

Wicked: Part 1

An Analysis of The
Film's PR Campaign



Natalie Gillum

INTRODUCTION

Wicked, a *Wizard of Oz* prequel musical, became a pillar of US pop culture when it debuted on Broadway in the early 2000s. The concept of creating a film adaptation dates back to the musical's initial creation, as the project was originally intended to be a film (Kelly 2024). The movie adaptation of the musical was a debated rumor as speculation came of a musical-to-movie adaptation as early as 2004. Development on the film began in 2010 but was delayed in 2018 with the creation of the *Cats* musical to movie film. The creation of the *Wicked* film was then halted again by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Finally, the movie adaptation was officially announced during a commercial break at the 2024 Super Bowl (Kelly 2024). Fans old and new eagerly anticipated the film's opening in November 2024.

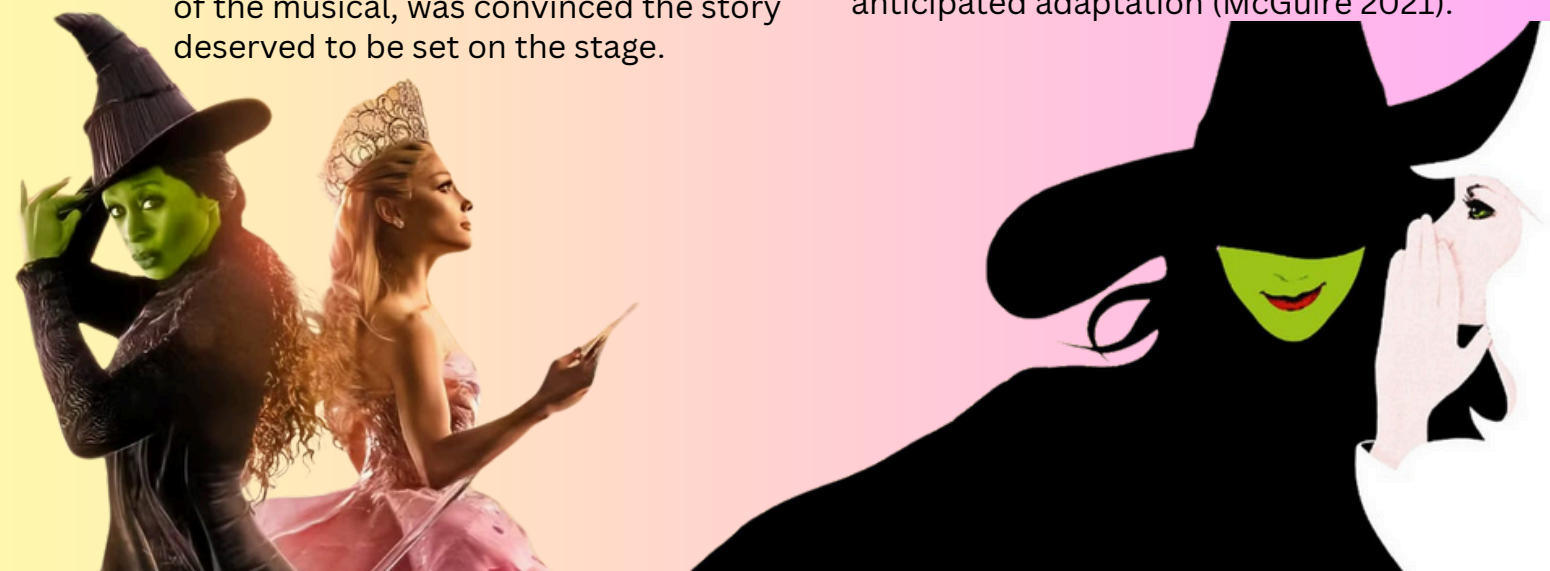
BACKGROUND

Wicked is a two-part musical-to-movie adaptation of the classic Broadway musical. Although the story of *Wicked* did not begin as a musical, it was originally created as a 1995 novel. Gregory Maguire was the author of the original *Wicked* book series, which was intended to function as a prequel to the story of *The Wizard of Oz* (Higgins 2024). As aforementioned, there were discussions of adapting Maguire's book into a film early on, but Stephen Schwartz, composer of the musical, was convinced the story deserved to be set on the stage.

