Get Real! New Ways Advertisers are Integrating Communications into Consumers' Lives

By Stephanie Bernstein

Consumers have more control over the marketing messages they receive than ever before, and this trend will escalate with filtering technologies. Advertisers must rise to the challenge of creating compelling reasons for consumers to seek out their message, and advertisers must either take advantage of or create mechanisms with which consumers can seek these messages. This article explores some techniques that have been successful in bringing advertising messages into consumer's real lives.

My friend Kendall is worried. Very worried. With the advent of WebTV and Replay, the day will soon come when her uncanny knack for channel surfing is no longer in high demand. In fact, it will soon become a commodity. No longer will she be assured the best television-viewing spot in the house just because of her impeccable ability to surf. Frankly, we just won't need her anymore. Thanks to the likes of these new technologies, even the not-so-remote-control adept will have the power to skip through all of the commercials with a mere flick of the wrist.

If you think Kendall is worried, imagine how advertisers must feel! Prior to the introduction of WebTV and Replay, once their commercial spots had been produced and their media schedules determined, network television advertisers could heave a sigh of relief, kick back on the sofa, and dig into their favorite flavor of Ben & Jerry's. With the help of savvy media planners and the occasional grace of God, their message was assured a predetermined reach and frequency of viewership. In other words, a captive audience.

Unfortunately for these advertisers, the days of captive audiences are quickly being replaced by a new set of consumers armed not only with remote controls, but also keyboards and an array of new technologies, which allow them to skip over commercial messages entirely. In fact, just as WebTV and Replay now allow viewers to skip through television commercial messages, conventions of the Web have made it possible for Web surfers to ignore online advertisements from the get-go. Guided by their own personal mouse and click-through agendas, Web users have the power to micro-manage media messages like never before. Rather than having messages "pushed" on them by advertisers, these newly empowered consumers are able to "pull" what they want from the Web, when they want it - thereby changing their role as consumers from passive and captive to active and independent.

Given this shift in power, it is no wonder that traditional advertisers are being forced to rethink their strategies. How can they compete with the free will of consumers to surf to their heart's content? To watch and listen to whatever they want, whenever they want to? What could possibly make their media message more compelling than the next program, interaction, or activity on a consumer's agenda? While some advertisers are still identifying new "push" tactics for distributing their media message, many others are exploring ways to increase the likelihood that their message will be actively "pulled" by consumers. Whichever method they select, one thing is for certain. As consumers gain more and more control over the media messages they receive, the need for advertisers to create more relevant and valuable messages will grow along with it.

The search to discover, bottle and sell a consumer cure-all to advertising aversion is the #1 item on advertisers' lists of Things-To-Do.

Enter such marketing tactics as online behavior-tracking, permission marketing, viral marketing, "chat-vertising," and a revitalized product placement and program sponsorship industry - each of which claim to be the cure-all for the advertising industry's ail-
ing click-through and attention rates. Though these tactics have their roots in diverse areas, they share several valuable features. Each tactic relies on a cyber entity or intelligent agent to integrate an advertiser's message into a consumer's lifestyle through less intrusive and "commercial" ways than within traditional advertising. Additionally, each of these tactics provides consumers with something of value and relevance - be it credible recommendations, shopping tips, or entertainment - from a source they have actively selected.

Among the most precarious tactics currently used by advertisers to increase the relevancy of their messages are online behavior-tracking technologies. Such technologies, which may include anything from rules-based Web page personalization to neural networking and collaborative filtering, offer advertisers tremendous advantages in terms of understanding and providing relevant messages to their consumers. Not only do they provide advertisers with the ability to speak to consumers on a one-to-one basis, but also to tailor their product offerings to reach consumers at the place, time, and price point most likely to result in a sale.

Despite the tremendous benefits to advertisers and consumers alike, online tracking technologies do have inherent drawbacks. Personalization works wonders for increasing a site's "stickiness;" however, the real question is how online behavior-tracking technologies can be properly utilized to drive new visitors to a Web site. These technologies allow for more targeted placement of ads, but one must question whether or not the technology is providing advertisers with more effective reach than they received with traditional banner ads. Additionally, the concern for invading consumer privacy must be considered.

