
PRODUCT PLACEMENT ADVERTISING IN THE NEWS:

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Product Placements Acquire A Life Of Their Own On Shows

By STEPHANIE CLIFFORD

In the season finale of “CSI: NY” in May, the show’s characters gathered around videoconferencing screens to share information about a shooting. “She wants everybody on a TelePresence call,” says an investigator, Lindsay Monroe. “O.K., we have a full house, network’s secure, you’re good to go, Stella.”

The unlikely supporting player in the episode was Cisco Systems, which wanted to show off its TelePresence videoconferencing system. Cisco’s on-air cameo may seem puzzling to viewers more familiar with product placements for soft drinks or cars (who would rush out to buy a complex computer system after seeing it on CSI?), but the placement resulted from careful deal-making by the company’s entertainment agency, Davie Brown Entertainment, with CBS and the show.

This is the kind of product placement woven into the plot of a popular show that is of growing concern to the Federal Communications Commission and consumer groups. Product placements are “a huge, out-of-control issue,” said Robert Weissman, the managing director of Commercial Alert, a nonprofit group that aims to limit commercial marketing. He said that the involvement of advertisers in the shaping of scripts and plots represented “fundamental encroachments on the independence of the programming.”

Last month, the F.C.C. opened an inquiry into whether there ought to be frank disclosure of such deals. Among the suggestions are that the networks be required to display on-screen crawls whenever a paid-for placement is seen on television.

“We’re not saying they can’t do it we’re just saying they have to let the audience know what they’re doing,” said Jonathan S. Adelstein, an F.C.C. commissioner.

“CSI: NY” is only one of Cisco’s many TV and movie credits: the company keeps a long list on its Web site of where its products have appeared, from Fox’s “24” and NBC’s “Heroes” to films like “You, Me and Dupree” and “I Am Legend.” Usually the sponsor’s brand is hard to miss: on a “24” episode, for example, the words “Cisco TelePresence” appear in a close-up that fills the screen.

Mr. Adelstein argues that more disclosure is necessary. He suggested considering that the brand names appear in a minimum font size, and for a minimum length of time, at the

beginning or end of a show. For now, it is not clear whether the F.C.C. will take action; it is soliciting comments for the next few months, and may or may not issue a ruling after that.

But in Hollywood and on Madison Avenue, the F.C.C.'s concerns appear archaic and intrusive. The type of pop-up warnings that the F.C.C. is considering would "completely disrupt the entertainment experience," said Tom Meyer, the president of Davie Brown, a leading brand management agency in Los Angeles. "If their ultimate goal is, can they do something that kills integration, advertisers' ability to integrate into a show, that would do it," he said.

Some viewers, too, say the F.C.C.'s concerns are a little over the top. Realistically, does anyone wonder why Simon Cowell has a huge Coke cup in front of him on every "American Idol"? "I think that most people in the United States know that there's some financial arrangement there," said Ambar Rao, a professor of marketing at Washington University in St. Louis. He said that he did not oppose disclosure at the beginning or end of a show, but "people watch a show for entertainment, and if they're constantly being reminded that somebody has paid for this product or that product, it just takes away from the experience."

With agencies like Davie Brown becoming more sophisticated and demanding about how their clients' products are depicted, the issue has grown murkier. These days consumer brands not only appear on shows, but are also elaborately woven into the plot, with advertisers calling a lot of the shots. Their agencies approve television scripts, suggest plots that hinge on the product, attend and critique the episode shoots, and review the rough cuts of episodes.

"We almost consider ourselves to be the junior writers on the show," Mr. Meyer said.

Television writers are not happy about this development the Writers Guild of America West sent a letter to the F.C.C. urging that an on-screen crawl disclose a placement at the moment it occurs but the networks and producers are thrilled with the extra income they get from product placement.

A one-episode integration on a moderately popular show costs at least \$100,000 but rarely goes over \$500,000, Mr. Meyer said. Then there is the cost of buying commercials, which the network usually requires.

Mr. Meyer, a former Paramount Pictures executive, has been at Davie Brown for almost a decade and has seen product placement evolve well beyond its beginnings as a prize for a game-show contestant.

For instance, when Staples was introducing a new paper-shredding device called the MailMate in 2006, Davie Brown approached the producers of "The Office" on NBC. The agency wound up striking a two-episode deal: in the first episode, the character Kevin Malone was given the responsibility of shredding paper with the MailMate; in the second, the character Dwight Schrute took a job at Staples.

The Davie Brown team wanted to emphasize that the shredder was small, so the shredder sat on Kevin's desk. It wanted to emphasize that it was sturdy, so Kevin shredded not only paper, but also his credit card. And it wanted to emphasize that the shredder was available only at Staples.

"This is where the writers come up with their own ideas, which we all loved," Mr. Meyer said.

The episode closed with Kevin shredding lettuce and making it into a salad; when a colleague asked where he got the salad, he replied, "Staples."

"Everyone has an opinion now on whether or not we're deceiving the public," Mr. Meyer said. But "these shows have always been funded by advertising, and if advertising is changing, it has to be understood that the mechanics of how we deliver advertising must change, or advertisers will walk away."

Davie Brown goes so far as to ask for final script approval. Kevin McAuliffe, the vice president for branded entertainment for NBC Universal's cable properties, which include Bravo and USA Network, said that creativity always comes first, but that product placement has a strong influence.

"Nine times out of 10, we have a client that goes with us to the shoot, so they see the place, they see the roughs, they see the placing," Mr. McAuliffe said, adding, "we've actually made changes on set" because of advertiser feedback.

As the F.C.C. seeks comments on how to disclose products, Mr. Meyer of Davie Brown said he would not object to a more overt disclosure, but not during the show itself. Three of the largest advertising-industry associations are pushing for the F.C.C. to stall a decision on disclosure.

The ideal disclosure, Mr. Meyer said, is one that "doesn't interrupt the entertainment experience, but achieves the brand's objective, so they're still willing to fund the television model."