Schwartz refers to his phone call with Marc Platt, Universal exec, as an "impassioned plea" for Universal to consider a musical adaptation rather than a film (Winn 2003). Schwartz got his way, and *Wicked*, the Broadway classic, was created in 2003.

The road from Broadway musical to movie adaptation was fraught and lengthy as delays in development hampered any progress on the project. After much anticipation, Jon M. Chu was announced as the director of the project in 2021 (Kelly 2024). Marc Platt, the Universal exec assigned to the *Wicked* project, noted that he remembers "Turning down many, many directors. But it wasn't because they weren't wonderfully talented. I just wasn't ready to make a movie" (Kelly 2024).

Once Chu was on the project, the question became whether this adaptation would be in one film or two parts. This became the leading question in development, as all previous scripts had been too long for a singular film. The decision, led by Chu, was that the adaptation would be more representative of the Broadway production if they could split it into two parts. Development continued on the project and in 2021 it was announced that Ariana Grande and Cynthia Erivo would take the leading roles in this highly anticipated adaptation (McGuire 2021).



OBJECTIVES

1

The campaign **aimed at driving success at the box office**. Creators sought to outperform previous musical movies such as *West Side Story*, which was considered to be a failure at the box office (D'Alessandro 2024).

2

Sought to connect with **existing Broadway fans as well as new audiences** of consumers and viewers.

3

The main **goal** of the campaign was **to create a cultural movement**. Creators wanted the film to be omnipresent in the media (D'Alessandro 2024).

CAMPAIGN OVERVIEW

The public relations campaign for the *Wicked* film was wildly successful in its initial objectives. **The campaign for *Wicked* included more than 400 brand partnerships** to increase visibility (D'Alessandro 2024). The movie employed a global marketing scheme, as **products and experiences were available world-wide**. Overall, the campaign used a variety of marketing tactics through media and promotion to reach their goals.

It was decided that the **film's marketing campaign would kick off during the 2024 Superbowl** in order to **generate high visibility** (Higgins 2024). This strategic decision was made by the Universal Chief Marketing Officer, Michael Moses, who noted that this would be an important step in their overall campaign by beginning with **being as "big and declarative as possible"** (Higgins 2024).

STAKEHOLDER ANALYSIS

1

Universal Studios was a major stakeholder in this case as they were the studio funding the film's multi-million dollar marketing campaign (D'Alessandro 2024).

2

Broadway Musical Fans were another major stakeholder in this case. Fans of the musical were a central target audience of this campaign. Familiarity with the story and the success of the musical adaptation were crucial to the success of the film adaptation.

3

New Audiences were a huge stakeholder in this case, as the campaign aimed at reaching a broader audience. There are more limits in terms of access to a Broadway musical than limits in the general public's access to film. The film and campaign's success was contingent on reaching more viewers and fans.

COMPETITOR ANALYSIS

The *Wicked* marketing campaign was inspired by the Barbie movie's historic public relations campaign the previous year and looked to mimic that case but with a wider scope, i.e., **creating a cultural movement** (D'Alessandro 2024).

In terms of competitors, Universal has released a slew of musical to movie adaptations in the past. **Titles such as Les Mis, Into the Woods, Cats, Dear Evan Hansen, In the Heights, and West Side Story were all created by Universal Studios with varying rates of success.** Universal Chief Marketing Officer, Michael Moses commented that Universal learned from these previous projects stating that "We knew the size of the enterprise and we had to treat it like a cultural event... This is IP, but there's not an existing film franchise, so we felt obligated to do everything to become an event" (D'Alessandro 2024).

KEY MESSAGING & THEMES

The campaign's main goal was to create a cultural event surrounding the movie's release. Michael Moses, Universal's Chief Marketing Officer, noted that his goal in marketing *Wicked: Part 1* was to be "just short of obnoxious" (Rubin 2024).

Moses cited Universal's goal of using the Barbie movie's successful campaign as a blueprint due to its pandering towards females, whom he felt would be a key demographic in driving the *Wicked* campaign (D'Alessandro 2024). Due to this marketing decision, the key messaging for this campaign was centered around the main characters, Glinda and Elphaba, and their developing friendship throughout the first film.

