DVDs Smell, and That's a Good Thing for Hollywood

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WASHINGTON — Hollywood's newest stars are perfectly happy to go straight to DVD.

And Hollywood is perfectly happy to go to the dogs.

On Tuesday, the Motion Picture Assn. of America showed off Lucky and Flo, a pair of playful, 2-year-old black Labrador retrievers with noses trained to zero in on DVDs, including the pirated kind.

During a briefing at the MPAA's headquarters, Lucky and Flo took turns sniffing out DVDs hidden in a box.

"They tend to be cheaper than most employees and they don't demand raises all the time," said John Malcolm, the MPAA's director of worldwide anti-piracy operations.

Still, the first ever DVD-sniffing dogs didn't come that cheap. The MPAA spent about $9,000 on each to train them over eight months. But the group said that was a small price compared with losses from pirated DVDs, estimated by the industry at $11.1 billion in 2005.

MPAA Chief Executive Dan Glickman gave the go-ahead for the project. As Agriculture secretary in the 1990s, he had seen the success of the department's "Beagle Brigade" in identifying prohibited foods at U.S. borders.

It turns out that DVDs also have a unique smell — not just the ones that were stinkers at the box office — probably from the resins and polycarbonates used to produce the discs.

"There is a scent that comes off the DVD that the dog is absolutely dead-set on finding," said Neil Powell, a Northern Ireland sniffer dog expert who trained Lucky and Flo. If there's a scent — whether it's from DVDs, drugs or explosives — a dog can be trained to sniff it out.

Lucky and Flo can't distinguish between legitimate and bootleg DVDs, but customs officials can identify smugglers by checking the declarations for the packages that the dogs point out, Malcolm said.

The world tour even has a Hollywood touch: commemorative "Lucky & Flo K-9 Pirate Smackdown" T-shirts.

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