

Putting the I in Advertising Now Consumers Are Part of the Ad

By Libby Copeland
Washington Post Staff Writer
Monday, May 7, 2007

Marketers have always loved consumers who so identify with a brand that they become its evangelists, wearing the logo on their backsides and preaching to their friends about its virtues.

Now, we consumers are becoming evangelists in new and surreptitious ways. Online, we spend quality time with advertising, we star in it and we send it to our friends. We the people have been co-opted into selling ourselves.



The Caveman Web site involves consumers actively in Geico's advertising. (Geico)

And we rather like it.

Cadillac has created an enthusiast "microsite," Mycadillacstory.com, where people can watch interviews with Cadillac lovers like Joan Jett and Tiki Barber and upload their own videos and pictures. Chevy lets people upload photos of themselves and then watch an ad with their own faces pasted in. (The results are pretty creepy.) Coca-Cola has launched a contest within the online community Second Life for people to create virtual Coke vending machines.

And there's a Web site for M&M's where visitors can customize their own M&M to look just like them and then send the finished product to friends. They can give the creature a goatee, sunglasses, a cowboy hat, stuff like that. The M&M's folks call this finding one's "inner M," and they say that so far, 1.5 million of these avatars have been created. The company launched the site back in January by sailing a 50-foot statue of Lady Liberty as an M&M around Manhattan on a barge.

Apparently, even iconic American symbols have "inner M's."

Brands express what we aspire to be and what we believe about ourselves, in a kind of commercial shorthand. Aspirations -- for beauty and coolness and status and joy -- are the stuff of brand loyalty. For any European who accuses America of being a cultural wasteland, our oddly emotional attachment to brands belies that. Brands are our culture.

So, if a person posts a photo of herself with her Cadillac on the company Web site, she doesn't do it for the company. She does it for herself.

"Consumers are not creating content in order to pander, to posture to marketers," says Joseph Jaffe, who wrote "Life After the 30-Second Spot." "There's a degree of self-actualization."

Maybe. Or, as with so many things online -- including video-sharing sites and the blogosphere -- it could just be big dose of "Hey, look at me," says Advertising Age's Bob Garfield. He calls this "the revenge of Willy Loman."

Companies have long involved consumers in their marketing efforts through contests to, say, write jingles or name the new Crayola colors. But now, in ways large and small, a culture of open-source software and Wikipedia and online interactivity is reconfiguring the business of selling.

The traditional advertising models are collapsing. Where once there were mass media, with the audience a passive receptacle, we are moving toward what branding expert Rob Frankel calls "the masses controlling the media." An audience empowered by hundreds of cable channels and TiVo pays less and less mind to TV ads. And the marketers, well, some might suggest they are desperate.

"You can smell the fear," Garfield says.

Which means that smart marketers will figure out how to get the people to do much of their work for them. The big marketing story of this year's Super Bowl was "consumer-generated advertising," in which ordinary folks competed to help create TV spots for Doritos and Chevrolet.

Plenty of other brands, including Converse, Ban deodorant and MasterCard, have launched consumer-generated ad campaigns that have played out both online and off-line.

Get the audience involved, the thinking goes, and they'll develop a better connection to the product, as well as tap into what appeals to their own demographic better than the professionals. Oh, and they'll save the advertisers serious production money.

But even when ordinary people are not attempting to fashion TV spots, they are participating in advertising more than ever, courtesy of the Internet. There are whole branded worlds to be explored, some with obvious product placements, and others whose primary purpose is to entertain -- with only the faintest connections to the business of selling.

The kitchen appliance company Blendtec has a microsite called Willitblend.com, which functions as a laboratory of unlikely things getting pureed in Blendtec blenders, including pickled pigs' feet and light bulbs. Users can send a note to the Will It Blend? site to suggest a new item to be blended -- a shag rug, perhaps.

Geico has a site that allows visitors to explore the apartment of its popular caveman characters. Visitors can read the guys' e-mail, listen to the music on their iPod and peek in on one of them in the shower as he gets ready to host a party. There are few actual references to Geico or to car insurance, though few will miss the allusion. The company says since it launched Cavemanscrib.com in January, 850,000 unique visitors have come to the site.

Naturally, there's the option to e-mail a friend. ("Join the Party! The Gentlemen of Apartment 1231 request the pleasure of your company.")

Should we be more or less suspicious of advertising that we have helped to spread or to create? Perhaps it's no big deal, since one could argue that we shill for corporate America whenever we put on a T-shirt with a logo. And besides, there's a kind of democratization at work when an audience is empowered to act as its own filter. Perhaps someone e-mails a friend a link, implicitly vouching for its value, or perhaps marketers "seed" their short film to a video-sharing site, where it is rated by thousands. In any case, it is the audience that determines what gets seen.

Grant McCracken, a cultural anthropologist affiliated with MIT, says participatory advertising represents a "revolution" in thinking. It means marketers are actually "inviting" consumers "into the production of meaning," he says. "Just a few years ago people were still talking about trying to find and push the hot button inside the consumer."

On the other hand, what of the time-honored divide between Madison Avenue and ordinary people? It's an American tradition to decry advertising's growing encroachment into our lives.

But we can't blame the outsiders, the brainwashers, the clever admen, when we are all complicit, when we are all One of Them.