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## BUSINESS

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## BOX OFFICE

## 'Sex' is a big hit among women

The romantic comedy is No. 1 at theaters with a surprising \$55-million opening weekend.

By JOSH FRIEDMAN  
Times Staff Writer

Women flexed their box-office muscle this weekend as "Sex and the City" racked up \$55.7 million to dethrone "Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull," according to studio estimates.

The Warner Bros. movie took the No. 1 spot away from the Harrison Ford sequel and also notched the highest opening ever for a romantic comedy, capturing that honor from Will Smith's "Hitch," which had tallied \$43.1 million in 2005.

Huge ticket sales for Friday's opening day propelled the R-rated comedy, based on the HBO television series and with Sarah Jessica Parker, Kim Cattrall, Cynthia Nixon and Kristin Davis reprising their roles as pals Carrie, Samantha, Miranda and Charlotte.

The opening night crowd was estimated at 85% female — and 80% older than 25 — although theater owners told the studio that audiences were about 75% female during the rest of the weekend as it played a bit more as a date movie. Along with husbands and boyfriends, gay males are part of the show's fan base.

Prerelease tracking surveys had pointed to an opening of about \$25 million, but they failed to capture an unusually passionate groundswell for the ensemble film.

"The cosmos were pouring and the girls came out in strength," said Dan Fellman, the president of domestic distribution at Warner Bros., referring to the show's signature cocktail. "There has never been, in the history of our industry, a female-driven movie that's created a frenzy like this."

Fellman said the closest thing might have been Super Bowl weekend's 3-D hit "Hannah Montana & Miley Cyrus: Best of Both Worlds Concert Tour," which attracted throngs of much-younger females when it came out.

Paramount Pictures' "Indiana Jones" took in \$46 million over the weekend, dropping 54% from its opening, to rank No. 2. The horror film "The Strangers" from Universal's genre arm Rogue Pictures amassed a better-than-expected \$20.7 million to finish No. 3.

Boosted by midnight shows and viewing parties around the country, "Sex and the City" grossed \$26.9 million in its first day before falling off steeply on [See Box office, Page C2]



SELLING POINT: NextMedium founder Hamet Watt, second from left, in a meeting at the firm's L.A. offices. CEO David Bluhm said making product placement efficient could help TV networks offset the shift of ad dollars to the Net.

Photographs by AL SEIB Los Angeles Times

## SMALL BUSINESS

## Advertising's matchmaker

Hooking up brands seeking product placement with the right TV shows and music videos is NextMedium's forte.

By ALANA SEMUELS  
Times Staff Writer

It's tough to break into the energy drink market, even with a beverage containing nine herbs designed to enhance libido.

Delmond Newton, chief executive of Fever Beverage USA, could skill his drink on the radio and plaster ads all around town. But he recently discovered that sales of his energy "stimulation drink" skyrocketed with a mere mention in a music video featuring rapper Ludacris.

Now, rather than spend money on TV commercials and other traditional advertising vehicles, he's relying solely on product placement: having the Fever drink appear in movies, television shows and music videos.

And he's turning to Los Angeles-based NextMedium, which hopes to



NEW APPROACH: Hamet Watt noticed that the way products typically got on shows was clunky.

standardize the product-placement marketplace.

Product placement has been around for decades, but it is becoming an increasingly common way for companies to get their brands in front of viewers who tune out or fast-forward through TV commercials.

NextMedium, which has 30 employees, wants to play matchmaker between those brands and television shows, music videos and other product-placement outlets. The company created an online marketplace called Embed, where advertisers can find shows, music videos and movies on which to appear, and producers can find advertisers willing to pay for placement. So far, the company has signed up 120 productions and hundreds of advertisers.

About 62% of marketers believe that traditional TV ads have become [See Advertising, Page C5]

## Young entrepreneurs have prized ideas

Candle, smoothie and auto care businesses take top spots in the L.A.-region part of a nationwide contest.

By CYNDIA ZWAHLEN  
Special to The Times

When she was 8 years old, Evelyn Espinoza sold bubble gum and other candy door-to-door in her Los Angeles neighborhood to earn money.

By sixth grade, her mom was buy-

ing the enterprising 12-year-old toys at a wholesale mart to resell at school.

Now 17, Espinoza is still hard at work. Her latest business venture, Hippie's Candles, was named the winner last week of the Los Angeles regional business-plan competition, and a \$1,750 prize, at the event sponsored by the National Foundation for Teaching Entrepreneurship and the Merrill Lynch Foundation.

"Entrepreneurship is excellent," said Espinoza, who is in the NFTE entrepreneur-training class at Sol-edad Enrichment Action Girls Academy, a charter school in downtown Los Angeles.