Every aspect of the film's campaign centered around "nostalgia, friendship, empowerment, and individuality—core to the musical's story" (Higgins 2024). The campaign also sought to invoke the nostalgia of the musical's Broadway fans in order to garner their support. Immersion and unity were also dominant themes throughout the campaign (Hardcastle 2024).



MEDIA STRATEGY & PUBLICITY

ARTICLE	MESSAGE	INTENDED TARGET AUDIENCE	EFFECTIVE OR INNEFFECTIVE?
<u>"A 'Wicked' Tearful Talk With Cynthia Erivo and Ariana Grande"- NYT- Nov 6, 2024</u>	Cynthia Erivo and Ariana Grande are emotionally invested in their roles and in one another. They both understand and highlight the key messages of the film-- suggesting that these themes of acceptance and friendship make the story topical today. They are very proud of the film and excited for it to be released.	The target audience of this article would be fans of <i>Wicked</i> and of the actors themselves. The general moviegoer would also be considered a target audience here.	This article highlights the strong bond between the two actors and their excitement for their roles. There is strategic messaging included by the actors to discuss the key themes of the film. This article is effective as it is positive, authentic, and strategic.
<u>"Wicked Soars, Roars, and Casts a Heady Spell"- Vanity Fair- Nov 19, 2024</u>	<i>Wicked: Part 1</i> is a highly successful adaptation of the original Broadway musical. The film featured strong lead performances with perfect emotional timing. Mentions Erivo's performance in "Defying Gravity" as a standout in the film.	The target audience of this article would be fans of the original musical and moviegoers. The article mentions the impact of "Defying Gravity," so fans of Broadway who are vaguely familiar with the show might have an interest.	This article is effective in persuading potential fans to see <i>Wicked: Part 1</i> . The article as a whole emphasizes the quality of the film but does find a few critiques. The fact that this article is not blindly positive could make it seem more genuine to readers and, in turn, encourage them to see the film.
<u>"Wicked' Review: A Spectacular Triumph"- Forbes- Nov 25, 2024</u>	<i>Wicked: Part 1</i> is a respectful and incredibly produced and performed adaptation. The film is visually appealing and more than does justice to the original show.	The target audience of this would be potential moviegoers. Both new and old fans of <i>Wicked</i> would be intrigued and excited by this review.	This review seems extremely effective. The author has nothing but positive things to say. The article praises the film's design and quality. This review effectively builds anticipation—not only for part 1, but for part 2 as well.

TIMELINE

2016

Announcement of Wicked adaptation film (GVPRSSA 2024).

March 2023

Universal Studios invites 200 brands to their London set in an effort to create brand partnerships (Rubin 2024).

Throughout 2024

- Universal Studios announces strategic partnerships with over 400 brands (Higgins 2024)
- Ariana Grande and Cynthia Erivo dress as their characters at various events
- Various experiential exhibits are unveiled, such as:
 - Greenwich temporarily remained to “GreenWitch”
 - Arc de Triomphe and Empire state lit pink and green
 - Bloomingdales window unveiling with Erivo
 - Hilton partnership offers themed suite at NY location
- Ariana Grande and Cynthia Erivo attend 2024 Olympics

2021

Announcement of Ariana Grande and Cynthia Erivo as lead roles (Akinpelu 2024).

February 2024

The first *Wicked: Part 1* trailer debuts during a 60-second ad block during the 2024 Super Bowl. This ad went on to gain over 230 million views (Higgins 2024). Google Searches for “Wicked” surged.

November 2024

The movie is officially released in theaters with surprise cameos from both the original actors, Kristin Chenoweth and Idina Menzel. Opens with \$112.5M box office sales in the US and Canada with \$162.5M globally (D’Alessandro 2024) ... but this campaign is still ongoing with Part 2 expected November 2025. Marketing for Part 2 is expected to begin later than it did for Part 1.

Media & Public Relations Tactics



Tactic #1 Social Media Strategy

Wicked's impressive public relations campaign would not have been possible without the power of social media. **Influencer marketing on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram elevated the visibility of the campaign's over 400 strategic brand partnerships** (Hardcastle-Geddes 2024). The **TikTok platform greatly contributed to the omnipresence of the campaign as a whole**. Micro-influencers and musical fans danced and sang along to songs from the musical and new movie soundtrack while unknowingly furthering the film's widespread promotion. Social media worked in favor of this campaign—all Universal had to do was spark the movement.

