusiasts, hoping after a couple of rentals, I'd have made my money back. The first month I had one rental, the second month, three rentals and by the third month, with 14 rentals... And now we've got a 15-person company with a big office and hundreds of thousands of hands-on, how-to DVDs in stock.

Netflix and its competitors focus on entertainment, while our customers are looking for education, on their own time, and at their own speed.

MM: What can aspiring moviemakers gain from SmartFlix? What about professional moviemakers?

TC: For whatever slice of moviemaking you're interested in, we offer the best videos available. We've got

script writing advice from experts, digital art tutorials, sound mixing, Avid and Final Cut instruction, acting, camerawork, claymation and puppets, lighting, recording, editing, directing and more—over 200 titles for moviemakers. No matter what level you're at, we have videos that can help you to quickly and efficiently advance your skills and learn brand new ones.

MM: There's no denying the educational element to what you do. Do you think SmartFlix's videos can supplant the services of a traditional film school, with customers essentially designing their own curriculum by choosing videos? Do you believe SmartFlix can adequately prepare moviemaking students to begin their careers?

TC: Film schools have their place. A lot of great artists go to them... and a lot don't. People from Kubrick to Kevin Smith have made movies without graduating from film school.

Can one get a first class education outside of film school? Absolutely... and SmartFlix can help with that. By carrying so many selections from so many different authors, we are able to offer our customers top-of-the-line training, often in sets—authors will release DVDs in a series, basically created as a full training program for someone looking to start at the beginning and come out as a practical professional. We offer sets like this in order to emulate what a student might gain from a program at a school, only for cheaper, and with a more flexible time frame.

SmartFlix is a fantastic resource for beginners just getting into moviemaking, or those trying to decide if they want to go to film school at all, because we offer so many titles from lots of different authors. As you said, this gives our customers the ability to “customize” their education, which is great for people looking to spend very little money to get top-notch education in this trade.

MM: What are some of your most popular rentals and why? How do you think these videos help moviemakers advance their craft?

TC: Some of our most popular titles include *The Best of Dean Collins on Lighting*, which is of interest to both photographers and moviemakers; the *Character Sculpture* series, for folks interested in special effects work, the Per Holmes *Stationary Blocking/The Moving Camera/Staging High end scenes* series, which cameraman and directors have really enjoyed, and *The DVD Film School* by Dov Simens, which seeks to distill down conventional film school into just eight DVDs.

If I had to recommend just one set of DVDs for the average *MovieMaker* reader, it would have to be these.

MM: What's the most surprising thing you've discovered about your customers since founding the company? Have any unusual video categories proved popular that you wouldn't have expected?

TC: I think the most surprising thing is how widespread the demand for rentals of lots of niche instructional DVDs is—and how many great DVDs there are out there that are hard to find, or even to hear about in the first place. I had never heard of the *DVD Film School* series before a customer recommended it to us, and I had no idea that there were so many great DVDs on scriptwriting, special effects and more.

To widen the topic from “film” a bit, we recently released a newsletter titled “The Top 10 Wackiest DVDs at SmartFlix.” It included titles like “Scoop No More—Cat Toilet Training System,” “Wine for the Confused with John Cleese,” “Bake Your Own Wedding Cake” and “Beating Blackjack.” People really responded to this and the rentals for the featured titles just skyrocketed. Other than that, metalworking and arts & crafts are our biggest renting topics and we responded accordingly by building up the DVD

library in those categories to accommodate customers' needs.

MM: By the very nature of its uniqueness, SmartFlix is already a company on the cutting edge. Are there any new innovations or services in the works?

TC: Thank you! We've made a lot of changes recently: Gift cards, newsletters, a new monthly contest with fun prizes (this month it's a crafts contest, but a film one is coming up) and have hired hilarious writer/blogger, James Lileks, to write reviews of DVDs that we post on the blog.

Over the next few months we've got a lot of other things planned: Wishlists, maybe an experiment with a subscription program, maybe package DVD rental deals that lead to certification, top-ranked reviewers, forums and/or personal pages for folks to share their projects with others.

No matter what we add to SmartFlix in the future, though, one thing will stay constant: Our commitment to carry ever high quality DVD our customers request, so that we always continue to be the best and largest how-to DVD rental site on the Web.

Visit <http://www.smartflix.com> for more information.

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