



January 15, 2007

Anywhere the Eye Can See, It's Likely to See an Ad

By LOUISE STORY

Add this to the endangered list: blank spaces.

Advertisers seem determined to fill every last one of them. Supermarket eggs have been stamped with the names of [CBS](#) television shows. Subway turnstiles bear messages from Geico auto insurance. Chinese food cartons promote Continental Airways. [US Airways](#) is selling ads on motion sickness bags. And the trays used in airport security lines have been hawking Rolodexes.

Marketers used to try their hardest to reach people at home, when they were watching TV or reading newspapers or magazines. But consumers' viewing and reading habits are so scattershot now that many advertisers say the best way to reach time-pressed consumers is to try to catch their eye at literally every turn.

"We never know where the consumer is going to be at any point in time, so we have to find a way to be everywhere," said Linda Kaplan Thaler, chief executive at the Kaplan Thaler Group, a New York ad agency. "Ubiquity is the new exclusivity."

No consumer, it seems, is too young. Some school buses now play radio ads meant for children. Last summer, [Walt Disney](#) advertised its "Little Einsteins" DVDs for preschoolers on the paper liners of examination tables in 2,000 pediatricians' offices, according to Supply Marketing, a company that gives doctors free supplies in exchange for using branded products.

Some people have had enough. Last month, after some "Got Milk?" billboards started emitting the odor of chocolate chip cookies at San Francisco bus stops, many people complained, and the city told the California Milk Processing Board to turn off the smell.

And this month the [Port Authority of New York and New Jersey](#) cancelled a plan to post ads for Geico at tollbooths and elsewhere around the George Washington Bridge, a deal that was valued at \$3.2 million. Politicians and preservationists had raised aesthetic concerns, and some had complained the city was selling the ad space too inexpensively.

Yankelovich, a market research firm, estimates that a person living in a city 30 years ago saw up to 2,000 ad messages a day, compared with up to 5,000 today. About half the 4,110 people surveyed last spring by Yankelovich said they thought marketing and advertising today was out of control.

Some ad agencies and the companies that hire them are taking heed, calling the placement of ads everywhere a waste of money.

“What all marketers are dealing with is an absolute sensory overload,” said Gretchen Hofmann, executive vice president of marketing and sales at Universal Orlando Resort. The landscape is “overly saturated” as companies press harder to make their products stand out, she said.

Outright advertising is just one contributing factor. The feeling of ubiquity may also be fueled by spam e-mail messages and the increasing use of name-brand items in TV shows and movies, a trend known as product placement. Plus, companies are finding new ways to offer free services to people who agree to view their ads, particularly on the Internet or on cellphones.

More is on the horizon. Old-fashioned billboards are being converted to digital screens, which are considered the next big thing. They allow advertisers to change messages frequently from remote computers, timing their pitches to sales events or the hour of the day. People can expect to see more of them not only along highways, but also in stores, gyms, doctors' offices and on the sides of buildings, marketing executives say.

The trend may lead to more showdowns as civic pride is affronted. “They're making our community look like Las Vegas,” said Barbara Thomason, president of the Houston Northwest Chamber of Commerce, of the scores of digital signs she has noticed popping up in the last few years. “The word ‘trashy’ has been used.”

Some advertising executives say that as long as an advertisement is entertaining, people do not necessarily mind the intrusion — and may even welcome it.

In some office buildings, for instance, video screens in elevators provide news and information as well as ads. This year video screens will be placed in about 5,000 New York City taxicabs, where passengers will see both advertisements and NBC programs, according to [Clear Channel](#) Outdoor, which is installing the screens.

“If you do it the right way, you actually win points,” said John McNeil, executive creative director at McCann Worldgroup San Francisco. His agency designed ads for [Microsoft](#) that appeared on tray tables in US Airways planes last spring.

But advertisers are still trying to determine exactly what the right way is, and that has led to some intriguing experiments.

At the Amway Arena in Orlando, Fla., for instance, an interactive floor display for [McDonald's](#) last year showed the head of a teenage boy with small Big Mac burgers flying past; when people stepped on the ad, the burgers bounced away from their feet.

An interactive ad for Adidas appears in the Herald Square subway station in New York City. Passers-by last week said they liked the sign, which looked like a static picture of a sneaker until someone walked past it, triggering a motion sensor that sent a spray of miniature sneakers flying.

"It makes me interested in the sneakers," said Roscoe Evans, 36, a personal trainer from Waterbury, Conn. "I'd rather have it in here than out on the street."

Andrea Mendez and Julie Wheaton, both working in New York for a year for Teach for America, said the sign was "cool" and suitable for its location. "But I wouldn't want to see it back in Spokane," said Ms. Wheaton, who is from the state of Washington.

[Toyota](#) projected ads for its Scion cars on the sides of buildings in 14 cities, including Chicago, Atlanta and Dallas. [Unilever](#) also projected ads, for its Axe men's fragrance, on buildings in places like Tampa and Milwaukee. But this tactic does not always go over well: last month, when branches of Chase Bank and Commerce Bank projected ads on New York sidewalks, the city told the banks to turn off the unauthorized beams.

Ad executives say that new forms of advertising take trial and error.

"No one wants to annoy the consumer," said Bill Bean, director of trade insight at Miller Brewing Company. "However, there are many annoying ads that sell products, and it's very difficult to tell what annoys one consumer and what pleases another."

Advertisers may not be able to get their logos everywhere. For instance, while companies like [Verizon](#) and [Continental Airlines](#) seem to have had success in giving out free (or inexpensive) boxes to pizzerias, some stores say they do not want the branded merchandise.

"It would offend as many of our customers, and could cost us as much business as the money we'd save by having free boxes," said Kevin Behnke, general manager of Cosmo's Pizza in Boulder, Colo. "Boulder's kind of anti-commercial."

Connie Garrido, president of the WOW Factory, an ad agency, said that advertisers took risks when they put messages in offbeat places, but that such risks could often be worthwhile. A campaign that reaches people outside their homes is "very good for awareness because it's out there, it's in your face, and you can blanket a marketplace," she said. "It's one of the last mass mediums."

Revenue from these new and unusual ads is still small and hard to measure. The “alternative media” category represented \$387 million in spending in the United States last year, up from \$24 million in 2000, according to PQ Media, a research firm. But the 2006 figure still represented a tiny part of out-of-home advertising, which generated \$6.8 billion that year, according to figures PQ Media compiled for the private equity firm Veronis Suhler Stevenson.

“If you reach consumers out of the house, they’re more likely to act than if they’re sitting on their couches,” said Jack Sullivan, senior vice president and out-of-home media director at Starcom USA, an advertising agency.

One company that says that nontraditional advertising has worked is Perry Ellis, the clothing designer, which gave 594,000 free shirt boxes and hanging bags to dry cleaners in New York, Miami, Los Angeles and San Francisco last year. Perry Ellis still gets phone calls from the laundries asking for more bags, said Pablo de Echevarria, senior vice president of marketing.

“We’re always looking for new mediums and places that have not been used before — it’s an effort to get over the clutter,” Mr. de Echevarria said.

“But,” he added, “I guess we end up creating more clutter.”

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