

In Proximity

Season 3 Episode 35

Bing Chen, Terra Potts, Dawn Yang, Cameron Curtis

Final Transcript

Terra Potts: We live in a world where they're trying to make us all the same, and that is the exact point where creators' voices are the most important because we can't let that happen, and we have—you have to be the hope and the light for the young kids—I have a teenage daughter—you know, to embrace their individuality, to embrace their creativity and see that there's other people thinking different ways, and it's celebrated. And the numbers don't lie. Your, your likes, your shares, no one can take that away.

So, as they try to tell us, like, "Oh, no, this is the new norm," or, "We're going back and bringing it back to the norm," like, you guys are proof every day that that's not the case. And that's what brings me hope, and I think that's what brings a lot of your followers and people that engage with you hope. So I—like, now, when they're telling us that is when you need to double down on what you do.

[0:47 - "In Proximity Theme" by Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: You're watching and listening to In Proximity. I'm Paola Mardo. Sinners didn't just open at number one at the box office. It became a cultural conversation. Here's how and why in Part 2 of our Sinners Symposium.

Last week was the first of a two-part series from the Sinners Symposium with Proximity, TikTok, and Gold House. If you missed it, I talked to Ryan Coogler, Sev Ohanian, and TikTok creator Jocelyn Yates about Sinners, audience, and creating content around movies. We'll drop a link below so you can catch up. This week, we have the second part of the event, all about Sinners marketing, fan edits, creator commentary, and truly viral moments. Sinners is a case study in what happens when a film and its filmmaker create a genuine connection with the audience. So what made that possible? And what can the rest of the industry learn from it? Proximity Media's Chief Marketing and Operations Officer Terra Potts sits down with executives from Gold House, TikTok, and Warner Bros. to discuss.

Terra Potts is a veteran executive who oversees marketing and operations at Proximity. Prior to joining the company full-time, she was a consultant on projects like Sinners, Ironheart, Eyes of Wakanda, and Hurricane Katrina: Race Against Time. She spent more than a decade at Warner Bros. where she rose to EVP of Worldwide Marketing, leading campaigns for major films like Creed, Judas and the Black Messiah, Crazy Rich Asians, and more.

On this panel, she's joined by Bing Chen, CEO and Executive Chairman of Gold House—he moderates the conversation—Dawn Yang, Global Head of Entertainment Partnerships at TikTok, and Cameron Curtis, Executive Vice President of Global Marketing at Warner Bros. In this conversation, you'll hear the studio, production company, and social media platform

perspectives on how to recognize a film's potential in becoming a cultural moment, what role creators played in Sinners' reach, and what filmmakers, studios, and even audiences can learn from Sinners' viral marketing campaign. Enjoy.

[02:51 - "KN 9 to 5" by Ludwig Göransson]

Bing Chen: I'm going to jump right into it. A lot is changing in the ecosystem for creativity. What does Sinners represent and enumerate that is most changing to sustain the next wave of creativity? And anybody can begin. Maybe Terra. Maybe not.

Terra Potts: I—to Cameron.

Cameron Curtis: You know, for us at Warner Bros., I just think, you know, what a privilege it was to have a chance to work on this movie and to collaborate with the whole team at Proximity. Our team—you know, when you get a movie like Sinners, you can feel that it's going to move culture. And I think that's what's so—what's so rare and unique is that, especially from what we saw on TikTok, as people began to respond to the first trailer debut, they weren't just saying, "I liked it." They were commenting on it. They were creating content around it. All the creators in this room, who we know so well, were participating in it. It wasn't a one-way conversation.

So I think any time you see from trailer launch to, to, you know, ticketing that folks are participating in the conversation, it's not just a one-way marketing conversation, that's when you feel like you're working on something that's going to be big, that's going to be special. And it's wild to think that this movie came out a year ago, and here we are a year later, and it still feels so timely and so relevant and so powerful. And, like, that's a real tribute to the creators in this room who continue to talk about it, to share about it. That's a tribute to the amazing film that's been created and all the layers of the film that are worth being—they're so talk-worthy. And I think, for me, that's what makes—you know, that's the difference in film marketing today and what's become so important is, you know, thinking about the conversation. It really is a conversation you're having with an audience, and it's not just a one-way sell. You know, that's changed a lot.

Bing Chen: Let's go further on this. Dawn, how would you codify the multidirectional conversational relationship that this piece of art and its team had with the community? Why did that take off?

