AdAge, Madison & Vine
September 28, 2005

THE BEST AND WORST BRAND INTEGRATIONS

From the Highs of 'The Apprentice' to the Lows of Nascar

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LOS ANGELES -- As opposed to several years ago, companies across the board are no longer discussing the prospects of branded entertainment but are aggressively taking the plunge, spending millions of marketing dollars to back TV shows, movies, music and video games, as well as launching content-based Internet initiatives, all in the hope of promoting their brands through entertainment.

The concept isn't new. The amount of activity, however, is.

Pontiac's Solstice brand integration on 'The Appreentice' sold 1,000 cars in 41 minutes.
More projects to come
And there's more to come. New seasons of The Apprentice are starting up. Other reality shows like Survivor, The Amazing Race, Extreme Makeover: Home Edition, Trading Spaces and The Biggest Loser continue to lure advertisers and spawn copycats. And heavyweights like General Motors Corp. and Procter & Gamble Co. said they will buy fewer commercials during the coming TV season and commit that money to alternative marketing methods, namely branded entertainment.

Madison & Vine has been tracking the deals to date. And with so many projects being launched all the time, the newsletter will rank the five best and worst deals every six months, taking a look at why they worked, why they didn't and what lessons might be learned.

Now for the reality check: Marketers are still playing it safe. Much of what's being called "branded entertainment" these days is still just glorified product placement. Sponsoring a task in The Apprentice or slapping a brand's logo on the boxing ring in The Contender isn't taking much of a risk, no matter how many millions a company is paying to appear in a show.

Few marketers have yet to devote marketing dollars to produce entertainment on their own like a scripted TV show, movie or video game.

The content ownership quandary

There are reasons: Buddying up to a successful reality show just makes sense -- the weekly exposure to millions of loyal viewers is worth it. So is promoting a major movie franchise at the box office. But marketers are also still struggling with who will own the content a brand might produce. Being beholden to shareholders, they have to remain focused on their core business, which is not creating entertainment. So far, turning to a producer like a Mark Burnett or Ben

Silverman is just easier.

We'll take a look at the second half of the year in January. Until then, here's what worked and what didn't so far:

THE BEST

The deal: General Motors' Pontiac division sponsors a task in The Apprentice built around its new Solstice roadster.

Why it worked: The task was simple: have contestants design a brochure for the two-seater that was to hit showrooms that summer. The winning team designed their brochure around the emotional response generated by the car -- juxtaposing striking photographs with words like "desire," "lust" and "success." After the show, viewers were given the chance to visit a Pontiac Web site where they could print out a certificate that could be taken to a dealership to order one of the first 1,000 roadsters built. Pontiac spent more than $1 million to appear in the episode.

The result: The 1,000 cars sold in 41 minutes after the April episode. Of the 212,000 who visited the site, 20,000 signed up for a certificate to take to a dealer to order one of the first Solstice models. Visits to the Pontiac Web site rose 1,400% in the first hour. The Apprentice ended up selling 724 more Pontiacs in 41 minutes than Oprah Winfrey gave away in five minutes on her show last year.

Lesson learned: Be ready to capitalize on the on-air exposure by sending viewers to a Web site for additional information, promotion, contest or giveaway. Have your product ready to sell. Pontiac's integration could have paid off even more had the automaker had the Solstice already available at dealerships.

The deal: As one of their challenges, team members on NBC's The Apprentice created 30-second ads for Unilever's newly launched cucumber-infused Dove Cool Moisture Body Wash.

Why it shouldn't have worked: Unilever put too much faith in The Apprentice's contestants to position their product. One of the show's teams created an ad so dreadful, it was quickly dubbed vegetable porn. The offending ad showed a female chef lovingly stroking a cucumber held by a male colleague who ends up picking another man over her. The tagline said, "It's a refreshing twist," presumably like the cucumber-scented body wash. The other spot wasn't much better: A jogger rubs the body wash all over his face in mid-stride, and wipes it off with a towel. To make matters worse, Dove executives didn't see the ads until the show aired, so they had no idea of the content, which is a high-risk proposition for a marketer.

Why it ended up working: Dove executives were ready for the mishap. The company had planned a multilayered campaign to launch around the episode that ended up saving what could have been a disastrous placement -- which cost north of $1 million. Donald Trump and his advisor Carolyn Kepcher introduced a real Dove ad for the new product and chatted up a separate contest for viewers that sent the winner to the Apprentice finale. Mr. Trump and Ms. Kepcher also took part in national Wal-Mart TV ads for Dove, which tied in to 700 in-store displays. Newspaper ads, radio promos and rich media ads on Yahoo also launched the next day. It was also a good thing Dove executives had a sense of humor. After seeing both Apprentice spots, execs offered to send some contestants to a Dove marketing boot camp.