According to Christopher Locke's article "What's Going On Here?" the success of personalization technologies relies largely upon the motives for their use. "If it's just old wine in new bottles," he explained, "if it's used to enable the same old TV-style broadcasting of unwanted commercial 'messages' - then it's grossly out of synch with the realities of the Web. On the other hand, when used to market conversations, personalization can be a powerful way to deliver information deemed worthy of attention" (1999). Given these trends, it is obvious that merely "Webifying" traditional advertising models will not work. Although the effects of personalization are likely to enhance a consumer's experience once they have reached a Web site, their usefulness as tools for driving first-time customers to the Web site remain to be determined.

Unfortunately, personalization technologies also have the potential to out-voyeur even the best Peeping Toms.

Even more questionable than the effectiveness of online ads are concerns regarding privacy and the use, or misuse, of proprietary customer information. Before applying these technologies, marketers must ask themselves whether the benefits of better-targeted ads are worth the risk of upsetting consumers by potentially invading their privacy.

Consumer information needs to be safeguarded in the cyber equivalent of a Brinks Armored Truck - not a Pinto.

Ted Kamionek, of Firefly Networks, compares personal information to currency. "In the electronic world," he explained, "your profile becomes as valuable as money is in the real world" (Charlet, 1998). Given its high intrinsic value, consumer information must be safeguarded in nothing less than the cyber equivalent of a Brinks armored truck. Unfortunately, last January's hacker attacks on such Web giants as Amazon.com, Yahoo.com, and eTrade are glaring reminders that the only safeguard protecting the majority of Web sites is the cyber equivalent of a Pinto.

In addition to fears about consumer information falling into the wrong hands, another concern relates to the use (or misuse) of the information by the company itself. One marketing tactic that runs this risk relates to Seth Godin's idea of "Permission Marketing" (Godin, 1999). This strategy allows consumers to actively determine which, if any, e-mail lists, offers, or advertising messages they receive; however, the information is often mismanaged because of issues including follow-up with customers and updating information. All too often, consumers forget that they have requested information or, worse yet, mistakenly overlook an icon that must be clicked to "opt-out" of an advertiser's mailing list. The result? Consumers feel even more frustrated and disenchant- ed with advertisers than before.

"If you try to mess with people's heads online, they will find you out - guaranteed. And then they'll hunt you down for sport."

(Locke, 1999)

What this translates into is a tremendous responsibility for advertisers. Relationships in the non-cyber world are based on
valuable, reciprocal exchanges of information, and the same laws apply online. Think about it. If you take the time and energy to go on a date and share information about yourself, it is quite frustrating if the person repeatedly asks the same questions and appears not to have been listening. Will you agree to go out with them a second time? Hardly. When information is collected, whether online through permission marketing companies such as Yesmail.com and MyPoints.com, or offline through personal relationships, the information must be incorporated into future interactions appropriately. Without this caution or care, you can kiss your chances at a second date or click-through goodbye. In other words, if you know you're not going to follow-through on a relationship, or if you realize your intentions for getting to know someone are less than honorable, don't begin the relationship in the first place. It will only come back to haunt you, and before you know it, your name will be scrawled on a bathroom wall or added to the family of www.(insert name here)sucks.com sites now proliferating the Web.

Make new friends, but keep the old. One is silver and the other's gold.

The important thing for advertisers to understand is that even when these technologies are successfully applied, their efforts to build relationships with consumers will inevitably pale in comparison to the intimate and timely exchanges of information shared between old friends. Given all the concerns surrounding the application of personalization technologies, many marketers are looking to consumers to do their marketing for them.

Chip Walker, within his article "Word of Mouth," highlights the power of such advertising, known within the industry as "viral" or word-of-mouth marketing. According to Mr. Walker, more than 40% of Americans seek the advice of family and friends when shopping for doctors, lawyers, or auto mechanics, and more than half seek the advice of others before making decisions to buy products or services. With the proliferation of online news groups, listservs and new technologies including the Israel-created uTOK which provides Web surfers with consumer feedback and product evaluations while shopping online (Lindstrom, 1999), the power of word-of-mouth recommendations will continue to grow exponentially.

