



AUDI PARTY An ad campaign ends with a bash

ing from their laptops and distribute ad-free amateur radio shows online, marketers are giving away some control over their ads. Their hope is that the public will accept them as entertainment rather than advertising. The most successful have found it a way to spark buzz and get creative ads on the cheap.

Audi spent \$5 million-plus to run "The Art of The Heist" game. The carmaker thinks few online gamers will actually buy an A3. The real goal is to

generate buzz among the 25-to-35-year-old, upper-income males Audi targets, says Lee Newman, group account director at McKinney & Silver. "If they see Audi as inclusive and innovative, we hope they won't turn our messages off," says Newman. During the three-month campaign, hits to Audi's Web site were up 140% from last year, with the heaviest traffic coming from the "Heist" game sites. Dealers got 10,000 sales leads and handled some 3,500 test drives.

The idea of letting the public play in the ad game is what some call brand democratization. In May, 2004, when Sausalito (Calif.) agency Butler, Shine, Stern & Partners pitched Nike's \$10 million Converse account, agency co-creative director John Butler persuaded Converse executives to outsource ads to fans. Butler solicited 60-second films from anyone with an idea and a camera. After the initial seven films about Converse went up

on the Net, more films flooded in. "Our customers tend to be creative, and we've given them the biggest canvas we have to express themselves—our advertising," says Converse's global marketing chief, Erick Soderstrom.

The pitch attracted 31-year-old Steve Daniels of Columbia, S.C. Using 10 years' worth of stinky Converse sneakers, he shot a film, *The Amazing Russell*, about a man jumping a line of sneakers on a vin-

Advertising Of, By, And For the People

Getting consumers to create ads saves a ton of money—and builds buzz

DONOVAN UNKS, a 28-year-old biotech researcher at Stanford University, spent valuable minutes every day for three months to follow an Audi marketing campaign. The ads for the new A3 hatchback, appearing in magazines and on TV, billboards, and the Internet, wove a complicated serialized mystery of a stolen car. Some 500,000 people, according to Audi, tracked the story by following online clues. But Unks and his friend Laura Burstein didn't just play the game. They were drafted to be characters in the plot by ad agency McKinney & Silver in Durham, N.C., after they answered an encrypted ad that only solvers of binary code could read in *The Hollywood Reporter*. In their Audi roles, the two drove all night to a music festival, crashed a party, were blogged about by fans of the sto-

ry, and Webcast worldwide on the final night of the drama at the Viceroy Hotel in Santa Monica, Calif., on June 30.

Unks, a BMW-owner, ignores most ads. "But for Audi to embrace this type of gaming changed my opinion of them," he says, adding that he long considered Audi just a weaker rival to BMW.

* That's the kind of marketing punch that companies such as Nike, Cingular Wireless, General Motors, Samsung, and others are seeking by drawing consumers into the ad-making process. Instead of cajoling consumers into passively absorbing ads, the idea now is to get the public to create and participate in them. In a time when consumers can scrub advertis-

THE STAT

40%

Increase in the number of visitors to the Converse Web site since it asked fans to create ads

tage Schwinn girl's bicycle. The film ran online, and then on MTV and elsewhere. Daniels and more than 30 others whose ads played on TV each got \$10,000, a far cry from the \$300,000-plus cost of a regular 30-second TV spot.

Generating 81 artful ads so far at a fraction of the Madison Avenue price is only part of the payoff. Converse's Web site has been getting 400,000 unique visitors a month, 40% more than before the films launched. And Converse sales were up 12% in the recent quarter. Enlisting brand fans as ad makers generates positive buzz. Earlier this year, GM's Cadillac Div. put out a call for films by the public and received 2,600 entries before running winners on Web channels like msn.com. Over 12 days of soliciting films, traffic to Cadillac.com was up 300% from the previous year.

MERE HUCKSTERISM?

ENLISTING CONSUMERS as ad creators isn't enough for some to see beyond the sales pitch. Even Laura Burstein, who co-starred in Audi's ad game, admits: "I had fun but felt slightly uncomfortable being used as free advertising." And McKinney's own report to Audi contained Web postings decrying the game as mere hucksterism.

Still, with many consumers freely mixing their own music and editing their own videos, it's naive to think they'll sit attentively while sales pitches wash over them. Those attracted to playing at advertising are called "Generation C" by some marketing experts. "The 'C' is for creative, and they're part of the tsunami of consumer-generated 'content' on the Web," says Trendwatching.com director Reinier Evers.

One of the most intriguing tools for letting consumers create ads is the cell phone, but unlike with telemarketing, consumers place the call. This fall, Samsung will link users to interactive billboards in Hollywood and Manhattan's Times Square, possibly allowing them to put text messages up for thousands to see. Sharon Lee Ricketts, a 19-year-old student from Corpus Christi, Tex., recently stood before the 22-story Times Square Nike billboard fingering her phone. By means of a toll-free phone link to the board, she was using her phone to customize sneakers she was ordering online in front of 1,000 or so onlookers. "This is way cool. Look what I just did. I just controlled that whole board," she marveled. And to think she only set out to buy a pair of sneakers. II

-By David Kiley in New York

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