

Netflix



My better half used to send me to the video store (reluctantly, of course) to pick up movies for us.

I would wander the aisles for what seemed to be hours, unable to find that charming film for a romantic night, screwball comedy for a light-hearted evening or the gripping drama when suspense was ordered.

Without fail, I either came home with a near-worthless action movie that had one good car chase or any number of chick flicks that invariably starred Jennifer Aniston. Despite adoring the magic of the movies and even teaching a class on cinema, I became so wracked by doubt about my decisions in the video store (and my inability to return the bad movies on time) that I simply stopped going.

Thankfully, Reed Hastings is a lot smarter than me. He founded a company called Netflix in 1997 and launched its subscription service in 1999. The company now has more than 4 million clients who generate about \$829 million in revenues. His idea was simple: Rather than force customers to run an unsavory errand for their movies, find out what movies they want through an easy-to-navigate Web site and then mail them to their home. For \$17.99 a month (there are

levels of membership), customers can borrow three DVDs at a time and keep them as long as they want.

But it's not just that Netflix has about 55,000 movie, television and other entertainment titles, it also makes it darn near idiot proof. The envelopes that come to your home double as return envelopes, complete with prepaid postage. Because Netflix has 41 distribution centers in the United States, almost all of your movies arrive the day after you send one back.

The initial setup doesn't require a computer science degree, either. Once enrolled, you go to the Netflix Web site and start searching for movies you want to watch. A quick click on the "Add" button stocks your queue. The company ships the movies at the top of the queue, and voila, there's a red envelope in your mailbox in about a day.

In addition, the site has a wonderful feature called "Friends" that allows you to share your queue, ratings and mini-reviews with buddies. While it's not the same as a full-fledged discussion over a beer and peanuts, it's a way to unlock some hidden treasures.

It's those unknown cinema gems that I could never find at my local chain video store — movies like the French thriller, "The Wages of Fear," or the recent Dashiell Hammett homage,

A MOVIE REVOLUTION THAT SHAKES THE FOUNDATION OF CONVENTIONAL BRICK-AND-MORTAR BUSINESS

BY MARK LUCE

"Brick." The service also allows me to indulge my taste for film noir and silent films (impossible to find in video stores) as well as introduce our family to the charm of Japanese director Hayao Miyazaki ("Spirited Away" and "Castle in the Sky") and let us laugh to oldies but goodies "Strange Brew" and all variations of "Looney Tunes."

Of course, similar services have popped up, including ones from your traditional brick-and-mortar stores. But for my money, any company that can defeat a year-long video-store funk has my vote of confidence.

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