Think clean thoughts: In spite of the suggestive overtones of the mock ad, the episode, which aired in February, enticed 3,000 people-a-second to visit Dove.com after the show ended. The marketer doled out 400,000 samples and collected thousands of new names for its direct-marketing database. "Dove and Apprentice" became one of the hottest searches on Yahoo and Google. The experience also deepened the marketer's commitment to branded entertainment, with Unilever executives, who'd already cut TV ad spending by one-fifth, saying they will drop that figure more in favor of more product integration.

Lesson learned: Be ready for damage control.

The deal: Samsung partners with 20th Century Fox and Marvel Studios for brand integration in the comic book-based action film Fantastic Four and its Activision video game.

Why it worked: A movie's promotional partners typically devote much of their attention and marketing dollars on the film itself, but Samsung took things further. For the first time, a company's products -- in this case Samsung's line of cellphones, computer monitors and TVs -- appeared in both the film and the movie-based game. Also in the film and game, Samsung signage appears on a billboard in Times Square and elsewhere on sets. The game, created by Activision and available across six gaming platforms, bowed shortly before the movie's release in July. Additionally, Samsung promoted the movie heavily in TV, print, in-theater and with Internet ads across more than 400 consumer Web sites.

In good company: Samsung, which spend tens of millions to back the film worldwide, wasn't the film's only promotional partner. Burger King doled out toys in kids' meals and cash credits for Amazon.com with adult value meals. The National Basketball Association ran TV spots featuring Magic Johnson playing basketball with the Fantastic Four characters. Kraft made movie-themed Lunchables, and SBC Communications gave three free months of SBC/DISH Network, downloads, screensavers and e-cards. None of those, however, appear in the game.

Outcome: The movie, released in the crowded summer period, pulled in more than $150 million in the U.S. and another $150 million internationally. Its DVD, which will give Samsung extended exposure, is expected to sell briskly. The video game has sold nearly 100,000 units, earning an estimated $5 million.

Lesson learned: Think big. If you're spending millions to promote a movie, make sure your product appears in all of the property's products.

The deal: Audi of America produces three documentaries to promote its new A3 luxury compact car as part of its relationship with the American Film Institute in Los Angeles.

Why it worked: Last year, Audi inked a partnership with the AFI, through which the automaker serves as the title sponsor of the school's annual film festival, events, screening series, as well as the American Film Market. But instead of just sponsoring a series of Hollywood events, Audi opted to expand the relationship and use the AFI's filmmakers to create original content to promote its own vehicles. One project: "Step Ahead With Audi A3: Personal Journeys With AFI Fest Filmmakers," had three AFI alums compete for the opportunity to take a three-week road trip in the automaker's new A3. The participants created 15-minute documentaries on an emerging trend (the winning film, Life as You Know It, focuses on nontraditional parenting as practiced by active professionals). Directors posted blogs on the Audi Web site, where the finished films appear. A print and Web campaign was also launched to promote the effort and encourage voting. Given the road-trip concept, the A3 appears prominently in each film, which will eventually be packaged and shown on TV.

Revving up its ties to Hollywood: Audi is aggressively going after Hollywood. And not just through its relationship with the AFI. This summer, the company's A8 starred in 20th Century Fox's action flick Transporter 2, and was prominently featured in the film's marketing campaign. The film opened at No. 1 over the Labor Day holiday weekend, breaking box office records. It follows the appearance of a futuristic Audi sports car in the sci-fi movie I, Robot last summer, also from Fox.

Lesson learned: Sponsoring events is one thing. Creating original content with the partner you're promoting makes more use of marketing dollars.

The deal: 24 Hour Total Fitness Worldwide jogged past its plus-sized competitor Bally Total Fitness to be the heavyweight sponsor of NBC's surprise reality hit The Biggest Loser, in which participants shed pounds and bulk up their confidence.

Why it worked: 24 Hour Fitness had extended face time during pivotal competition scenes. The marketer also built a custom gym on the horse ranch where the contestants were living and scattered the company's branded merchandise and logo throughout the set. All this resulted in a coup for the company: The fitness chain isn't national -- its 330 gyms are located west of the Mississippi -- so its media plan focuses on regional spot TV buys, print, Internet and direct marketing.

An added bonus: Flexible deal points. 24 Hour Fitness paid an undisclosed integration fee but did not buy media on the network, usually a requirement for any such deal. NBC did not insist on the ad buy because 24 Hour Fitness was taking a chance on an unproven show that needed all the support it could muster.

