



TASTE TEST



Dubbed the ‘Doctor of Audience-ology’, Kevin Goetz has been the most influential figure in the test-screening business for years. As he delves into his work in a new book, *Total Film* discovers the ins and outs of a much-misunderstood filmmaking process.

WORDS **MATT MAYTUM**

Test screenings, it’s fair to say, have often had a bad rap. The process – by which early cuts of movies are screened privately to an audience who’ll then answer surveys and in some cases participate in focus groups discussing what they liked and disliked about the film – is sometimes used as a shorthand for diminishing artistic licence and lowest-common-denominator filmmaking.

But Kevin Goetz would beg to differ. Having worked in the research industry for more

than three decades, he knows the business inside out and his company Screen Engine/ASI (www.ScreenEngineASI.com) deals with the testing process on movies of all scales, and he counts many big-name filmmakers as close friends. “I’ve been doing this for 35 years, and I literally have passed my 7,000th title,” he tells *TF* over Zoom in December 2021. “Movies, not screenings – those are 20,000-plus. But 7,000 titles.”

In a new book, *Audience-ology*, Goetz lifts the lid on the secretive business, sharing

good, bad and ugly stories from the frontline of testing. Featuring home-run screenings for instant classics, directors unwilling to listen to feedback and full-throated rants from Harvey Weinstein, he’s seen it all. And it’s not just car wrecks that need salvaging – even all-timers like *Jaws* have benefitted from audience input.

Goetz’s expertise earned him the moniker “the doctor of audience-ology” from *Los Angeles Times* journalist Patrick Goldstein. Here, Goetz tells *Total Film* about what really happens on the test-screening operating table. ➤➔



TESTING TIMES

"I would say [to a young filmmaker]: you need to go through this process of showing your movie to the public. What we want to do is bring in 300 to 400 people and show them the movie. We want to gauge their reaction. We want to dig deeply underneath it, and find out what's working, and what's not working, so you can have the best vision of what you created.

"We will supply you with a written report, combining a lot of different information: how easy or difficult the recruit was to get people to see your movie; the understanding of the way it played throughout the movie; the engagement levels, through maybe biometric devices, through night-vision goggles. We will [undertake] an administrative questionnaire, covering favourite scenes and parts, and confusions, and, 'How did you like the ending?' and, 'Are you definitely going to recommend it?'

"And then we're going to do a focus group after that of a microcosm of the whole audience. About 20 people are going to stay behind, and we're going to dig deeply into some of those issues. That will form the story that we're going to tell you, so that you can go back into the editing room and create the best version of what you set out to do."

DIRECTOR DOUBT

"I had a conversation with Ang Lee. And he said, 'Picasso never tested his paintings.' And I said, 'Well, OK, but first of all, they're completely different mediums. And the art form of film is one that is created with a bunch of artists. Yes, it's a director's vision, and there's a producer's vision. But at the end of the day, it's made for an audience.'

"A book, you can argue, is made for an audience, but it's a solo endeavour, as a painting is. You can put it in the back of your closet, and never have to worry about it again. Not to mention that Picasso's

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supplies were cents. But a studio is giving you \$150 million. Ang, who I believe to be one of the five greatest directors of this generation, gets to have a say in it. And so do many other artists that are associated with it. It's not an apples-to-apples comparison.

"My book was [originally] called *Don't Kill The Messenger*. And you know what I did? I tested it. In the general public, *Audience-ology* was more interesting. I was very involved in the

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movie *Despicable Me*. [Chris Meledandri writes *Audience-ology's* foreword.] It was called *Evil Me*, and then they changed it to *Despicable Me*. And I was like, 'How can we call this *Despicable Me*? No one's going to know that name.' So no one knows anything. You can't think of it being anything else now."

ASSEMBLING THE AUDIENCE

"It's very difficult. And it's become more and more difficult, obviously, with the pandemic.



