

ADVERTISING

BET YOU CAN'T TIVO PAST THIS

Companies aren't just pitching their wares on shows, they're producing them

BY BURT HELM

THIS SHOW IS ABOUT THE moments in our lives that are delicious in every way," purrs Chef Jacky Pluton at the beginning of *The Fairway Gourmet*, which runs on PBS. "I'm going to bring you to the most beautiful places in the world to play the game of golf...[and] taste the local flavor."

Sounds idyllic, no? It will be, and not just for Pluton and his viewers. Whoever picks up *The Fairway Gourmet* for its second season will pay nothing to produce or air the show. Meanwhile, the folks actually footing the bill will use the program to subtly pitch their wares to affluent baby boomers. Who's the backer? Here's a hint: Every resort next season will be in the state of Hawaii. "It's a perfect opportunity for us," says Jay Talwar, the Hawaii Visitors & Convention Bureau's marketing chief.

Yes, the line between what's an ad and what's a TV show is getting more blurred all the time. Not only are companies creating entertainment to flog their stuff to viewers, they are getting increasingly cagey about it. The aim is to make the message so veiled that viewers don't notice they're essentially watching one big ad. It gets better: The networks can sell ads around the, um, ad. "It's not about

putting [the product] everywhere anymore," says Laura Caraccioli-Davis, director of Starcom Entertainment, which helps place products and brands in shows. "It's about getting viewers to lean in and pay attention, and then connect with them in other ways."

While product placement has been a fact of viewing life since the earliest days of TV, the proliferation of ad-zapping technology such as TiVo has made the practice a priority for advertisers. Placements

Win-Win Deal

Why advertisers and programmers benefit from shows built around one product or brand:

ADVERTISERS

By creating a show from scratch, they can attract a defined audience with a tailored message, rather than trying to cram a product into an existing show. This can be more cost-effective than traditional advertising, too.

PROGRAMMERS

With production costs paid for by advertisers, they can sell ads around the free show. Plus advertisers often cross-market the program—promoting it in print ads and TV spots—which helps boost ratings.



are showing up practically everywhere, from the prominent Coca-Cola cups in the hands of *American Idol* judges to the Buick LaCrosse that actress Eva Longoria hawked in an episode of *Desperate Housewives* last fall.

TAILORED MESSAGE

THE IDEA OF BUILDING story lines around products got a big lift with the runaway success of programs such as *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*. In the hit ABC show, cast members using Sears products and Ford automobiles build houses for poor families. Now all kinds of companies are cooking up their own advertisement. Goen Group, maker of diet pill Trimspa, is developing *Million Dollar Makeover Challenge*, a weight-loss reality show. Sporting Bet PLC, the British owner of the Aces.net gambling site, has shot a pilot for a game show. And Unilever put together two specials built around its AXE Shower body wash: *The Gamekillers* on MTV and *Exposing the Order of the Serpentine* on SpikeTV.

Advertisers love the fact that they can tailor a message to a specific audience. *Fairway Gourmet* lets the Hawaii Visitors & Convention Bureau court free spenders who like to travel in style. The underlying message: The islands aren't just for beach bums;

CLEANING UP?
Exposing the Order of the Serpentine promotes AXE body wash

they have plenty to offer the golfing foodie, too. "Ad placements weren't going to move the dial given our budget," says Talwar, who hopes PBS will agree to carry the Hawaii edition. "PBS has an audience we've coveted for years."

Sometimes producing a show gives advertisers more bang for the buck, too. The production costs of the Hawaii edition of *Fairway Gourmet* will run \$40,000 to \$50,000 per half-hour episode, according to one of the show's producers, Direct Spotlight Media. That's about what it costs to place a 30-second spot with a middle-tier golf

tournament on CBS or NBC, according to Nielsen Media Research figures. A golf tourney attracts far more viewers than *Fairway Gourmet*, but getting half an hour to push a brand—if only subliminally—beats 30 seconds.

And even when production costs eclipse those of a traditional ad campaign, advertisers see benefits. The AXE

shows are a case in point. Each one depicts the trials and tribulations of twentysomething woman-chasers. The program goes light on AXE products, but during the commercial break, the viewer sees an AXE spot in which a guy attracts swarms

of women. "We are entertaining young guys, and then we show them AXE is master of the 'mating game,'" says AXE brand development director David Rubin. "Fifteen-second ads are limited, [and] product placement is good for sticking your name in something. It's not good for telling brand-level concepts."

RATINGS POP

IT'S NO SECRET WHY the networks like advertiser-generated content. Typically advertisers foot the entire production cost of the show or pay for a portion and agree to buy big blocks of advertising on other shows in return. Sometimes, the advertisers refer to their shows in their print and TV ads, which can generate a nice ratings pop. And of course the TV guys sell ads against the program.

Building a show around a brand or product is not without risk, of course. Programmers stress that the show must be entertaining. They won't pick it up just because a big advertiser is behind it. And while they are open to having advertisers as production partners, network and cable executives say shows need to mesh with whatever channel they run on and contain no false marketing claims.

For advertisers, it's critical to strike the right balance. Push the brand too much, and viewers could resist the hard sell. Making the show appear independent and unaffiliated could backfire if people find out they've been had. But hit that sweet spot, say marketing experts, and advertisers will have potential customers fast-forwarding their TiVos just to get back to...the advertisement.