Dawn Yang: So a lot of the content on TikTok from the movies are about just not only the movie itself but also about the filmmaker's past work. So, for Ryan, we see a lot of creations around not just Sinners but also Creed, Fruitvale, and so forth. I'm going to drop some stats in terms of how much, you know, engagement it drove. Within the four months of the film's release—this is probably me talking to Sev and Ryan—there's about 10.5 million creations that happened in that period of time, about 38 million searches on the movie itself. So people are actually searching for conversations and searching for the deep-dive, searching for the historical context of the movie, searching for the meaning behind and searching for all the scenes. So there's a deep

variety of content from our creators that bring diversity and bring that content, those conversations to the platform.

Bing Chen: Terra, what do you think? You've been on all sides of this.

Terra Potts: You know, we were just talking earlier because we have such a long relationship and about Crazy Rich Asians and that trust that we had with each other immediately. And I think that same thing was similar with Warner Bros. because Cameron and I—I worked there for many years, so Cameron and I had a great relationship existing already. So it was just, like, trusting each other 100 percent to say, like, "We don't have to manage this. We don't have to control the messaging. Like, let's really hand it over to the creators and the audience and not put too many guardrails around them."

And, you know, especially when you're coming from a studio, and there's a lot of rules around things, and we're just—you know, we're on the filmmaker side, and we're just trying to make sure the fans can do whatever they want to do. I think giving that trust to the creator community—I mean, I think you guys can feel it when you know that people—the studios are behind you because they give you more access, they create events like this because it shows you that you're valued so you feel more free to be yourselves. And that comes—I think that was felt from the top, or from the beginning of the campaign in the work.

Bing Chen: Y'all really get extra credit because it can be very stressful investing, we all know, so many hours and so many resources in your own art and then having to give, really, it away.

Terra Potts: Yeah.

Bing Chen: But I think we all know it. We're all just trying to get to the other side. Every creator wants a film, every filmmaker wants creators, etc. So, so it's just nice to be in each other's company on this. Terra, can you go deeper? What were your favorite ways the creators engaged, and how would you, especially with your marketing hat, templatzize that so it's replicable in the future, if possible?

Terra Potts: You know, I think it can't be replicated, and I think you don't—

Bing Chen: Right answer.

Terra Potts: Yeah. And I think you don't want to replicate it. I think the most amazing thing about the campaign was that, you know, the film was very layered, and everyone took something away of how it meant to—you know, what it meant to you. And I think all of us, even as marketers, we all come to this, a very specific worldview, our own very specific experiences, so we're limited at how far things can go. And when you allow people from all over the world from all different backgrounds and all different experiences bring their point-of-view to the project, it's so amazing to see how they interpret things. Like, we can see the—we can see the same thing but different all the time, or there's things that I might have missed because I haven't

had that experience. So what I love the most is I think it's, like, even though we're all working off the same film, like, we're letting each other into each other's worlds a little bit, and how we see the world. And so that's why I just love what all the creators put out. And we look at it. Like, we are constantly texting each other.

Bing Chen: They read comments.

Terra Potts: Yeah.

Bing Chen: Be nice!

Terra Potts: We live in the comments. No. No, the comments have been great on this film. But, you know, we're laughing with everybody. We're crying with everybody. We're looking at some content and seeing where it goes and wondering, like, "Oh, what would have driven that? Like, what happened in their experience that got them to this piece of art?" And it's very—again, I didn't make the film. I'm just marketing it, but it's really touching to see, always.

Bing Chen: I hate to be a sycophant again, but this is one of those examples of: we just came up with different eyes. We grew up in the age of the internet and social and so forth. Like, Myspace is ancient to many of us, right? And it's just a different way to go about it. And so kudos, again, to the Proximity team. I want to go down this thread of we all have different eyes, and we all see art differently.

Cameron, what I really respect about Warner Bros. repertoire, and I mean this sincerely, and I'd say this if your competitors were here, is your films feel each singular. They all feel different and special. How, how do you identify taste, and how do you transcend film, especially, from just a piece of art to a piece of society defining commentary, which this has become?

