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### Studios deny 'Access'

Pic predictions don't play well with H'wood

By DADE HAYES, CHRIS PURSELL

What started as an online game now has studios playing hardball.

Several studios claimed a minor victory over the weekend after being told that a weekly segment airing on NBC's "Access Hollywood," called "Battle @ the Box Office," may be pulled after only one airing.

Studios had threatened to boycott the syndicated strip by denying it access to talent interviews and film footage.

The segment in question featured Hollywood Stock Exchange founder Max Keiser forecasting weekend B.O. totals based on the opinions of Internet users playing the game.

Studio execs blasted the idea of an online analyst predicting B.O. tallies on national TV. Doing so on Friday is far more dubious than the already inexact but common practice of estimating weekend grosses on Sunday, they said.

In Friday's segment, Keiser called "The Bone Collector" the "odds-on favorite to win." The reason: "America loves psychothrillers."

He predicted "The Bachelor" would reap "strong numbers" due to "a serious chick-flick drought." But "The Insider," he said, would underperform because "America is tired of this movie-of-the-week stuff."

#### Soft sell

HSX execs insisted that no move had been made to yank the briefing, but acknowledged that some studios had taken issue with the seg. The feature did not get "teased" at the top of the show or before commercial breaks. It aired in the show's waning minutes.

"They finally learned to accept what was on the Internet but feel that once it crosses over to the broadcast medium, they can no longer control the information," said one source close to the show.

Studio execs wouldn't comment on the record. But they were still steaming Sunday

about the seg.

"We think it's ridiculous to start declaring a winner before the race even starts," said one.

Others said the explosion of information on TV and online is to blame.

In that climate, the show "entered this deal much more naively than maliciously," one exec said.

The "Access" outcry follows a successful bid by studios to get National Research Group to stop distributing B.O. projections based on audience tracking.

### **Virtual exchange**

Traders on HSX buy and sell virtual "stock" in celebrities, movies and other entertainment properties using "Hollywood dollars." For instance, stock prices on "Sleepy Hollow" closed the weekend at \$72.30, meaning that traders predicted a box office gross of just over \$72 million within six weeks.

Based on the traders' opinions, HSX predicted on the newsmag that "Bone" would gross \$17 million, "Bachelor" would collect \$11 million and "Insider" would earn \$8.7 million.

Actual results are due today, but on Sunday the studio estimates on "The Bachelor" and "Insider" were \$8 million and \$7 million, respectively.

Digital media company HSX provides over 800,000 consumers a month with online entertainment.

### **Media convergence**

"I'm still amazed at the degree of convergence we see between television, film and the Internet, and this is a primary example of what can come from it," Keiser told Daily Variety. "Right now it's really tough to tell who's affecting whom and to what degree. Either way, the HSX is the filmgoer's version of fantasy football and has become something of a sport for the public."

"Access Hollywood" executive producer Gary Considine was hit with a number of calls from concerned studio execs Friday after word spread about the Hollywood Stock Exchange deal, sources said.

NBC declined comment over a possible studio boycott of "Access." But in a statement, Considine defended the "Access" pact with HSX.

"'Access Hollywood' is excited about its new relationship with the Hollywood Stock Exchange," Considine said. "We consider it a great mechanism to monitor current and future trends of movie projects, up-and-coming stars and smaller, low budget movies, like 'The Blair Witch Project.' It is a great complement to our already existing Hollywood Weekend segment."

NBC sources said they'd wait for reaction from the initial feature before considering studio concerns.

"The alliance allows us to utilize the input of tens of thousands of Internet traders in terms of what they consider hot or not relative to movies or music," Considine said.

**(Michael Schneider contributed to this report.)**

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