Further research conducted by Jeffrey Graham and discussed within the article "Leveraging the Internet" found that "almost 75% of respondents passed along jokes to friends via e-mail and more than half received e-mail forwards. In contrast, fifty-three percent said they never visited consumer product Web sites." What this means to marketers is that their primary competition for customer "mindshare" is no longer limited to other product advertisers, but to consumers themselves, who are using e-mail and word-of-"mouse" to communicate about products like never before.

Among the companies leveraging this point is Epidemic.com, which provides e-mail users with incentives for signing up and forwarding relevant links to friends. In the article "Product Placement: The Interactive Choice," Martin Lindstrom uses the following example to describe the process. "Pretend your friend is in the doghouse with his girlfriend," he explained. "You could offer him a helpful suggestion by adding the 1-800-FLOWERS.com advertisement to your next e-mail." In doing so, both the sender and recipient would benefit from the exchange; the recipient would potentially find his way out of the doghouse by sending his girlfriend a gift from 1-800-FLOWERS, and the sender would benefit from earning a percent commission on the total sales cost.

Are we all just one click away from becoming a virtual team of Amway salespeople?

Unfortunately, the benefits of such viral or pyramid marketing schemes are not always what they appear to be. As with the Amway salespeople and Tupperware party throwers who became notorious for peddling unwanted wares to friends during the 80s, participants in Epidemic.com's program run the same risk. Say you were the individual who'd been relegated to the doghouse. Would you appreciate your friend's suggestion, or would you be annoyed when you realize he had capitalized on your dismal state of affairs in hopes of earning a commission? A clever e-mail recipient would just take a cut of the profits and run; however, not everyone would be so savvy. (Nor would Epidemic.com want them to be.) Given this constraint, the future of the company will depend upon the ability of its users to send links to friends only
when they are truly valuable and relevant.

One way advertisers may avoid these viral marketing concerns is by affiliating themselves with Web entities providing entertainment rather than direct selling opportunities. According to Graham, "The types of messages that tend to spread underground are usually funny, horrific, or have to do with sex. They often have a homespun, amateur quality. They often are outrageous hoaxes. And they almost never feel branded or seem like they are from a corporation."

Pete Kirby, creative director for the London advertising shop HHCL, in the article "Unconventional Methods Help HHCL's Clients Create A Buzz," seconds this viewpoint. According to Mr. Kirby, "Guerrilla marketing often attempts to create culture rather than borrow from it. It is a content-driven effort to create something that is an instant cult favorite. The idea is to leapfrog the step that traditional ads take to become something people talk about. Certainly traditional ads work sometimes. They always will. But there are many instances where people are too bombarded with regular ad campaigns for any one of them to really make a difference."

We all know kissing can spread a virus. But would you ever have thought an "I KISS YOU!!!" Web site would spread like one, too?!

One example of such a cult sensation is Mahir, a once-lonely-Turkish-fellow-turned-overnight-super-star-and-super-stud through the creation of a homespun, self-promoting Web site that boasts "I KISS YOU!!!" to any woman interested in making the trek to Turkey for a visit. Over a year ago, Mahir was probably just the Turkish version of an American cyber geek. He worked hard and played hard, yet was failing miserably with the ladies. To remedy his situation, Mahir did what any other reasonably Web savvy, desperate, and shameless fellow working within a limited budget and limited marketing experience would do. He created his own Web site - a virtual cyber SOS for some lovin', if you will.

According to Graham, Mahir's success can be attributed to the "hokey-ness of his home page" (http://members.xoom.com/primall/mahir/). "The mangled English and snapshots of himself on the site are really funny, and a few people who saw the site started passing the link around. People who got the link forwarded it on to friends and colleagues, and it spread like wildfire."

With upwards of a million hits to his home page, dozens of fan sites subsequently created in his honor, corporate sponsorships and a U.S. media tour in the works (Graham, 1999), my guess is that NO ONE could have anticipated the extent of buzz his site would generate. Yet for the few savvy advertisers who had the foresight to develop partnerships with Mahir before he became a hot commodity, the results have most likely been a much appreciated, albeit unexpected, boondoggle.

The "Blair Witch Project Phenomenon" really put the "scare" into movie marketers. Was this a "shot in the dark"? Or will such gueirlla tactics be more commonplace in the future?

