

Long live the video store

Watch out Netflix and Redbox — local video stores are here to stay

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Like any film connoisseur worth their salt, Morgan Krizan knows how to make connections. But more than being able to link Kevin Bacon to any other actor in under 6 degrees of separation, Krizan loves connecting people with movies.

In her eight years of managing Noah's Video in Kings Beach, Krizan takes pride in being able to find customers the perfect film, whether it's a cerebral work of art requiring intense attention or a mindless comedy to watch while folding clothes.

Since the arrival of Netflix and Redbox, however, local video stores are in danger of being replaced by the wildly popular website that offers thousands of titles by mail and those inescapable machines that make renting movies as easy as buying a soda, and just as cheap.

But as the battle for the hearts of renters wages on, it seems Tahoe video stores are proving that customers would rather converse with a real person than click a few buttons on a machine.

One of the major disadvantages Noah's Video has, Krizan said, is that they cannot get around charging \$5 per new release. As long as they have to purchase movies upfront — a cost Krizan said is close to retail value — and then try to recoup the cost and turn a profit, there is no way they can compete.

Though competitive deals can be found at Tahoe's local video stores — Noah's offers two new releases or three general titles for \$8 and Video Stop (Tahoe City) and Video Maniacs (Incline Village) offer a free general title movie with the rental of a new release — it's hard to top the variety of Netflix's monthly plans or movies for a buck at Redbox.

But despite the advantage in price and convenience both movie rental moguls have, Krizan said the local video store will always have its place in communities.

"Companies like Netflix and Redbox haven't taken a huge part of the business," Krizan said. "They fill a niche but they won't replace the home town video store."

Steve Hanson, owner of Video Maniacs and Video Stop, agrees.

"Tahoe is a different place," said Hanson. "I wouldn't own a video store in any other area."

Part of the reason both Krizan and Hanson believe their stores are surviving is the face-to-face customer service available from staffs who know their movies.

“People like to get out of their house in Tahoe; they feel confined,” said Hanson. “They want to come hold the DVD in their hands and come talk to us about what movies they should watch.”

And when a customer comes in with questions, Hanson said that chances are they will likely get some good answers.

That’s why Andrea Carabetta, a 37-year local, visits Video Stop on a regular basis. But besides the interesting recommendations she frequently gets, she also appreciates the family atmosphere of the store.

“A lot of the employees are different ages and I always get very diverse recommendations,” she said. “And they’re always happy to talk to you. It’s like a family-run business where everyone knows one another and is friendly.”

This is exactly the reaction both Krizan and Hanson expect when people regularly visit their stores. And because they hand pick their staffs based on an appreciation for movies and the ability to converse about them, customers like Carabetta usually leave happy.

“I’ve got great people working for me,” Hanson said, “They know movies, they love movies, and we talk about movies in the stores all the time.”

Common ground

In an interesting mix of technology and expert opinion, entrepreneur Stuart Skorman pooled the collective wisdom of 20 former video store clerks into a new Internet search engine, ClerkDogs, that launched in December.

ClerkDogs is Skorman’s attempt at combining human intelligence and data crunching into a system that will hopefully emerge as a more engaging and intuitive alternative to the highly automated movie-recommendation system that has helped fuel the success of online DVD rental leader Netflix Inc., according to the Associated Press.

After it asks visitors to enter the name of a movie they liked, ClerkDogs’ engine generates a list of suggestions based on a computer-driven analysis of video clerks’ insights and written reviews. And for a more personal touch, it lets its users tweak recommendations based on their moods at the time of a request. ClerkDogs users can slide a scale indicating whether they are looking for movies with a little more romance, suspense, humor and other elements contained in the movie they initially selected.

Skorman, a former video store owner, likens the system to having a conversation with a movie buff — something that’s not possible on Netflix’s recommendation engine because

it relies on a strict one-to five-star rating system, and doesn't adjust for a renter's changing emotions, according to the Associated Press.