basis for US distributors. The data measures consumer awareness of a given film, the level of interest people have in seeing the film at the cinema, and how a film compares to other movies opening at the same time. A film is placed in surveys six weeks prior to its release. The marketing push is building and public awareness is hopefully growing. Just before opening, each survey issues a forecast for opening box office with a 15% margin of error. Results are supposed to be confidential for the client film distributor, mainly the major studios. Indie distributors often lack the marketing budgets to be regular tracking subscribers and do not have the wide-release films for which tracking would be meaningful. Over the years, tracking data has been leaked regularly to exhibitors and the press, both of which can misread the incomplete snippets of data they receive, according to researchers.

For example, the surveys focus on heavy cinema-goers, since the inclusion of infrequent cinema-goers would only muddle results with the least important audience. So, it can be argued, the older, more infrequent movie-going audience that flocked to The Passion Of The Christ was never intended to be measured. Also, the closely measured youth audience that enjoys frothy comedies is not a good indicator for the entire genre, particularly off-beat comedies from the likes of Judd Apatow's Knocked Up and Talladega Nights: The Ballad Of Ricky Bobby, whose films follow a unique trajectory in tracking.

Break-Up breakdown

Adam Fogelson, Universal Pictures president of marketing and distribution, recalls that in 2006, some press stories asserted comedy The Break-Up was tracking poorly prior to release, and then leap to a further conclusion that this indicated female lead Jennifer Aniston could not carry a Hollywood film. "Not only did those stories prove to be inaccurate after the fact, but they were also an incorrect reading of the basic tracking data when compared to both Vince [Vaughn] and Jennifer's prior successes," says Fogelson. The Break-Up later grossed an incorrect reading of the basic tracking data when inclusion this indicated female lead Jennifer Aniston could reverse a fortune by Saturday morning. A favourable reading high or low on Friday night can have an abrupt impact on a film's opening weekend.

Fogelson, who says Hollywood still has faith in tracking data, is taking measures to improve reliability. Universal now subscribes to more than one survey, something that would not have been the case 10 years ago. Also, he is doubly careful in selecting past films for data "comparison" this indicated female lead Jennifer Aniston could reverse a fortune by Saturday morning. A favourable reading high or low on Friday night can have an abrupt impact on a film's opening weekend. Yet audiences still confound even the best-designed tracking models - "if you give us a script, there are hundreds of elements in that copy that can accurately predict profits before the films are made," explains Nick Meaney, head of Epagogix.

Based on this prediction, Epagogix will then ask a studio to consider if they are making the best film possible. Are there key narrative elements that would need adjusting to make the project more financially viable?

Follow the script

Meaney, whose background is in risk management, explains the company started with a screening set-box of hundreds of scripts along with box-office receipts for each of the films made from those screenplays. These were entered into a computer network called a 'neural network system'.

The network then compared what came out of the system with how the film performed and if it was not accurate, it tried again until the system had worked out a formula that did the best job of predicting the financial success of every film in the database.

The idea was to sell this formula to the US studios, "With money pouring into Hollywood, there is a market, especially from hedge funds, to find out exactly what their return on investment will be," says Meaney, who claims his clients include at least one of the big US studios as well as independent film-makers and hedge funds.

But the UK film industry remains sceptical such a system can be applied to a business driven as much by creativity as by cash. "How can we evaluate the risk of a film before it's been shot?" asks Andrew Cripps, the London-based head of Paramount Pictures International. "I'm pretty dubious anyone could achieve this because you can have an excellent script, but no idea what the director will do with it or the cast."

And that is before you take into consideration all the other factors involved around a film and its release — from marketing, festival buzz and market competition.

UK producer Robert Bernstein of Ecosse Pictures, quotes screenwriter William Goldman: "Not one person in the entire motion-picture field... knows for a certainty what's going to work."

Rupert Preston, of UK distributor Vertigo Films agrees, although he adds that many hits are the ones without bankable stars, so on that front, Epagogix might be right. But he doubts such a formula could work outside Hollywood on the lower budget end of the market.

Used to such criticism, Meaney says: "It's true that if our tool is used in an unsubtle way, it would no doubt restrict the creativity of the film industry. It's worth highlighting again that Epagogix is only, at the moment, applied to a particular brand of big-budget, blockbuster film. These are churned out of Hollywood at least 10 times a year and are as far away from films with low-budget appeal as you can get."

Despite this, the company has just signed a deal with Simon Channing-Williams' London-based Pomeroli Productions, whose credits include The Constant Gardener and Man About Dog.

Epagogix is a formula for determining the commercial potential of films, launched by three UK businessmen, Dick Copaken, Nick Meaney and Sean Verity, with two technical analysts. They have devised a database points system, which is used to analyse the likelihood of scripts going on to make financially successful films.

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The Epagogix method is based on the notion that the best way to calculate the commercial potential of a film is through its script and plot development, rather than its stars, directors or locations.

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