

THE COLLECTIBLE OBSESSION

The Rising Popularity of Concessions Merchandise

BY REBECCA PAHLE



➔ When it comes to going to the movies, the most important thing is, well, the movie. Since the earliest days of cinema, exhibitors have been responsible for the showmanship angle, using whatever means necessary to entice moviegoers with a little something extra, be it experiential, like the still-rising popularity of premium formats, or material.

In the latter category, a bit of merch—either free with purchase or available at additional cost—can both draw moviegoers to the cinema and evoke memories of the moviegoing experience after-the-fact. BOXOFFICE PRO’s 100-plus years of reporting on the cinema industry is filled with examples, ranging from dinnerware (“dish night” was a popular promotion during the cash-strapped days of the Great Depression) to movie memorabilia to, in one notable case, live chickens. (From our August 1, 1960, issue: Guests at the Circus Drive-In in Hammonton, New Jersey, had a chance to win one of ten live chickens that were “toss[ed] off the roof of the concessions building during intermission, with each bird to become the property of the person who catches it.”)

Though live animal giveaways are (as far as we know) a thing of the past, the spirit of showmanship is alive and well in the many cinema-exclusive popcorn buckets, cup toppers, and other tie-in items that are popping up in cinema

concessions areas coast-to-coast . . . and later, on eBay or other resale sites, where a *Dune: Part 2* or *Deadpool & Wolverine* popcorn bucket can bring in over \$100.

Custom concessions merchandise, also called collectible concession vehicles (CCVs), aren’t a new thing for cinemas. One of the leaders in the movie collectibles industry, Golden Link, has been providing cinemas with such merch since its founding in 1997. Exclusive branded items have been a major part of dine-in chain Alamo Drafthouse’s brand identity ever since they launched their own merchandise brand, Mondo, in 2004, with custom pint glasses taking pride of place in many a movie geek’s kitchen. AMC traces its big CCV “Aha!” moment to 2019, when their popcorn/drink holder shaped like



(above) Star Wars: The Force Awakens
(below) Five Nights at Freddy’s





Alien: Romulus

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R2-D2 sold out on the opening night of *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*; Nels Storm, AMC Theatres’ vice president of food and beverage product strategy, called it “an inflection point where we saw the real potential for these vessels and began to strategize how they could be a core part of our overall marketing plans.”

Still, it’s hard to deny that popcorn buckets and other concessions merchandise are having a moment. A big turning point came last summer when Warner Bros. and Hasbro pulled out all the stops in the run-up to *Barbie*, partnering with what sometimes seemed like every brand under the sun. That included major cinema brands, which rolled out exclusive popcorn vessels shaped like the Barbie box and Barbie’s famous pink convertible. “When *Barbie* was released, in-theater merchandise became must-have movie accessories, which was hard not to notice,” says Matt Willard, head of business development at Regal. “Collectible movie merch offers a tangible connection to the moment a guest sees a favorite film, especially when a specific item achieves viral status.”

And in instances where the merch in question is exclusive to a particular chain, as it often is, it can be a useful differentiating factor in an often crowded cinema marketplace. In 2023, after Cinemark’s *Scream VI* popcorn tub shaped like the iconic Ghostface flew off the shelves, moviegoers got the chance to buy it online;



Despicable Me 4

months later, the Texas-based chain’s introduction of an online merch shop was a major component of a company-wide rebrand. Concessions merchandise “helps, obviously, with the promotion of a film,” says David Haywood, Cinemark’s senior vice president of food and beverage, but, combined with other amenities like special menu items and premium technology, it also serves as the icing on the cake that helps sell the overall experience.

In February of this year, months after *Barbie* changed the merch game, another Warner Bros. release sparked concessions traffic when *Saturday Night Live* aired a musical skit about AMC’s *Dune: Part 2* popcorn bucket, after images of it leaked online days before. When the movie



Alien: Romulus

opened, the popcorn bucket was an instant hit: Sales were boosted by FOMO social media posts from moviegoers lucky enough to buy one before they sold out.

