



## Fresh DVDs, No Waiting

By [Jason Silverman](#) | [Also](#) by this reporter

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Got a poker game during the premiere of the FX Channel's new Iraq drama *Over There*? Don't feel like braving the traffic to catch the documentary *Enron: Smartest Guys in the Room*, which just opened at your local theater?

No worries -- just buy them on DVD. Right now.

### See also

A DVD version of *Over There*'s pilot will be released by 20th Century Fox six days after its July 27 premiere. [2929 Entertainment](#), which owns the national chain Landmark Theaters, the television network [HDNet](#) and the film distribution company [Magnolia Pictures](#), offered [Enron](#) to viewers simultaneously on cable, DVD and in theaters.

According to 2929's Todd Wagner, this new kind of distribution -- with films and TV shows instantly available on multiple platforms -- is designed to appeal to today's rapidly evolving consumer.

"In a digital world, bits are bits," said Wagner who runs 2929 with [Mark Cuban](#). "We should look at models that get content to consumers in whatever platform they want to consume it. If I hear a song on the radio, I don't have to wait for four months before I can buy the CD. It's immediately available for purchase at a store or for my iPod."

At this point, no one considers 2929 an imminent threat to more traditional distribution, where studios first show films in theaters and release them on DVD a few months later.

But these new distribution ideas reflect a shift of power from the multiplex to the living room. In 2004, box office receipts in the United States totaled \$9.5 billion -- a solid year relative to [recent ones](#). But DVD and VHS, by comparison, did monster business: \$26 billion, according to the [Hollywood Reporter](#).

So the conventional wisdom -- that you must build word of mouth for your film in theaters (or on TV) before releasing it in other formats -- is under examination.

Industry insiders refer to the "shrinking window" -- the narrowing of the gap between a studio's release of a film in theaters and its appearance on cable and on DVD. According to John Fithian, head of the National Association of Theater Owners, the window decreased from six months a decade ago to just over four months in 2004.

Independent distributors, including 2929 and [Film Movement](#), are dedicated to closing those windows completely. Film Movement was the first company to offer simultaneous theatrical and DVD movie releases. Its president, Stuart Litman, claims the Hollywood model just doesn't work for films without huge marketing budgets.

Most foreign, independent and art house movies survive thanks to positive word of mouth and good reviews, rather than massive TV and newspaper ad campaigns. They travel from city to city, unlike blockbusters, which open on 3,000 screens simultaneously. So by the time most filmgoers get a chance to see that specialty movie they discovered in a national magazine or newspaper, they've forgotten all about it.

"Audiences in Minnesota or Dallas might read a *New York Times* review of a movie and know that it's a good quality movie that they should see," Litman said. "The consumer understands that it will take a long time, if at all, for that movie to reach their city.... But the audience is vast, and by collapsing the windows we have a good opportunity to feed them."

At this point, independent companies like 2929 and Film Movement are still anomalies. Fithian said his members think of 2929's model as "nothing more than an experiment."

"These are smaller, artistic films with relatively little commercial potential," Fithian said, adding that most major theater chains won't play films that are available on cable or DVD.

If the studios, however, were to start toying with simultaneous releases, or even shrinking the window further, Fithian admitted it could have a "profound" effect on the movie exhibition business.

The next few years will likely provide theater chains with an increasing number of challenges. But the upside is that consumers may find more ways to watch new movies.

"(2929 is) taking some small, educated chances to see if we can better leverage technology in a digital era, to get product to consumers," Wagner said. "If we can give consumers more choice, and generate additional revenues, and cut our costs ... that strikes me as a win-win for everyone."

Many in Hollywood are monitoring 2929's progress, especially since the group signed Oscar-winning director Steven Soderbergh ([Ocean's 11](#) and *Traffic*) to a six-picture deal. Soderbergh is now shooting his first HDNet film, *Bubble*, in Ohio.

Some critics of Hollywood hope the simultaneous release model -- along with the inevitable arrival of full video-on-demand services -- will shake up film exhibition. But no one wants movie theaters to disappear. That includes Wagner, who, through 2929 is, among other things, a theater chain owner.

"Never is the home theater experience going to duplicate the feeling of going to a movie, the smell of popcorn and the communal experience of seeing something with an audience," he said. "Similar to watching a game on TV -- it's even more fun and exciting to be there in person."