Tactic #2 Publicity & Media Relations

Wicked's **publicity and media relations catapulted the film toward's major success**. Film leads **Ariana Grande and Cynthia Erivo embodied their characters** through fashion and made the film come to life in their interviews. Iconic moments such as the "holding space for defying gravity" interview **solidified Wicked's place in popular culture** and as a true movement in and of itself. The press tour for the film went global, and the leads engaged in various coordinated appearances, such as a performance at the 2024 Met Gala, The Today Show, the 2024 Super Bowl, and the 2024 Summer Olympics (Hardcastle 2024). Grande and Erivo engaged in an impressive number of press-related events in order to propel this campaign toward global success (Akinpelu 2024).



Tactic #3 Strategic Brand Partnerships

The genius behind this public relations case can be found in its promotional brand partnerships. This campaign included extensive partnerships with over 400 brands (Higgins 2024). **Universal managed to gather big names such as Lexus, Starbucks, Bloomingdales, Amazon, Lego, Mattel, Hilton, r.e.m beauty, OPI, Betty Crocker, H&M, Aerie, Crocs, and Absolut Vodka**, to name a few (D'Alessandro). **Wicked was virtually everywhere, and in any form you could want**. The brilliance behind these various collaborations was their affordability (Hardcastle 2024). Anyone and everyone was welcome to be a part of the *Wicked* phenomenon, and this made it a true cultural movement.

Tactic #2 Experiential Marketing

Experiential marketing was another tactic Universal employed to make its *Wicked* campaign omnipresent. Brands such as **Lush** (to the right) and **Hilton** took **Wicked's marketing to new levels as they offered exclusive Wicked-related experiences** related to their brands (Hardcastle 2024). Universal also used historic locations such as the **Arc de Triomphe and the Empire State Building to display pink and green lights promoting the film** (Higgins 2024). Experiential marketing was a key tactic in catapulting the film towards massive success.



MEASUREMENT & EVALUATION

The public relations campaign for *Wicked: Part 1* was wildly ambitious, but with a large marketing budget to spare, Universal was able to reach its lofty goals.

The campaign set out to attain 3 measurable goals: outperform Universal's previous musical-to-movie adaptations, retain the musical's Broadway fans and gain new audiences, and create a cultural movement surrounding the film's anticipation and release. With these goals in mind and with data now available since the film's release, it is simple to measure the effectiveness of this campaign as a whole.

Wicked: Part 1 is Universal's most successful musical-to-movie adaptation to date, scoring \$112.5 million in the US and Canada box offices and \$162.5 million worldwide (D'Alessandro 2024). The PR campaign's 400+ partnerships generated "2 billion shoppers and 25 billion impressions" (D'Alessandro 2024).

When reflecting on *Wicked: Part 1*'s metrics, it is evident that this campaign held true to all of its promises. Universal has found major success in this adaptation, and it is only the beginning as they are yet to unveil their campaign for Part 2.

Much can be learned from this campaign about how to successfully market a film on a large scale. This campaign was omnipresent, and the announcement was big and bold. Once the word of *Wicked* was out, it was everywhere, and it was inescapable.

Moreover, the campaign was genius in terms of its strategic partnerships. The over 400 partnerships Universal secured for its *Wicked* campaign all pandered to different audiences. Everyone was sure to find something for them at an attainable cost within this campaign.

Overall, to live through this campaign was an exciting and monumental movement. The creators of this film and marketing campaign knew the meaning and gravity of this film for so many fans and knew that they needed to deliver.

CONCLUSION

The public relations campaign for *Wicked: Part 1* was a massive endeavor that aimed to make the film a cultural movement. The campaign was able to reach its lofty goals through strategic brand partnerships, pointed media relations, and experiential marketing. This campaign created an immersive experience for fans and generated excitement around the movie franchise. The best part of this campaign is that it is ongoing—Universal plans to ramp up its campaign for Part 2 later than it began for Part 1. Ultimately, the campaign for the *Wicked* musical-to-movie adaptations was indeed "just short of obnoxious" (Rubin 2024) and will no doubt be a blueprint for movie promotion going forward.



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