"Money rules the society," she said. "Everyone wants money, and it's only right to learn how to make it in a legit way and to be your own boss."

Second place and \$1,250 went to Crenshaw High School students Autumn Taylor and Ariana Drummond, both 18, for their Groovy Smoothie business — a revival of a concept created by a former student.

Taylor and Drummond, who sell smoothies at special events, recently whipped up 300 at a multicultural bazaar at the school, bringing \$800 in revenue and a profit of \$600. They've trained other students to take over the [See Entrepreneurs, Page C5]

## MARKETING

## Same-sex weddings could be a gift to California's economy

By ALANA SEMUELS  
Times Staff Writer

Forget economic stimulus checks. Same-sex marriages may give California just the financial boost it needs.

Wedding planners, bakers and hotels began booking more business almost immediately after the state Supreme Court's May 15 decision overturning a ban on gay marriage. Citing pent-up demand, one UCLA study projects that same-sex unions could provide a \$370-million shot in the arm to the state economy over the next three years.

"Being in West Hollywood,

we've been inundated," said Tom Rosa, owner of the Cake and Art bakery on Santa Monica Boulevard. "After the ruling, the phone really picked up."

Rosa said couples who had waited for decades to legally marry were splurging on 5-foot-tall confections shaped like carousels and cakes featuring handcrafted birds of paradise.

Mike Standifer and Marc Hammer were already planning a commitment ceremony for October, but when the court ruling came out, they decided to throw an even bigger bash and get married.

They plan on spending about \$25,000, which includes renovations on their Holly-

wood home so they can have the party in their backyard. The new price tag includes rings, their suits and those of their wedding party, and the cost of flying in Standifer's priest from Tennessee — all costs they wouldn't have incurred if they were just having a party.

"The wedding dynamic in the last two weeks changed everything," Standifer said. The wedding businesses he's worked with so far seem thrilled. "I think it's because the economy's not so great, but the vendors have been treating us like royalty," he said.

By some estimates, wed- [See Weddings, Page C4]



SUSAN GOLDMAN Biggayweddings.com

CAPTURING THE MOMENT: Wedding photographer Susan Goldman is marketing her services to same-sex couples. Above, clients Stacy Lacaille, left, and Heidi Post last month.

## WORLD ECONOMY

## Europe juggles growth, prices

Business is healthy but inflation is up. Many firms go global while officials fret about family budgets.

By GERALDINE BAUM  
Times Staff Writer

KORTRIJK, BELGIUM — Shortly after he was appointed Belgium's economy minister this spring, Vincent van Quickenborne ordered an inquiry into the price of *frites*. Invented in Belgium but known to the world as French fries, these crispy national favorites had jumped in price by 4% over the prior year — despite a 24% drop in the price of potatoes.

Suppliers immediately blamed the rocketing cost of energy and rent. Minister Van Quickenborne quipped that the price of fries just might be chasing the price of a barrel of oil. (Not that they're cooked in such grease.)

In all seriousness, the minister made it clear that, through his inquiry, he was chasing a much larger problem affecting not only Belgium but much of Europe: inflation.

With the United States hovering on the brink of recession and the Federal Reserve deciding that slow growth is a bigger threat than inflation — even with higher fuel and food costs — Europe remains strong.

Euro-zone economies grew 0.7% in the first quarter compared to a year earlier, while the U.S. eked out 0.1% in the same period. Leading the way was Germany, Europe's largest economy and biggest exporter, with a 1.5% expansion. But even France, which has been plagued by stagnation and social unrest, did moderately better than expected with 0.6% growth. Such figures have affirmed the European Central Bank's steadfast refusal to follow the Fed in lowering interest rates, which can fuel inflation.

But the European public is fretting about rising prices. In Belgium, inflation hit 4.9% in March compared to a year earlier, its highest rate since 1985 and the steepest in the 15-country euro zone, where the average was 3.4%, according to Eurostat, a statistical agency. (U.S. consumer prices were up 4% in March over the previous year.)

The reasons for steady European growth and persistent inflation can be found here in Kortrijk, a flourishing city of 80,000 in Belgium's Flanders region, not far from the French border, that has been modernizing in a powerful way.

Historically, the city relied on the textile industry and sold much of its wares in Europe. But in the last decade, many of its companies turned from making flax, steel and other commodities to high-tech specialty products. They also reduced their reliance on the United States and Western Europe, focusing more on Eastern Europe, Asia and Latin America.

For example, Barco, which started out in 1934 by assem- [See Europe, Page C3]

## In Business

## Wooden's tips for playing to win

The revered former UCLA coach shares his insights on how business owners can become better leaders. Page C5

## Gas prices spark global revolts

Beleaguered drivers, fishermen and farmers are demanding government help. Page C4