Three strikes and you're out: Can data insights predict best picture three years in a row?

By Bryan Melmed , issued by VDX.tv   20 Feb 2015

Our audience data and insights accurately predicted the best picture Oscar winner in 2013 and 2014. So whilst it is potentially foolhardy to put our neck on the line again, I'm here to tell you that *Birdman* will win. And this is why.

Winners are chosen by the 5,800 members of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Exactly who these people are is a secret, but we do know that they are fairly homogenous. In a *Los Angeles Times* exposé, Academy members are described as 94% Caucasian, 77% male, and having a median age of 62. With this information (industry, job title, location, ethnicity, gender, and age) we can identify 32,000 relevant user profiles, a handful of which may be voting for best picture, and many more who are the in the influencer network of voters. It's not a perfect read, but it's enough to make some smart assumptions and drive an analysis to the Best Picture winner.

Bryan Melmed

Too kooky/too smart

Last year we wrote off four movies immediately as their core audiences were markedly different from the Academy profile. This year there are only two that can be eschewed so easily - *The Grand Budapest Hotel* and *The Theory of Everything*.

The cities most receptive to *The Grand Budapest Hotel* help illustrate how this film found its audience in a distinctive segment of American society. We see high interest in the young liberal enclaves of Austin (Texas), Madison (Wisconsin) and San Francisco and more broadly amongst the highly educated "emerging affluent". It also had the highest density of female viewers and had the youngest median age of any nominee in the category. In twenty years these viewers will look very much like an Academy voter, but the movie is out of luck this year.

Moviegoers who favour *The Theory of Everything* are north-eastern liberals, huge fans of NPR, work for non-profits or educational institutions, and favour electric hybrids like the Toyota Prius. They are the most educated movie audience but struggle financially - both student loans and the high cost of housing have taken their toll. Some may imagine this a perfect fit with the Hollywood stereotype, but the Academy members are Hillary Clinton voters - liberal but not left-wing, educated but not intellectual, and with a West Coast affinity for strong personalities.

Too niche

Two movies found their niche outside the gates of Hollywood, and while they have fans within the Academy, their appeal is too narrow to pull off a win. Goodbye, then, to *American Sniper* and *Selma*.

American Sniper has an unusual profile for a Best Picture nominee. It is most popular in rural states like Alaska and Montana, among military personnel and policemen, and with drivers of large SUVs. Yet this film also finds favour within the confines of Hollywood. For one thing, the audience demographics are perfectly aligned with the Academy voter - overwhelmingly Caucasian, male, and older. Looking deeper, *American Sniper* also has a distinct secondary audience of affluent urban professionals. It is hugely popular among owners of the BMW i3, a sporty electric car, and a favourite of lawyers, financiers, and film producers. That's enough to garner a nomination, but not enough to win.

The core audience for *Selma* is also quite different. These viewers are far more likely to be upper-middle class African Americans and to hail from the southern states. In other ways they resemble the *American Sniper* profile - an older audience, preferring traditional American cuisine and SUVs, who are likely to have a career in the military. But the distinct overlap with our Academy voter is in domestic matters. We see a shared emphasis on family life, with tight-knit multi-generational families and a great deal of money and attention lavished on the home. It may seem ironic, but more than any other film Selma reflects the sense of establishment that pervade the Hollywood elites. Again enough to capture a nomination, but not a majority vote.

Too broad

It may seem strange to rule out a film because it is widely popular, but usually we find that broad appeal also implies shallow support - and *Boyhood* and *Whiplash* found fans almost everywhere. The only telling distinction in these audiences was related to the content; in general, *Boyhood* was preferred by moviegoers with families and *Whiplash* by arts enthusiasts. Universal appeal is an ideal situation for a movie distributor but a nightmare at awards night if the consensus "feel-good" choice fails to make it to the top of anyone's list.

Our Best Picture prediction is complicated by the fact that votes are made on a ranked ballot, such that votes for losing films are redistributed towards the consensus winner. Specifically, if fans of the non-contender and niche films mentioned above share a second choice pick, *Boyhood* or *Whiplash* could steal the Best Picture nod. The correlation in our data is not strong enough to suggest this will happen. If it does, *Boyhood* benefit from the *American Sniper* and *Selma* vote, and *Whiplash* from *The Grand Budapest Hotel* vote. (*The Theory of Everything* voter will have picked *Birdman* second.)

The contenders

This leaves *The Imitation Game* and *Birdman*. They are the top choice of Los Angeles and New York residents, of wealthier audiences, and of those working in the film industry. The audiences of these films show the highest correlation with other Oscar best picture nominees, suggesting that they have similar tastes as Academy voters or that their preferences are shaped by the Academy nominations.

To choose between the two, we have to look past these broad strokes. Fortunately, our ad targeting is driven by precise, granular interests that can identify and describe the most highly relevant audiences. It is this approach that vaults *Birdman* to the top.

The audience most interested in movie cameras, video editing systems, pro audio equipment, sound stages, effects lighting, and cables favor Birdman. The audience who travelled to the Cannes film festival and the Sundance film festival would also choose *Birdman*. In contrast, those that prefer *The Imitation Game* are likely to read about film, discuss film online, and buy movie tickets or DVDs.

In short, those living as artistic creators (much like *Birdman* himself) are far more likely to vote for *Birdman*, while those passionate about film would choose *The Imitation Game*.

Since the Oscars are an insider's game, not an imitation one, we therefore predict *Birdman* will win Best Picture this year.

And if it doesn't, well, two out of three ain't bad.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Vice President, Insights, Exponential **Summary of Potential Speaker Topics** Bryan drives all global insight driven thought leadership and research projects at Exponential, and is a sought after keynote speaker at leading international media and marketing events. Most recently Bryan has spoken about marketing to millennials, about why data is only human, and given insights into what drives passionate World Cup fans. He is also a regular contributor and commentator to global media outlets including the Washington Post, Hollywood Reporter, Fox Business News and Ad Week.
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About Bryan Melmed
Bryan Melmed is VP of Insights at Exponential and is based in New York. He is an experienced keynote speaker having presented at Cannes Lions, Advertising Week NY, AdTech Sydney, IAB Interact Paris and many other industry events in 2014. Bryan has deep expertise on quantitative and strategic analysis of digital marketing, and has served as a consultant for media litigation as well as an in-house expert for corporate enterprise. Previous employers include Droga5, MediaMind, ING and NBC. Bryan has an MBA and a Masters in Quantitative Methods from Columbia University in addition to a Bachelor in Economics from Oberlin College.

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