One of the most oft-cited examples of the Web's role in propelling financially strapped entrepreneurs into global stardom was exemplified by the tremendous success of "The Blair Witch Project" (Blair Witch) last summer. Produced on a shoestring budget of thirty-five thousand dollars and netting more than forty-eight million within its first week of release (Corliss, 1999), Blair Witch was catapulted to the front cover of every magazine, the top of everyone's minds, and the top of the box office without any form of paid advertising.

In fact, the unprecedented Blair Witch marketing "phenomenon" was so successful that it not only frightened millions of moviegoers throughout the world, but also gave quite a scare to Hollywood's most seasoned movie marketers as well. This point is made in the Time article, "Blair Witch Craft" (1999). According to author, Richard Corliss, "Faced with this out-of-nowhere phenomenon, Hollywood cheers and shudders. Any movie that scares up business is considered good for the rest of the industry. But this one became a hit by breaking too many rules... If Artisan can create an avid audience in cyberspace, why is Fox or Warner Bros. spending tens of millions advertising in the papers and on prime time? No wonder Hollywood, looking at Blair Witch, says both Wow! and Uh-oh!"

The Blair Witch became a surprise success in part through its parading-as-truth Web site. According to John Leland in "The Blair Witch Cult," movie directors Dan Myrick and Eduardo Sanchez launched a rudimentary but clever Web site in June, 1998, hoping to secure additional financing and distribution. "They stuffed their site with lore about the Blair Witch, including fake
newspaper clippings and Heather's 'diary.' Throughout, they never let on that the story might be bogus." Before they knew it, Myrick and Sanchez had acquired a band of vigilant Web marketers who were eager to spread the scare of "The Blair Witch" at no cost to the movie-makers at all. One such "civilian" marketer is Jeff Johnsen, creator of the first Blair Witch fan site. "I thought (the story) was real and that's what first drew me in," he explained in Leland's article. "When I found out it was fictional, I just thought they were geniuses. And I wanted everyone else in the world to get sucked into this."

And boy did they ever! Thanks to the hard work of such Blair Witch enthusiasts, "so many links and sites had been created within months of the original Web site's posting, that thousands of people were experiencing the 'Blair Witch Phenomenon' each day - ensuring the line between marketing and entertainment vanished as completely as Josh, Heather and Mike in the woods outside of Burkitsville, Maryland" (Leland, 1999).

It is no surprise that today's marketers continue trying to replicate the Blair "magic" by creating witchy-good entertainment sites of their own. In the article "Movie Pages Stress Content Over Hype," Marc Graser says, "It's safe to say that every site out there is shopping for some Blair Witch magic. But the Blair Witch phenomenon was a pinnacle of stealth marketing - one that is unlikely to be repeated because the mythology behind the horror film uniquely adapted it to a Web-savvy audience. What made the Blair Witch Internet site so appealing was how it drew the users into the back story of the movie's plot by offering diaries from the characters, out-takes from the filming in the forest and faux news bulletins about the search for the three novice filmmakers."

"In other words, the site and story appeared to be real, and the Internet provided a way for this realism to be hyped and distributed.

Livin' La Vida Voyeur

Undaunted by Graser's discouraging words that the Blair Witch's phenomenal success could not be repeated, CBS's smash summer hit, "Survivor" became yet another media entity to leverage an "assumed" reality program and capitalize on the voyeuristic American public through the Web. According to Paul Bond's article, "Convergence: Web Boosts 'Survivor' Success, "‘Survivor’s’ site and Web activity in many ways parallels that of last year's "The Blair Witch Project," which has become the de facto standard by which all other media marketing Web sites are measured.” Once again, visitors to the site were able to glean a behind-the-scenes look at the cast members by reading personal accounts, voting on the next contestant to be ousted from the island, playing the show's sweepstakes, and participating in many other activities designed to heighten the show's suspense and keep viewers coming back for more.

According to Nielsen/Net Ratings analyst Allen Weiner in Bond's article, "The 'Survivor' site was the ultimate promotional tool to keep the buzz going on days the show wasn't on. CBS was smart," he explained. "They made a separate companion experience as opposed to trying to put television on the Web." By attracting so many visitors to its site, CBS was also able to leverage the increased word-of-mouth opportunities made possible by the Web. Friends would visit the site and inevitably pass links to other friends, thereby ensuring that they wouldn't be the only person 'surviving' yet another Wednesday night alone in front of the TV, while at the same time bolstering CBS's ratings."