Why it almost didn't: NBC was in discussions with Bally's, which had an important foot in the door as an existing network advertiser, but a deal was not coming together. Meanwhile, David Broome, an executive producer of The Biggest Loser, chatted up the CEO of 24 Hour Fitness, where he'd been a longtime member. Mr. Broome and Mark Mastrov hammered out an agreement within weeks, and NBC blessed the deal.

The result: The show lifted NBC's ratings in the time period, spawned spinoffs and a second season, which is now part of the network's fall lineup. 24 Hour Fitness saw a bump in its business early this year, which executives attributed partly to the relationship with The Biggest Loser, whose producers include Reveille Entertainment's CEO Ben Silverman. The marketer has returned for the show's second season with a stepped-up presence, including making its personal trainers a part of the series, motivating and tracking the contestants, who wear T-shirts with slogans that mirror the gym's ad campaign taglines.

Lesson learned: 24 Hour Fitness didn't let its smaller size stand in the way, and negotiated more beneficial terms by backing an untested show.

Honorable mentions: Unilever's branded entertainment series Evan and Gareth for Axe; PerfectMatch.com's appearances on Dr. Phil and in the Warner Bros. movie Must Love Dogs; Mercedes-Benz and the release of its series of downloadable "Mixed-Tape" compilations; Budweiser's promotion of New Line Cinema's comedy Wedding Crashers; the integration of Gran Centenario tequila in Neil Simon's Sweet Charity on Broadway.

THE WORST

The deal: Nascar, a plethora of the racing league's official sponsors and other marketers have their brands integrated into Walt Disney Pictures' Herbie: Fully Loaded, a summer family film starring Lindsay Lohan and Michael Keaton.

Who was in it: Nextel, UPS, Goodyear Tire Co., Valvoline, Radio Shack, Net Zero, DuPont, Home Depot, Lowe's PepsiCo's Tropicana, General Motors' Pontiac GTO and Chevrolet Corvette. Disney even applied a little corporate synergy, with Ms. Lohan's character winning a coveted job at the conglomerate's cable powerhouse ESPN.

Conspicuously absent: Though the title character is a Volkswagen, there's scant other evidence of VW in the movie, save for a couple of recent models supplied for a few scenes. The marketer is never mentioned by name, maybe because VW signed an overall product integration deal with Disney rival NBC Universal.

Why it didn't work: Fully loaded is right. When nearly every movie review specifically calls out the product placement in a film -- and maligns it -- that's a sign of overkill. Nascar was woven into the storyline, which centers on Ms. Lohan's character driving Herbie, the classic '63 VW beetle, in a professional race. The Nascar setting, however, turns into a sea of marketers, mirroring the heavily sponsored sport and its logo-laden drivers. Ms. Lohan frequently wears a Goodyear baseball cap and chugs Tropicana orange juice. And in a turn-the-tables scenario, Nascar did not pay for its massive movie exposure. Disney paid the racing league an undisclosed fee for support and production assistance in filming Nascar races and scenes.

As if that weren't enough: Other marketers like McDonald's, Wal-Mart, Northwest Airlines, Visa Canada and Pringles joined Disney in co-marketing the film. The brands offered everything from Happy Meals, grocery store promotions and sweepstakes to car show exposure and Herbie-themed merchandise. None of it seemed to help the bottom line. The G-rated family flick failed to catch fire, earning a disappointing $65.7 million. Not enough to launch a new franchise.

Lesson learned: Less is more.

The deal: Domino's Pizza sponsors a task in The Apprentice in which teams develop and sell a new type of pizza.

Why it didn't work: Mixed messages. The show's two competing teams both developed and sold meatball pizzas, but Domino's used the episode to unveil its American Classic Cheeseburger pizza in an ad that starred Mr. Trump as the company's new pitchman, saying, "It takes my two favorite foods -- pizza and cheeseburgers -- and blends them together. I've tried this product and it's fabulous." Unfortunately, that's not the product viewers remembered. Papa John's trumped its rival by airing a 30-second spot during the episode promoting its new meatball pizza. In the ad, Papa John's founder John Schnatter quips, "Why eat a pizza made by apprentices when you can call the pros at Papa John's?"

Who's to blame: NBC's ad sales department. The network knew that Domino's would be sponsoring the episode, but still allowed the company's rival to purchase an ad in 64 major markets. But Domino's is also at fault. It confused viewers. It should have taken more control over the task, never allowing contestants to develop a pizza that didn't match the product it was spending millions to promote. It also shouldn't have allowed teams -- especially both teams -- to develop the same product its rival was readying to roll out.

Keeping marketers happy: Producers realized the embarrassing mistake, and the following week, as a make-good, had Mr. Trump introduce the episode by referring back to the Domino's task. Through an awkward voiceover, he tells contestants, "If you'd done your market research like Domino's did, you would have discovered that customers don't want meatball pizza. What they want is cheeseburger pizza. The lesson: Always pay attention to your customer." That's especially true when they're paying upward of $1 million to appear in your show.

