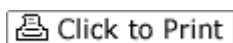


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Commercials as Content: Will Consumers Watch?

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By Brian Morrissey

NEW YORK The fresh-faced young host cheerfully introduces the next segment of video clips. But rather than the latest music video, she is teasing a different type of fare: the often-maligned 30-second spot. In this case, she's hyping spots from GoDaddy.com and Ted airlines as part of an ambitious experiment by Firebrand to do for the commercial what MTV did for the music video more than 25 years ago: turn promotional material into content viewers actually seek out.

The efforts of Firebrand and other startups like Honeyshed, the gussied-up infomercial site recently started by Droga5 and Smuggler, fly in the face of the conventional wisdom that consumers are keen on avoiding ad messages. On the contrary, these players believe consumers, especially young ones, are only interested in avoiding bad commercials that are interruptive. Their simple yet bold solution? Create an entire digital channel where commercials are the only content.

"The commercial as an interruption is heading south," said John Lack, CEO of Firebrand, which launched just last week. "The concept of shoving something in the middle of CSI is anathema to people, particularly young people."

But detractors cite Brightspot TV as a cautionary tale. The site, set up solely for consumers to watch TV commercials, rewarded viewers for their time with discounts on subscription services like Napster and video-game rental service GameFly. Two weeks ago, Brightspot closed after drawing minimal viewers and little advertiser interest. CEO Aaron Martens blamed the newness of the model. "Advertisers have been relatively slow to adopt new models when it's so clear they absolutely need to change their thinking," he wrote in an e-mail to Adweek.

Firebrand and Honeyshed claim selectivity will be their distinction. Admittedly, Brightspot accepted ads from most paying advertisers, much like a TV network would. Firebrand says it will run the most creative ads, and Honeyshed says it will only promote the hottest brands.

For instance, Lack said Firebrand wouldn't present run-of-the-mill spots. Similarly, David Droga, creative chairman of Droga5, said Honeyshed would be picky about which brands it lets in, even if that means skipping a big-budget advertiser in favor of a niche brand. The site will be "as much defined by the brands we don't have," he said.

The Firebrand and Honeyshed models have been intriguing enough to draw in some brands. Droga said Honeyshed is producing content for Sephora and Feit running shoes, among others. Firebrand is running promotions from Skittles, Adidas and others. Both are using the lure of performance-based pricing: Advertisers only pay when viewers take some kind of action, either clicking to an e-commerce site or sweepstakes or a deeper brand experience. "It takes the laziness out of our industry, which is better for our industry," said Droga.

Droga strongly rejects the notion that Honeyshed's programming constitutes "advertising," even though segments consist of positive appraisals of products by young, attractive hosts. He prefers to paint the effort as the digital equivalent of a trip to a shopping mall, where young consumers willingly go to interact with brands.

"[Viewers] are demanding more transparency," Droga said. "They're not embarrassed by the fact that they're consumers and capitalists."

While Droga and Lack aspire to emulate MTV (Lack was a founding executive at the cable network), there are plenty who doubt either can pull it off. MTV executives were given a preview of Honeyshed weeks before it launched and, according to one source, were less than impressed. "You have never seen an audience more speechless," said one MTV exec. Reviews from bloggers have been mixed, with some praising the effort as a new model and others panning it. David Armano, vp of experience design at Omnicom

Group's Critical Mass, wrote Honeyshed "feels like traditional advertising served up on the Internet." (Droga could not be reached for comment.)

Scott Witt, creative media director at Droga5, said doubters are to be expected with a new model like Honeyshed. He noted QVC was trashed when it debuted but has gone on to become a highly profitable cable fixture.

But for any of these efforts to take off, they need to capture the interest not of the ad industry or bloggers but real consumers. There is little early evidence they have. TBS gains about 2.6 million viewers for World's Funniest Ads, a Kevin Nealon-hosted special of commercials from around the globe. Its Web offshoot, VeryFunnyAds.com, launched just over a year ago, draws about 185,000 visitors per month, according to comScore. Honeyshed hasn't yet registered on the Internet measurement service's radar. Quantcast, another measurement firm, estimates the site received fewer than 2,000 visitors its first month.

The sites are unlikely to attract enough of an audience to work, according to Quentin George, global head of digital media and strategic innovation at Universal McCann, part of Interpublic. "If you don't have a million uniques, you're going to have trouble landing a meeting," he said. "It's once you get 10 million that you get discussions with people representing real brands."

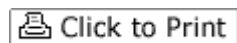
Lack acknowledges that Firebrand is not going to draw the same size audience as a hit TV show. The debut program last week on Ion Television Network, which reaches more than 90 million homes, got a modest 150,000 viewers, although Firebrand did little to promote it. Over the next year, Firebrand's goals are to regularly draw 250,000 viewers to the TV show and 1 million visitors to its Web property and mobile offering. Honeyshed will easily exceed 1 million viewers per month, according to Witt.

"Anyone with a media budget can buy an audience of 10 million people," he said. "It doesn't mean your ads are any good."

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