Yet despite the tremendous popularity of programs such as "Survivor" and "MTV's The Real World," many media critics believe that once people start entertaining themselves by spying on others, we are just scant moments away from grandma porn and ABC's Monday Night Stoning (Poniewozik, 2000). The line between ethical and manipulative entertainment must be drawn, and boundaries for how far the media and its sponsors will go to create provocative, word-of-mouth-generating programming should be determined. As viewers inevitably grow desensitized to voyeur television, the media will respond by conjuring up increasingly outrageous programs in hopes of maintaining consumer intrigue and promotional support.

Recently, I learned that a new program will be released in Denmark that will place overweight contestants in a fitness room lined with all of the Twinkies and Ding-Dongs their hearts could desire. At the end of each week, contestants will be weighed and awarded a bar of gold weighing the same amount they lost. Which advertiser will sponsor this program? Will it be Jenny Craig? Family Fitness? Or will it be McDonald's and Snickers claiming that their products are worth more than their weight in gold? (After all, without eating them, the show's participants wouldn't have any weight to lose!)

Monica finally gets the apartment clean on
"Friends," and she does so using Clorox Brand Cleaners!

For those advertisers who prefer the predictability of traditional television programming to the "real" risks of sponsoring voyeur programming as discussed above, product placement may be the way to go. In fact, if last January's episode of "Friends," which featured Jennifer Aniston's character obsessing over Pottery Barn furniture is any indication, product placement within traditional television programming will also be changing in the future. No longer satisfied with merely seeing their products sit haplessly in the background of a scene, an aggressive new breed of advertisers will be vying to see their products incorporated into the program's actual story line - evidence that the business of product placement will likely evolve into a far more elaborate subterfuge for advertising and commerce in the future.

Agreeing with this point is Jim Novo, former VP of Programming and Marketing at Home Shopping Network. In the article "What's The Buzz?" he explains, "It's easy for me to see a deal where CBS promotes throughout the day that you can buy 'show-branded' merchandise at AOL or Amazon." In fact, Web sites such as www.asseenin.com already exist, allowing trendy teens to buy the latest fashions featured on such programs as "Charmed" and "Dawson's Creek." John Allemang, the cynical writer of "The Money Is The Message," pointed out that "Spelling Television naturally owns a piece of the action, and has a considerable interest in turning actors into clothes horses."

Voila! Now you see it, now you don't! Virtual Advertising is taking place right before your very eyes!

And for those advertisers without the marketing savvy or breadth of wallet to weave their product into a program's storyline, there's always virtual advertising. Described by David Verklin, chief executive at Carat North America as "The Harry Houdini of Advertising," this new advertising technique relies on the magic of digital technology to insert an electronic image of signs, brand logos and even product packages into both live and previously taped television programming (Elliott, 1999).

While virtual advertising has traditionally been used only for sports programming, a notable shift toward prime-time entertainment programs is now underway. The first known use of virtual advertising within prime-time entertainment programming occurred last March, when the UPN Network invited such big-time advertisers as Blockbuster, Coca-Cola, Evian and Kenneth Cole to test drive their virtual advertising technology during an episode of "Seven Days." In one scene, shopping bags bearing the Cole logo were placed in a hotel lobby. In another, bottles of Evian were placed alongside a water carafe, and in still another, a videotape box bearing the Blockbuster logo was inserted onto a desk (Elliott, 1999).

Although virtual advertising has yet to become mainstream, it already has its share of vociferous advocates. According to Mr. Elliott, "There are several reasons for preferring it to simply placing products in a show before it is shot. For one thing, virtual products can be readily changed, so a different sponsor can be sold a placement each time a program runs." The flexibility made possible through virtual advertising also allows television sales representatives to make local placements for geographically sensitive regional advertisers, thereby making this advertising tactic financially feasible to large-scale and small-scale advertisers alike.

