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A Product's Place IS On The Set

By STEPHANIE CLIFFORD

Name-brand products make regular appearances on television shows, where they are typically written into a drama, comedy or reality program. "American Idol" viewers, for example, have come to expect to see a Coke cup in front of Simon Cowell as he dresses down contestants.

But TV news?

In recent weeks, anchors on the Fox affiliate in Las Vegas, KVVU, sit with cups of McDonald's iced coffee on their desks during the news-and-lifestyle portion of their morning show. The anchors rarely touch the cups.

Executives at the station, one of 12 owned by Meredith Corporation, say the six-month promotion is meant to shore up advertising revenue and, as they told the news staff, will not influence content.

"There was a healthy dose of skepticism, and I'm pleased there was it means they're being journalists," said Adam P. Bradshaw, news director of KVVU. The product placement was first reported Monday in The Las Vegas Sun.

The arrangement does raise questions about potential conflicts between the intended message and news content. The ad agency that arranged the promotion said the coffee cups would most likely be whisked away if KVVU chooses to report a negative story about McDonald's.

"If there were a story going up, let's say, God forbid, about a McDonald's food illness outbreak or something negative about McDonald's, I would expect that the station would absolutely give us the opportunity to pull our product off set," said Brent Williams, account supervisor at Karsh/Hagan, the advertising agency that arranged the deal between McDonald's and KVVU.

If that did not happen, "it might lead to the termination of an agreement" to appear on the show, he said. KVVU, for its part, said it would continue to report truthfully and honestly about McDonald's. Mr. Bradshaw said the station would remove the cups, just as it would remove spot advertising from a newscast for any advertiser who is the subject of a negative report.

With the economy in rough shape and advertisers funneling more dollars to the Internet, the television industry is trying to increase its revenues. Neither the agency nor KVVU would reveal the price of the six-month deal.

Other stations owned by Meredith including WFSB, the CBS affiliate in Hartford, Conn., and WGCL, the CBS affiliate in Atlanta are also accepting product placements on their morning shows.

Arrangements like these are anathema to journalists and media watchdogs. And the broader issue of product placements is under scrutiny at the Federal Communications Commission, which is weighing tighter rules for how sponsorships on TV shows are disclosed.

“Expanding this into news raises very troubling questions,” said Harold Feld, senior vice president for the Media Access Project, a consumer advocacy group. “Viewers, when they see news programs, are expecting to see things that reflect the marriage of the things reported, and do not look in the credits of these programs to see if there’s some small disclaimer that people are being paid for product placements.”

The three major network morning shows, ABC’s “Good Morning America,” CBS’s “The Early Show,” and NBC’s “Today” do not accept fees in exchange for product placement, representatives of the shows said Monday.

“It is against CBS News’s standards to accept money in exchange for product placement on any broadcast, and we do not do so,” Kelli Halyard, a CBS spokeswoman, wrote in an e-mail message.

Paul Karpowicz, the president of Meredith Broadcasting Group, said that product placements on his stations were limited to morning news shows.

“If something happens and we have to report something about McDonald’s, we’ll report it,” said Mr. Bradshaw of KVVU. “I would not put product placement into any of my traditional hard newscasts. I would not run it in my 5 p.m. or my 10 p.m.”

He said he was not allowing the McDonald’s cups on the so-called straight news portion of the morning report, which is before 7 a.m., but on a lighter, news-and-lifestyle show that goes from 7 to 9 a.m.

McDonald’s has also placed products on morning news shows on WFLD in Chicago, which is owned and operated by Fox; on KCPQ in Seattle, a Fox affiliate owned by the Tribune Company; and on Univision 41 in New York City, said Danya Proud, a McDonald’s spokeswoman.

Ms. Proud said the promotion was regional rather than national in scope. “This is a way for us to allow our customers to discover our products,” she said. Morning shows, she said, are a natural place to promote coffee drinks.

But what if the reporters sitting in front of McDonald’s products are doing segments about, say, gang violence or outbreaks of tainted food?

“That’s something we’ve taken into account,” said Mr. Williams of Karsh/Hagan, part of the TBWA Worldwide unit of Omnicom Group.

“I’m kind of relying, my client is relying, on just the inner workings of that station,” he said. “Not that editorial would ever give a heads-up to sales or be expected to give a heads-up to sales, but these are professionals. They do realize that some businesses’ brands, some businesses’ reputations, could be at stake in terms of how commerce and news are interacting here.”

In 2005, the F.C.C. issued a reminder to broadcasters that they must disclose when they use certain video news releases provided by corporations. The inquiry that the agency opened in June is focused on entertainment shows rather than news, but could easily be broadened.

In June, the Writers Guild of America West sent a letter to the F.C.C. supporting real-time disclosure of product placement and asking for a ban on video news releases on local broadcast television.

“This practice is unbelievably deceptive and is an attempt to trick the viewer to think that a paid advertisement is actually news,” the group’s president, Patric M. Verrone, wrote.

Herbert Jack Rotfeld, a professor of marketing at Auburn University, said that product placement deals on news shows could backfire for both sides. “In the end, they just make the audiences even more skeptical of everything.” he said.