When we recruit, we have a specification letter that's pre-decided with the studio or production company. So, in other words, they say, 'We're aspiring to get 60 per cent female and 40 per cent male. We want [various age and race splits].'

"Then what we'll do is, we'll add a criteria of: 'You have to have seen and enjoyed at least three out of 12 movies, for example.' You don't want someone who's simply an action fan who's going to see, you know, a period romance. You don't want rejectors.

And then you over-recruit. To get 300 people to show up, you typically need maybe 1,400 confirms. That's the drop rate. And from that, we discover what the recruit ratio is. How many invitations did it take to get one body into the theatre? And that is often a precursor or a determining factor of how difficult or easy it is to get people into the theatre to buy tickets."

SMALL CHANGE

I always think there's something [that can be done to improve a film], almost always. There have been probably under 10 examples in

those 7,000 movies that I said, 'Lock it!' I chose the examples in the book – and I could have chosen any examples – because I think they most glaringly showed, or most shed a spotlight best on the points I was trying to make. So the *Moonstruck* story is a really good one [changing the opening song from dramatic opera music to 'That's Amore' signposted that the film was comedy]. And killing the dog in *Anchorman* [Baxter didn't originally survive being booted off the bridge]. We were like, 'You can't kill the fucking dog. You can't kill the dog.' And they didn't, and the scores went up [test screenings are typically 'scored' by the percentage of participants who would definitely or probably recommend to a friend].

War Of The Roses was a movie that did not test that well. Mixed-genre movies often don't test exceptionally well. Michael Douglas kills the dog, and eats it in front of Kathleen Turner, who loves the dog. Because it's so evil, it's so dark.... My boss at the time, Joe [Farrell], and I came back and said, "You can't do that. You've got to take a shot of the dog wagging its tail, so that he was just fucking with her, and didn't actually eat it." And the scores came up. And the audience didn't have a problem. So another dog story. A little thing made a big difference."



**ENDING
SUCKS!**

MAJOR REVISIONS

“The *Fatal Attraction* story, of course, is not a little thing. We reshot that whole ending. That ending... That movie made hundreds of millions of dollars, as opposed to 50 million or 75 million worldwide, which it would have done. It’s a very good movie, but she [originally] killed herself, and the audience was like, “What?” They felt so let down. Literally, in the room, you felt the air come out of the room.

“[The audience] needed Glenn Close to go down. And they needed Anne Archer, the wronged wife, to get comeuppance. Glenn didn’t want to do it, and Adrian Lyne, the director, didn’t want to do it. Michael Douglas wanted to do it, because he was also a producer on the movie, and recognised the financial differences between what 20 or 30 points would mean to the longevity, the legs of the movie, through the “recommend”.

“And the audience just went berserk [with the revised ending]. The scores went up 25 points, and it changed the whole trajectory of the movie.”

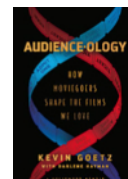
THE FUTURE OF TESTING

“Here’s the great thing about my business. Content is loved. Loved! Embraced. It’s not going anywhere. And so it’s always going to need to be consumer tested.

“Sometimes the ambiguity of something, not knowing if they did it or not, is intriguing, and the audience is really polarised. And if you give them the answer, it becomes less exciting as an overall movie. Oftentimes, it’s not. Word of mouth by someone you trust is still the most important [factor driving movie-viewing], and will continue to do that in the future.

“I do think [the industry] has to be changed. I think we have to look at people by psychographic identifiers. What do they watch, listen to, attend, read? So it’s not whether they’re Black or white or Hispanic or Asian, or if they’re male or female or transgender. You’re going to have people grouping because of their similar behaviours and attitudes. But it will take several years to get there.”

Goetz oversees a test screening with a colleague.



AUDIENCE-LOGY WILL BE PUBLISHED IN THE UK IN EARLY 2022. FIND KEVIN ON SOCIAL MEDIA @KEVINGOETZ360 AND AT WWW.KEVINGOETZ360.COM