In Mr. Elliott's brief summation about the future use of virtual advertising, he makes a very poignant statement - one that actually applies to the future of advertising across all channels. "The expansion of virtual advertising is a sign of the never-ending efforts of marketers to blanket consumers in a continuous fog of sponsored pitches," he explained. "Their goal is to elude consumer resistance to traditional forms of advertising like commercials and print advertisements. To that end, ads have intruded onto the floors of stores and the sides of blimps, airport baggage carousels and school hallways, coffee cups and stadium names, bathroom walls and hot dog cart umbrellas."

Will the convergence of home computer networking and appliances be so pervasive that consumers will one day open their refrigerators and be greeted by the ubiquitous voice of AOL informing them "You've Got Milk"?

Given the trends we are now seeing in the advertising industry, it would be no surprise if consumers came home one day to find their homes freshly wired by the likes of AOL, Coca-Cola and
Aaron Spelling. In fact, despite the rocky road ahead for the advertising industry, one thing is certain. As consumers gain more and more control over the media messages they receive, advertisers must look beyond the confines of traditional advertising models to find more subtle, relevant and valuable methods for integrating their message into the lifestyles of their target consumers.

The question is no longer whether the status quo of today's advertising must change, but when and how far advertisers will go in their quest to accomplish this lofty feat. Will the advances made possible through online personalization, chat room infiltration, or a juiced-up form of product placement be enough? Will advertisers continue pursuing more intrusive tactics for integrating their messages into the daily lives of their consumers? And if so, will they recognize the increasingly precarious line between just-plain-clever and potentially deceptive practices? Most importantly, will advertisers even have a choice in the future?

Given the new autonomy of today's consumers to determine the media messages they receive and, on occasion, become the media messages themselves, I have a hunch that the future of advertising will have very little to do with corporate marketers. Instead, it will be the Mahirs of the world, the 'Survivors,' and the ChrisandL.uke.com of the world generating all of the hype. (For those of you who have yet to hear about ChrisandL.uke.com, this is a Web site created by two entering college freshmen who are seeking corporate sponsorship of their education in exchange for flaunting the logos of their sponsor corporation throughout their entire college careers.) In fact, as Poniewozik so deftly points out in his "We Like To Watch" article, "there's the World Wide Web, the invention that puts the 'me' in medium." Because the Web allows even the most commonplace body of individuals to develop sites around themselves (move over, Mahir!), advertisers will soon find that their best spokespeople are no longer the Hollywood glitterati they've relied on in the past, but "real" people whose recommendations and entertainment value are far more believable to the masses.

Given this point, I would like to build on Poniewozik's statement by adding that the World Wide Web not only puts the "me" in medium, but strengthens the "me" in consumer, as well. After all, it is all about the consumer these days. Empowered with the ability to skip through television advertising, Web site banner ads, and unsolicited e-mails, while at the same time exchanging communications and product recommendations with people throughout the world like never before, the power of advertising truly does belong in the hands, mouse, and remote control of consumers. The decisions, which remain in the realm of marketers, will depend upon the channels and mediums through which they can best attract consumers and/or seemingly "real" people to serve as their spokespeople. Will it be through tell-a-friend campaigns, program sponsorships, or a new breed of product placement? My feeling is that the most successful companies of the future will prepare for a combination of all of these marketing mediums in hopes of creating their own best breed of spokespeople.

In fact, I believe a company's ability to enlist its best "real" customers to do their advertising for them will be the primary determinant of marketing success in the future. So valuable can word-of-mouth marketing become, that I wouldn't be surprised if we all had company-sponsored microchips installed into the roofs of our mouths one day. Just as Epidemic.com employs viral and incentive-based marketing techniques to proffer their advertisers' e-mail links, microchip sponsor companies could reward their new spokespeople (e.g. the new and improved company "mouthpiece") every time they reference a particular company to friends. Sound a little too much like Big Brother? I should say so. Just imagine the electro-convulsive shock you would likely receive if the sponsoring company ever heard you badmouthing them!

Although this marketing tactic would take the phrase "word-of-mouth" advertising to its fullest, most literal extreme, the concept is still a bit too creepy and X-Files-like for the majority of today's advertisers. In a few years though, nothing would surprise me. Of course, I hope we will have some forewarning before the microchips are implemented in the real world. Perhaps within the plot of a sit-com episode. Without a doubt, this concept would be so interesting that even my friend Kendall would have to watch. (Oh yeah, and let's not forget that all the voyeurs would watch, too!)

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