Cameron Curtis: Yeah. Well, well, first—great, but first and foremost, this is a real testament to Mike and Pam at Warner Bros. who, you know, head up our studio and have done an amazing job at choosing—working with incredible filmmakers and also working and choosing incredible stories that are original and unique. And, you know, sometimes you feel, when you have an original or unique story, that that's more of a risk to take. This isn't built-in IP, right? And so it can be nerve-wracking. But I think what we've seen is part of it is starting a conversation and making sure that a conversation is happening around this material. So, for us, you know, it's bringing people in early. It's bringing creators into our process early. It's—when you can see the passion—if you were to—if any of you had the chance to sit with Ryan or Sev, a filmmaker meeting, as they talked about this movie, you would feel that passion and you'd almost—you'd want to capture it, and you'd want it to be on TikTok, right? And so they, they gave so much of their time to so many of these creators and brought them into the process. And I think that's what you're seeing we're doing more of now, is we're bringing creators in early. We want—we want people to understand kind of what goes into these movies, what these stories, you know, are about. And then they translate that story to their audiences, you know? And that, that is, I

think, again, what is making these films more culturally relevant, what's making them new, and what's giving people a reason to go to the movie theaters and experience these together.

Bing Chen: I want to talk about this translation. As we all know, marketing is half the battle, half the budget. And I remember at my alma mater, one of TikTok's competitors, that we learned that—it's very red.

[LAUGHTER]

It's—yay! We love everybody. But we learned that 20 percent of logged-in users actually drive 80 percent of viewership. So it's truly fandoms, the most engaged of y'all, that control everything. By the way, the box office is the same. Half of the box office is run by the Latino, Asian, and African diaspora, in that order, most of which are women, as well. So the minorities are controlling everything, y'all! Just so you know. Just so you know.

[LAUGHTER]

It's 10 percent that drive half, half of the box office. Numbers don't lie; only people do.

[LAUGHTER]

And so, so Dawn—

Terra Potts: Bing.

Bing Chen: I was told we were allowed to be casual.

[LAUGHTER]

Terra Potts: You are! Be yourself, Bing.

Bing Chen: And honest. Dawn, so the question is: for everybody in the room, how do you—not to make this a business school case, but how do you structure fandoms so that they are sustainable, whether I'm a creator and I have my community, or I'm a film and I have this, or I am the company, and so forth? What's the formula for fandom?

Dawn Yang: So, for us, because we have 1 billion-plus users, it has to be a scalable way to do this on the product side. But by the way, you're dropping more stats than I do. I like the stats. So I'm going to try to be—

Bing Chen: We are in a Gold Household.

Dawn Yang: So I'm going to try to beat you to it. So, for example, when we see—we monitor the first weekend box office. Typically, when you look at the fandom—so when Cameron drops a

trailer, we monitor that, and then when the box office opens, we have a way of tracking conversations in terms of posts and creations. So, for *Sinners*, for example, we compared to average horror-genre content, and it actually 4xed the comp at the first weekend, which we shared with Warner Bros., as well. And then, because of that, we saw the second week at box office sustain, which is also very unusual for this genre of comp, as well.

So we believe that we, as creators, as people that talk about films on the platform, have a way of driving that conversion for the studios. But in addition to that, we also saw conversations amongst our users. So creators are talking to other creators about what they want to see in their conversations. For—that's the sustainability that's probably different from the previous way of marketing where there's typically a decay or a drop. That sustains because creators and also our community are talking to each other, and that brings up the conversation, again, throughout the year.

Bing Chen: I love that note.

Dawn Yang: It's been a full year.

Bing Chen: The tail is the body. I love that. Penultimate question: if there's one lesson the industry should take from the entire journey of *Sinners* from your respective perspectives, what is it? Also, I need to shout-out two other things: that they marketed a lesson about IMAX on digital themselves, which I thought was genius.

Dawn Yang: Yes!

Cameron Curtis: That's right. We got to—we got—we can't get enough of that. Yeah.

Bing Chen: And, and another example of this hybridization, and then—

Cameron Curtis: For me, it's bringing creators in early, you know? For me, it's bringing creators in early and starting that conversation early and, and giving people the space to respond. And I think Terra said it well earlier. It's—you know, it's not wanting to have control over it. It's bringing them in early and letting them translate the story for their audiences. *Sinners* means so much in so—to so many different people, and the way in which creators were able to translate that to their audiences and bring that to the world and get people to go to the theater and experience it, it was everything. So I think that was—that's the real lesson, is bring creators in early.

Bing Chen: Y'all heard that. Sounds like money.

[LAUGHTER]

Dawn Yang: My ask as a platform is very simple: allow creators to have the freedom of voice and creativity. Allow the assets, like the clips that you see, to be created by creators and told in

a different way and told in more personal and emotional ways. So access and freedom is what I seek for our creator teams here.