Lesson learned: Take more control of how your product will appear. Talk to the ad sales department.

The deal: Toyota Motor Sales USA and Home Depot signed on as the non-sports marketers for NBC's The Contender, a boxing reality show from uber-producer Mark Burnett.

Why it didn't work: The involvement of Toyota and Home Depot just didn't sense. Onscreen exposure was also minimal. The presence of Toyota's trucks did little to advance the storyline of up-and-coming boxers competing against each other for $1 million. The same was true for Home Depot, which had made an overall deal with Mr. Burnett for product integration into his shows. The marketer's logo had little meaning ringside, even though the show was aimed squarely at young men who are prime Home Depot targets.

Then there's the money: The show's deal points practically doomed the two sponsors from the start. Toyota paid a reported $16 million on media and product integration fees, the highest ever shelled out for such a deal. And the marketer made the agreement directly with Mark Burnett Productions and DreamWorks Television, the series' producers, who sold its airtime and integration rights. When the show underperformed -- it regularly attracted between 5 million and 7.8 million viewers -- Toyota had no ratings guarantees and could not go to the network for make-goods.

Split decision: Other partners like Foot Locker, PepsiCo's Gatorade and Sierra Mist, and Everlast Worldwide made for a more natural fit into the unscripted series, which was eventually canceled by NBC but picked up by Walt Disney Co.'s ESPN for a second season. Everlast executives were particularly pleased with their cost-efficient near-constant exposure for a relatively small brand on a network TV series.

Lesson learned: Just because Mark Burnett's the producer, it doesn't mean the show's right for your brand or a guaranteed ratings grabber.

The deal: Marketers flock to appear in DreamWorks' sc-fi flick The Island, directed by Michael Bay and starring Ewan McGregor and Scarlett Johansson.

Who was in: Microsoft's Xbox and MSN Search, Cisco Systems, Aquafina, Calvin Klein, Anheuser-Busch's Budweiser and Michelob, Puma, Cadillac, Nokia, General Motors, Chrysler's Dodge, Amtrak, Ben & Jerry's, Speedo, Apple and Jack Daniels and among others.

Why it didn't work: There's nothing subtle about the product placement within The Island. Lingering shots show the film's clones wearing Puma shoes, drinking Aquafina water and trying to escape villains in a $7 million concept car from Cadillac. The perfect placement of company logos proves too distracting. But individual scenes were also shot for Microsoft that show Mr. McGregor's and Ms. Johansson's characters interacting with the company's products -- in one, they play a futuristic fighting game with an Xbox using holograms; in another, they use an information booth to locate a character using MSN Search. Another for Cisco also showcases its videophone technology, with Mr. McGregor mentioning the Cisco Systems brand as part of his dialog.

On the other hand: The Island was expected to be a big summer hit, but it earned a mere $36 million in the U.S., but went on to collect $122 million overseas. If Hollywood prognosticators can't predict what will work with audiences, how should a brand rep based in Detroit? None of the film's integrated brands lost much financially, considering none of them backed the film with additional marketing support. They did, however, contribute $800,000 to the production's $122 million budget in integration fees, as well as products.

Lesson learned: Showing off what your products may be able to do in 2019 is clever, but showing off what they can do now might be more beneficial.

The deal: American Eagle Outfitters sponsored a design challenge in The Apprentice in which teams design a new clothing line for the teen clothier dubbed "wearable technology" that could incorporate high-tech gadgets like an iPod, cellphone or laptop computers.

Why it didn't work: The episode's losing team was reprimanded for not understanding its customer well enough. The same can be said for American Eagle. The company apparently forgot who buys its clothes. The show's contestants didn't fit the teen demo that the retailer normally targets with its clothing -- late 20- and 30-something team members struggled to understand the brand and its customer, as well as what's cool when it comes to what gadgets those customers use on a daily basis. At the same time, the show doesn't attract the young audience that makes up American Eagle's typical shopper. Making matters worse, producers managed to fumble American Eagle's integration in their own way. When Mr. Trump awarded the winning team a pricey shopping spree, contestants didn't shop at an American Eagle's flagship store. Instead, they went to Bergdorf Goodman, which Mr. Trump called "one of the great stores anywhere in the world."

Stick with what works: American Eagle is no stranger to courting young TV viewers, having secured the exclusive rights to outfit the casts of MTV's reality shows like Road Rules and the current season of The Real World: Austin.

Lesson learned: Stick with your audience.

Dishonorable mentions: McDonald's plan to integrate the Big Mac into rap songs; Wal-Mart's tie-in with ABC's The Scholar.