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Can brand image move upwards after *Sideways*? A strategic approach to brand placements

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Abstract In today's environment of fragmented mass media and popular technologies, such as DVR and TiVo, it is increasingly challenging for marketers to obtain quality face time with audiences. As more customers try to avoid advertisements, there has been growth in brand placement: the practice of integrating brands into entertainment media, particularly television and film. Brand placement engages the audience, limits viewers' ability to ignore commercial messages, and even impacts purchase behavior—as evidenced by the surge in Blackstone pinot noir wine sales after the brand's placement in the movie *Sideways*. Despite the prevalence of this practice, however, the industry often operates in a somewhat unfocused manner. In this article, we draw from academic literature and industry publications, offer insight regarding the growing popularity of brand placements, and suggest a specific set of guidelines to enhance the efficacy of placements in accomplishing a brand's marketing objectives.

1. What is brand placement?

> Why do they call it Ovaltine? The mug is round; the jar is round. . . .they should call it 'Roundtine.' That's gold, Jerry! Gold! ∼ *Kenny Bania in* Seinfeld *(season 8, episode 6)*

Wildly popular during its first run and in subsequent syndication, the television show *Seinfeld* continues to be watched and appreciated by audiences via multi-channel reruns and DVD. Thus, it should come as no surprise that, many years after its original broadcast in 1996, fans of *Seinfeld* can still recall the Ovaltine joke featured in "The Fatigues" (season 8, episode 6). The practice of placing products and brands in media vehicles—otherwise known as product placement—dates back to 1916, when a movie was entitled *She Wanted a Ford*. Today, marketers often use the terms 'brand placement' or 'branded entertainment' to underscore the importance of the brand in this marketing activity. *Brand placement* can be defined as "the purposeful incorporation of a brand into an entertainment vehicle" (Russell & Belch, 2005, p. 74).

Brands may be integrated into shows in different ways. Typically, television programs attempt to incorporate brands in a subtle manner that fits well with the plot; consider wealthy Charlie Harper owning a Mercedes Benz (*Two and a Half Men*, CBS) or the employees of Dunder Mifflin occasionally mentioning their competitor, Staples (*The Office*, NBC).

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Some shows, though, use placements for brands in a fairly overt manner; *American Idol* judges drink from large red cups bearing the Coca-Cola logo, contestants wait in a red Coca-Cola themed room, *Idol* host Ryan Seacrest mentions AT&T in every episode when giving voting instructions, and viewers are shown music videos of contestants using Ford automobiles. Another such example is Donald Trump's *The Apprentice*, which frequently integrates brands into the show, with one entire episode devoted to teams competing to promote the launch of Crest Whitening Expressions Vanilla Mint toothpaste (Wasserman, 2005).

While placement is an old practice, it has witnessed phenomenal growth over the last decade and the industry has been estimated at $3.46 billion dollars (PQ Media, 2005). A brand appears every 3 minutes in prime-time television shows (La Ferle & Edwards, 2006) and there seems to be a general consensus that brand placement will continue to increase in usage and importance. As such, it has started attracting great interest from both practitioners and academicians (e.g., Lehu & Bressoud, 2008; Schiller, 2008). Despite the pervasiveness of brand placements, managers are shorthanded in utilizing this invaluable tool to its full potential. Further, while there are fragmented studies on the topic in the academic literature, there exists no specific set of guidelines to assist managers in getting more mileage from brand placements. Herein, we aim to address this shortcoming.

2. A growing trend

The pioneer in brand placement is considered to be the movie industry, with brands being incorporated into various scenes—typically in exchange for compensation—since the early days of cinema. More recently, prominent examples of brand placement in popular movies have included Aston Martin and BMW automobiles in the James Bond franchise; White Castle hamburgers in *Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle*; Huggies diapers in *Raising Arizona*; Red Stripe beer in *The Firm*; Blackstone Pinot Noir in *Sideways*; and Budget Rent-A-Truck in *Home Alone*. Along with movies, the other major outlet for brand placement is television.

While TV and films account for the dominant share of placements, the practice is also gaining popularity in other media including radio, books, music, and video games. Consequently, consumers are being bombarded with all forms of placement; from hip-hop songs mentioning Big Macs (Sutherland, 2006, p. 108), to players wearing Nike gear in video games, to Pontiac cars in Marvel comics.

The strong interest in brand placements can be linked to many factors: fragmentation of media, growth of the Internet, the demise of traditional media (newspapers), and the advent of new media (video games). Preceding the 1980s, network television was the most viable source to establish a brand. It had an omnipotent presence, and advertisements inserted into regular programming received significant exposure. In the last couple of decades, however, network television's share in the media market has been shrinking consistently, limiting marketers' access to their customers. The biggest factor in favor of brand placements may very well be the widespread consumer adoption of technologies such as TiVo and DVR. Consumers can now 'zap' (change channels) or 'zip' (fast forward) when commercials appear on-screen, making it very challenging for marketers to get face time with customers via traditional advertising. As of March 2009, 31% of American households had a DVR, up significantly from just 12% in January 2007 (Nielsenwire, 2009). Among TiVo owners, 60% record TV programs and 92% avoid advertisements when they view these recordings (Lehu, 2007, p. 35). If a brand is actually incorporated into a program, though, the drop in viewership associated with zipping and zapping is severely restricted.

For its part, brand placement in a successful movie can help the stock price of the client company to move significantly upward. This occurs because consumers connect with certain movies and map their aspirations to products depicted in these films (Wiles & Danielova, 2009). Scholarly research has shown that such placements increase brand recall by enhancing brand accessibility in consumers' minds and becoming part of an evoked brand set (Sawyer, 2006), leading to higher sales. It is not surprising, therefore, that practitioners have been quick to embrace brand placement to generate buzz around their brands. Although traditional advertising still draws billions of dollars, its share in total media expenditures has been steadily shrinking; advertising spending declined by 2.8% in 2008, a trend that is expected to continue. On the other hand, paid brand placement is expected to grow at a compounded rate of 17.6% for the next 5 years (Clifford, 2009). As brand placement continues to increase in size and importance, it becomes essential to understand the unique nature of the placement industry.

3. The brand placement industry: How it works

The brand placement industry is still evolving, and lacks the structure and objectivity associated with