“I think it’s pretty clear that we live in an age of social media and instant gratification,” says Rod Mason, vice

president of business development at Zinc Group, the marketing agency behind the *Dune: Part 2* popcorn bucket. “If you can [say], ‘I’ve got the *Dune* popcorn bucket,’ it kind of elevates your coolness.”

“It’s an impulse buy for some and not for others,” adds Zinc’s Marcus Gonzalez, global creative director of entertainment marketing. “Every time you see it at home, it reminds you of watching the movie and the movie experience. You tell your friends, ‘Look at this thing that I got!’ Those are some of the same basic factors that feed into a lot of the whole social media experience, as well. It’s a matter of which [concept is] going to catch on.”

A lot has been catching on lately. The three movie merchandise programs AMC

Dune: Part 2



A red and white striped popcorn vending machine with a digital display and a coin slot. It has a sign that says 'POPCORN' and 'THE GOLD MEDAL'.

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(left) Scream VI
(right) Barbie



"I think people would be surprised at the lead time it requires to get these CCVs into the hands of our guests—from identifying titles, securing licensing, innovative concepting, creating prototypes, and then eventually moving onto production and shipping. We often work up to a year in advance to get these vessels into our guests' hands."

The long lead times typically required to produce movie-themed concessions merch are at odds with the nature of the cinema industry, where marketing often gets pushed to the last minute as cinemas wait for studios to provide official assets. It's that lack of lead time that poses the biggest challenge to cinemas looking to offer new release-themed concessions merchandise, either to sell or as free promotional items, says Geonni Sigl,



Deadpool & Wolverine

earned the most revenue from—*Taylor Swift: The Eras Tour*, *Deadpool & Wolverine*, and *Despicable Me 4*—all debuted in the last 12 months. So far this year, custom concessions vessels tied to *Dune: Part 2*, *Deadpool & Wolverine*, *Inside Out 2*, and *Despicable Me 4* all sold out the weekend they were released, as did a light-up Bat-Signal popcorn bucket released to coincide with Batman's 85th anniversary.

Alamo is also expanding its merch game; *Deadpool & Wolverine* gave the chain both its best-selling pint glass and its first movie-themed popcorn bucket, which sold out "almost instantly," per Chaya Rosenthal, chief marketing officer of Alamo. New licensing agreements have expanded the lifetime of certain items by allowing people to buy them in Alamo's online shop, whereas before they were only available when purchasing a ticket.

The point when a pint glass or popcorn tub goes home with a customer is closer to the end of the merch story than the beginning, of course. "I think people would be surprised at the lead time it requires to get these CCVs into the hands of our guests—from identifying titles, securing licensing, innovative concepting, creating prototypes, and then eventually moving onto production and shipping. We often work up to a year in advance to get these vessels into our guests' hands," says AMC's Storm. Zinc Group generally starts work on a project 12–4 months before a film is released. At Alamo, "we start planning our merch targets a year in advance, but that is not always realistic with the release schedule," says Rosenthal. "In reality, it comes down to a minimum of five months in advance of a release."

founder of marketing agency Onni Creative. But that doesn't mean it's impossible. More elaborate concessions items, like the *Barbie* car or *Dune: Part 2* popcorn bucket, require special molds that drive up the time needed to produce them. Using simpler designs makes the process exponentially easier, as does staying away from overseas manufacturers, which, though often cheaper, add layers of complexity by way of shipping and customs. "I really like the merch that can can fold into already existing things that the theaters have," says Sigl, like their custom *Five Nights at Freddy's* pizza box, which "was overwhelmingly popular. [People] would come in and not want the pizza. They'd just want to purchase the



Beetlejuice Beetlejuice

box. It was an exciting way to get people into the theaters, particularly younger audiences. They want that physical item to take home so they can have that memory."

"While merchandise tie-ins have long been part of marketing strategies outside of the industry, in the past few years movie studios have seen just how impactful movie tie-ins can be with theatrical partners in bringing excitement and awareness to their films," says AMC's Storm. The genie is out of the bottle (or the popcorn tub), and concessions merch sales are expected to stay strong throughout 2025, boosted by a slate of titles like *The Smurfs Musical*, *Captain America: Brave New World*, *Snow White*, and *Minecraft* that cry out for collectibles. ■



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