

McDonald's tries 'dark' marketing

Stephanie Clifford

McDonald's is not a company known for its "dark" marketing. It's more a try-our-new-salad, get-your-Shrek-action-figure, look-at-our-dollar-menu sort of place.

For that reason, gamers were surprised to learn that McDonald's was the sponsor of an enigmatic online Olympic-themed game, "The Lost Ring," which was recently introduced.

Nothing about the game was branded McDonald's, and the game's Web sites - mysterious and hip, like the TV show "Lost" mixed with the movie "The Blair Witch Project"- were a far cry from the golden arches.

"The Olympics in Beijing are a very big event for us, and we have a lot of different types of activation, with 'The Lost Ring' being the most creative," said Mary Dillon, McDonald's global chief marketing officer.

"Our goal is really about strengthening our bond with the global youth culture."

"The Lost Ring" is part of a gaming genre called alternate-reality games that blend online and offline clues and rely on players collaborating to solve puzzles.

While corporate sponsorship of these games is common - one popular game called "The Beast" was created by Microsoft for the Warner Brothers film "A.I. Artificial Intelligence" - this is McDonald's first foray into the genre.

The game kicked off with 50 bloggers receiving packages with an Olympic-themed poster and a clue pointing them to TheLostRing.com. The site presented a dramatic trailer, replete with sci-fi lighting and a narrator with a British-accented baritone speaking over footage of a woman waking up in a field with "Trovu la ringon perditan"- an Esperanto phrase - tattooed on her arm.

"I think finding out that it was McDonald's was kind of a big shock for everyone," said Geoff May, a game-player in Ontario who founded a Web site (olympics.wikibruce.com) about the game.

"Obviously it's McDonald's, and not everyone likes them., Personally, I don't mind, as long as we don't get products forced down our throat. If we're getting McDonald's meals sold by characters, it's going to be hard to suspend our disbelief."

That is part of the reason McDonald's has remained behind the curtain thus far.

A successful alternate-reality game, or ARG, relies on the players' continuing interest.

"If an ARG is too clearly corporate or commercial, the gamers will not want to engage," said Tracy Tuten, an associate professor at Virginia Commonwealth University who studies new-media marketing tools. "It's very important that the game be written in a way where the branding is not obvious."

McDonald's has been careful to reflect that, Dillon said. "Above all, we want to be credible, authentic, and respectful to this new audience," she said.

With that in mind, the company handed development of the game to AKQA, a marketing agency in San Francisco, and Jane McGonigal, a well-known game developer.

By the time the game was released in early March, it was available in seven languages.

Ten characters deliver clues via YouTube videos, blogs, photographs on the Web site Flickr and updates from Twitter, a social network.

Online clues are supplemented by offline ones: Last week, players found documents in a mailbox in Tokyo and the fireplace in a bookstore in suburban Johannesburg.

McDonald's would not reveal the cost of the campaign, though Dillon said that "in the context of the total Olympics, it's just a fraction of what we're doing."

As for measuring the company's return on the investment, or ROI, Dillon said she would look at it as more of a learning experience.

"You can't put an ROI on this," she said.

Disponível em: <<http://www.iht.com>>. Acesso em 2/4/2008.

A utilização deste artigo é exclusivo para fins educacionais.