

August 14, 2009
New York Magazine

The Hidden Genius of *Mad Men* Product Placement

BY Mike Vilensky

Mad Men centers around an ad agency, so it's fitting that brand names get dropped: Heineken, Cadillac, Utz, US Airways, London Fog, and Smirnoff have all arranged for product placement on the show. But you have to wonder: Since the show is set in the sixties, don't these companies risk seeming dated? We asked publicity-firm heads and branding gurus what they think — and got schooled on the world of modern advertising.

What's old is new.

Alison Brod, who heads a PR firm that reps the likes of Jill Stuart and alice + olivia, says that, on a certain level, *Mad Men's* setting doesn't matter: "The average consumer doesn't realize the anachronisms — they just have the identifications of the brand once it appears on the show."

But there's more to it than just that. Yvette Quiazon, marketing consultant for Apple, Nike, and Coca-Cola at whY-Q, the Soho-based brand-strategy boutique, says that *Mad Men's* setting is actually in some way current. "What's old is still new," she says. "Obviously, some of the mind-set and bad office behaviors are a thing of the past, but the interiors have been emulated for the last ten years. At this point, who has not heard of mid-century design? What woman has not latched on to the floral trend, entrenched in our closets and interpreted as a hipster frock in Chloë Sevigny's line for Opening Ceremony? The meticulous set and costume design feel modern because we live in a world where trends and decades are recycled and mashed up at warped speed."

Mad Men isn't alone in championing past aesthetics. "In fashion, for the last decade the past is frequently referenced blatantly," she explains. "In New York City, my evening out moves in time periods: Starting with the penthouse party at the Cooper Hotel, going for dinner at Minetta Tavern, and ending up at the Jane Hotel, I have gone through three resurrected time periods." An admitted TV buff, she adds: "The last season of *Lost* was a really clever metaphor for modern society. All of us are in living in different time periods."

Classic is also cool.

Chloë Sevigny may rock a floral print, but much of *Mad Men* is still distinctly "period." Kelly Cutrone, founder of the PR, branding, and marketing firm People's Revolution — and a TV star in her own right — says, "Style is in style, fashion is out. So reaching anyone's values — that's what in. I'd love to see a Good Humor truck go down my street. Anything associated with a feel-good part of America should be brought back instantly — a nice pair of Levi's, a Bob Seger tour, a polka-dotted skirt. If you look at America as a brand, I don't think there was a better time."

Marisa Acocella Marchetto, author and former creative director at branding firms Kirshenbaum and Bond and J. Walter Thompson, explains it this way: "It's like Holly Golightly staring at the diamond necklace in the window of Tiffany, and somehow finding inner peace. The fact that a brand can withstand the test of time makes it transcendent and gives us hope that we'll be okay. The world may be collapsing around you, but at least you can still munch on Utz and wash it down with a Heineken. There's something so comforting in that."

But does it sell?

"For a brand like Coca-Cola, product placement in something like *Mad Men* would be a perfect fit, and only help strengthen its innate brand equities in the minds of consumers," said Quiazon. "But of course this does not work for every brand. If you are Maidenform, which has a more dated, Grandma's-bra image in the minds of women, showing torpedo bras and girdles only reinforces this image in absence of some sort of follow-up messaging that screams 'today.'"

Quiazon continues: "Some of the pitches they make [on the show] — like for Lucky Strike — have an unsophisticated strategy. They could have been put together by a fifth-grader." (Pete Campbell, you may recall, suggests that Lucky Strike capitalize on Freud's theory of the "death drive.") "While this was the advertising of the past and [is] dated as far as how sophisticated marketing is these days, it is probably not the healthiest place for a brand to associate itself. It just screams 'we build our business on manipulating you,' point blank, and no consumer wants to hear that."

"I don't think that this [product placement] is something that was done purely to increase revenue on the show," Cutrone said. "It seems like some sort of weird experiment. Everything's changing. And one of the things that I totally know from being on a show and working on the other side too is that TV is hugely powerful format. Does having your products on a popular TV show in a subliminal or obvious way help sell them? Yes, it does. Does it increase awareness and comfort with the product — do viewers feel psychologically closer? Yes, they do." Pausing, she adds: "I think the whole advertising industry's gone to hell in a handbasket anyway, and it's every man for themselves."

Don Draper might agree.
