Porn studios quietly courted

It's all hush-hush as backers of HD DVD and Blu-ray formats vie for the industry's attention.

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As the opposing camps pushing the next generation of DVDs try to win audiences, they are furiously pursuing the affections of the multibillion-dollar porn industry.

Since the advent of home video, adult entertainment has played a key role in the adoption of new consumer technology. Porn companies, for instance, helped VHS trump Betamax in the '70s. More recently, they began streaming online video long before television networks.

Last summer, a group pitching Blu-ray visited the Canoga Park offices of Wicked Pictures, whose films include "As Sleazy as 1-2-3" and "Womb Raiders." Wicked executive Jackie Ramos said the Blu-ray proponents spent hours explaining how the movie studio could benefit from releasing Blu-ray DVDs, which deliver dramatically higher picture quality than conventional discs.

Versions of that message keep popping up as the backers of Blu-ray and HD DVD court the porn industry. Giants with a stake in the outcome include the likes of Microsoft Corp., Toshiba and Sony Corp.

The lengths to which they are going — and won't go — provide one way to measure the progress of the fiercest format war since VHS versus Betamax.

The porn industry has helped the HD DVD camp stay in the game despite support for Blu-ray from big electronics companies and Hollywood.

The battle is still young. Demand for the next-generation DVDs won't really take off until more people own televisions that can take advantage of the superior picture quality. And this month's introduction of an LG Electronics player that can handle either type of next-generation DVD — along with Warner Home Video's unveiling of a new hybrid "Total Hi Def" disc that holds both formats — suggests that the fight could last far longer than first predicted.

HD DVD, whose backers include Microsoft, Toshiba and General Electric Co.'s Universal Pictures, was out of the gate first. But since December, when Sony's PlayStation 3 and other devices that play Blu-ray movies began shipping in volume, Blu-ray disc sales have taken the lead.

Blu-ray has every major Hollywood studio except Universal (some are issuing in both formats). And with 710,000 PlayStation 3s and dedicated players sold through the end of the year, Blu-ray now has about four times as many homes to play in as HD DVD does.

But it is still too early to write off HD DVD, especially with inexpensive players due later this year from Chinese manufacturers, said Tom Adams, president of Adams Media Research. "HD is going to beat Blu-ray to $300 and $200 — all the prices that start unlocking all the segments of population that will buy," he said.

With the race this close, it stands to reason that both sides are paying close attention to the porn kings of the San Fernando Valley. By some estimates, adult titles make up 10% or more of the $24-billion annual market in traditional DVDs.
Plus, anyone wondering who would most appreciate pictures that appear crisper than
real life had only to witness a briefing at the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas
last month by LG Electronics, maker of the expensive players for either format. None
of the presenter's points gripped the audience like the slow-motion HD DVD video of a
model emerging from a swimming pool, every drop glistening as it fell from her white
bikini.

Most U.S. porn producers are getting their feet wet with HD DVD.

During those hushed meetings with the producers, HD DVD and Blu-ray promoters
insisted on secrecy as they touted the features of their respective formats. Each was
sensitive to concerns specific to adult entertainment, such as how to edit out the
surgical scars that would otherwise be far too visible.

But the HD DVD side went further, providing training and unofficially connecting the
studios with the factories known as replicators, which stamp out discs from a master
copy.

The porn industry is having trouble finding replicators to press Blu-ray DVDs.

HD DVD production methods are built on the old DVD standards, so the older
machinery can be retooled to make the next-generation discs. But Blu-ray requires
expensive new equipment. That's why there are only eight or so Blu-ray replicators in
the world.

For Vivid Entertainment Group, the physical production of Blu-ray discs will come to
about 35% of those movies' budgets, compared with 15% for HD DVDs and 10% for a
standard DVD, said Vivid Chief Executive Steve Hirsch.

Even if a porn studio wants to pay extra for Blu-ray, Sony and Walt Disney Co. make it
hard.

Sony manufactures Blu-ray discs but won't do it for adult titles. And Disney requires
the replicators it uses to pledge not to use the same machines and employees to
publish porn. Disney has its reasons: In the past, porn snippets have accidentally
shown up on Disney titles. Neither company would comment for the record about porn.

Since Disney uses most of the biggest U.S. Blu-ray replicators, L.A.-based Vivid, the
only adult producer to promise some Blu-ray discs, has been forced to range far
afield.

"The Blu-ray people are making it very difficult for the adult guys," Hirsch said.

On the other hand, that may just be because they can afford to be difficult.

If HD DVD mounts a serious comeback, executives at two mainstream Blu-ray studios
said, Sony and Disney will consider giving the porn makers a little more quiet help.

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