Terra Potts: I think it was—for me, it was: don't assume that you know what people are going to like and what they're going to take away from it. Like, there were things that we had advocated for from the beginning—and, sorry, I'm looking at Sev—like, you know, the—Jack's dance and things that we talked about. And there was—you know, I don't want to say "resistance," but people were—they—I don't think they really understood or got it. And then to see all these videos naturally creating and people recreating these dances or, like, just those little moments where I was like, "Let's not assume that we know what people are going to like and what's going to resonate with them."

Bing Chen: I love that. And then, final thing, I want to end with something hope-related, which I know is a four-letter word these days. But I think a lot of creatives are really—

[LAUGHTER]

Sorry. I didn't say it! I just said it was a four-letter word. I think a lot of us in the creative community are really stressed out right now. And my punchline question is: what is singlehandedly giving you hope to a creative? Because right now, I think a lot of us are seeing the media companies are consolidating. We're seeing a lot of the platforms maintain a lot of power, and you don't control the algorithm.

But my historic fact on this, to invoke data, is the same thing happened in 2008 when all the media companies were contracting. It was the biggest economic recession in history. We just came out of the pandemic. And what happens in these really stressful phases is singular specific voices will persist. And so I'm going to give you three examples. One, the Marvel Cinematic Universe was born in Iron Man in 2008. It is the most lucrative cinematic franchise of all time. Ryan, of course, Mr. Coogler, of course, is complicit in that with Black Panther.

[LAUGHTER]

Double-dipping, double-dipping! Greedy, honestly, is what it is. It's not Creed; it's greed. I'm kidding. The second is: a lot of Hollywood thought there was no place for mid-budget films, and then the horror category came up with James Wan and Blumhouse. And then the final example, to pick on Mr. Coogler as a segue to the next piece—you'll hear from the filmmakers—is nobody thought there was a place for independent voices, period. No one's going to invest in it because why would they invest in your tiny, rinky-dink film? But because of people like Eugene and Sundance, this period birthed—

[CHEERS AND APPLAUSE]

— this period birthed a film called Fruitvale Station, which is a very specific Bay Area story. It has made Ryan not only a great filmmaker but the most commercially successful Black filmmaker of all time.

[CHEERS AND APPLAUSE]

And this is in a decade. And so, so the question again is: it is easy to feel helpless and depressed, especially if you're in your bedroom, you're in your parents' or whatever. I'm just being real! The rent is free. What is your practical, no-b.s. lesson of hope for creatives?

Terra Potts: I mean, we're so aligned in this. Like, I love you so much. But we're—you know, we live in a world where they're trying to make us all the same, and that is the exact point where creators' voices are the most important because we can't let that happen, and we have—you have to be the hope and the light for the young kids—I have a teenage daughter—you know, to embrace their individuality, to embrace their creativity and see that there's other people thinking different ways, and it's celebrated. And the numbers don't lie. Your, your likes, your shares, all of—no one can take that away.

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[APPLAUSE]

Bing Chen: Dawn?

Dawn Yang: I think, for us, our recommendation is: find your people. Find your collaborators. I know that Ryan and Sev met at school, as well. So find the people that understand you, sees your vision, and try to help you. And I know a lot of you are here in this room, so please talk to each other and really find your people that will support you along the way. Collaboration is hugely important.

Cameron Curtis: Very good. For, for me, it's the excitement and everything these creators do in this room to celebrate the theater-going experience, you know? And there's—as different as we all are, the shared experience of watching a movie like Sinners in the movie theater is the most impactful, powerful thing. And the way in which you all relay that to your audiences means the world. And so I get excited when I think about those opportunities, and I get excited for movie-going and the future of movies because of all of you. So, you know, that's what gives me hope.

Bing Chen: Very good. Cameron, Dawn, Terra, thank y'all so much!

[APPLAUSE]

[18:11 - In Proximity Theme Music by Ludwig Göransson]

[VOICEOVER]

Paola Mardo: In Proximity is a production of Proximity Media.

The show is hosted, directed and produced by Paola Mardo.

Executive producers are Ryan Coogler, Zinzi Coogler, and Sev Ohanian.

Theme song and additional music is by Ludwig Göransson.

Patrick Epino is our co-director and director of photography.

Ken Nana is our sound designer and mix engineer.

Our editors are Patrick Epino, Ken Nana, and Ben Caloza

The production team includes Celine Mendiola, Joy Woo, and Alexandria Santana.

Follow us on social media @proximitymedia.

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[VOICEOVER ENDS]