A Ruse Awakening on the Web
Realistic Sites Are Being Created as Marketing Ploys

By William Booth
Washington Post Staff Writer
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LOS ANGELES, April 23 -- A few weeks ago, a Web site for an outfit called the Godsend Institute quietly popped up on the Internet. It describes the breakthrough medical procedures of its founder, Richard Wells, PhD, a fertility specialist who is offering to clone humans, allowing distraught parents the opportunity to replicate a child lost to accident or disease.

The Web site is professional in appearance, with photographs and testimonials of happy families with their little cloned ones, biographical details of Wells and his medical publications, and a brief description of how to copy and nurture donor DNA, complete with petri dishes. "Death," the site announced, "doesn't have to be an ending. At the Godsend Institute, we have the ability to make a new start -- a New Beginning!"

Creepy. Of course, it is all baloney. No human cloning (yet). No Richard Wells. No fertility institute offering copies of Junior.

The site was created as a rather elaborate marketing tool by Lions Gate Films for the release of "Godsend," a horror movie opening April 30. It stars Rebecca Romijn-Stamos and Greg Kinnear as parents who lose their little boy -- and then have a scientist (Robert De Niro) clone them a new son.

The bogus Web site is a sign of the times. As more movies crowd into the multiplexes, and as the average marketing budget for a major studio release tops $40 million, filmmakers are desperate to attract attention.

In addition to Lions Gate's "Godsend" campaign, New Line Cinema last week took out ads in newspapers across the country (including The Washington Post) on behalf of divorce attorney Audrey Woods, who urges prospective clients: "Let's work together and show that scumbag that you are not weak and fragile." The ad steers readers toward a Web site, katzcohenphelps.com.

Woods is not real, either. She's the character played by actress Julianne Moore in her new movie, "Laws
of Attraction." You'd have to read the fine print, or troll through the Web site, to get that.

"All this is a reaction to the fact that traditional media marketing is crumbling, just crumbling," says Jeff Hicks, president of the Miami-based advertising firm Crispin Porter & Bogusky, which recently designed an interactive Web site for Burger King that shows a person dressed in a chicken suit who acts out, à la amateur webcam porn, the instructions given to him/her/it by Web surfers who click on the site. The site is subservientchicken.com.

Think this is stupid?

The BK chicken-porn site (the bird is dressed in a garter belt and stockings) has gotten 150 million hits, according to Hicks.

"We're dealing with consumers who now have an absolute hair trigger for anything they don't find valuable, informative or entertaining. They're really quick to blow right past you," Hicks says.

Traditional advertising for movies is very expensive. A quarter-page ad for a new film in the Los Angeles Times, for example, costs about $22,000. Tom Ortenberg, president of Lions Gate, says it cost $10,000 for his team to build the Web pages for the Godsend Institute. The site has received hundreds of thousands of hits, plus hundreds of phone calls and e-mails from people who find the link (there's a helpful toll-free number to call).

"We're outspent by the [major studios] by at least 2 to 1, and so we absolutely need to build a better marketing mousetrap," Ortenberg says.

If a person types the word "cloning" into the Google search engine, one of the sponsored links is the Godsend Institute, which announces: "Cloning Is Now a Reality."

Ortenberg says that as far as he knows, none of the calls to his marketing team came from parents distraught and looking to clone a child. Most people, he says, eventually figure out the hoax.

But the studio is not above trying to promote a phony "controversy" over a fake institute. Not willing to wait for outrage, Lions Gate created another Web site that solicits "petitions" against the cloning of humans and the Godsend Institute. This ruse has already snared a columnist for Ireland On-Line, who posted a piece titled: "De Niro Cloning Movie Causes Outrage."

Expect more viral marketing. Ever since "The Blair Witch Project" went ballistic at the box office in 1999, based in part on an Internet campaign that described the scary movie as a documentary, Hollywood has been searching for ways to engage audiences with "reality" themes.

"Blair Witch' worked because it happened when the Internet was new, when e-mail was this new thing, and not a threat. It was very, very clever and very, very good," says publicist Jeremy Walker, who
worked with the "Blair Witch" folks and is also promoting "Godsend."

Will this stuff keep fooling people?

"It gets harder and harder," Walker admits.

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