

Show and Tell Moves Into Living Rooms

Stuart Elliott

WHEN creating advertising, the longtime industry executive John O'Toole once advised, "it's best to think of yourself as an uninvited guest in the living room of a prospect who has the magical power to make you disappear instantly."

Those words may have guided executives at the Ford Motor Company as they developed a marketing event intended to stimulate interest in products like the Ford Edge and Ford Focus. The event, called the "Ford Big Drive House Party," is recruiting Ford owners to invite friends, relatives, neighbors and co-workers into their homes this weekend and talk up their cars.

The event, to be conducted by a marketing services company named House Party, is indicative of the growing interest among major advertisers in nontraditional methods of reaching consumers — particularly if they bring brands to life in tangible forms.

The interest in that technique, known as experiential marketing, is especially strong when the goal of a campaign is to generate buzz, the catchword du jour for positive word of mouth.

Examples of branded experiences include pop-up stores, which are temporary retail outlets that promote products like Meow Mix cat food, and sports competitions like the Teva Mountain Games, sponsored by Teva footwear. Another is Camp Jeep rallies, where Chrysler plays host to Jeep owners.

Ford has become interested enough in such approaches that the Ford division has an executive whose title is experiential marketing manager.

"It's making sure you're truly connecting consumers with the product," said the executive, Connie Fontaine, who is based in Dearborn, Mich., "from physically to virtual ways."

The house parties are meant to address the notion that the Ford brand "has a perception issue" compared with competitors, Ms. Fontaine said.

Research has found that those perceptions can be dispelled "when we get people into the products, to drive the products," she added.

So Ford owners are being asked at the house parties to discuss their cars and let the guests see them, sit in them and even drive them.

"We're realizing there are a lot of Ford owners out there who are already advocates for the brand," Ms. Fontaine said. "Why not help them do an even better job of being advocates for us?"

The parties are to be held on Sunday night during the broadcast on ABC of an episode of "Oprah's Big Give."

Ford is a sponsor of the series and Ford products are incorporated into the show, just as they are in episodes of other reality series like "American Idol" and "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition."

House Party is selecting the hosts of the parties for Ford, based on submissions from Ford owners to the company's Web site (houseparty.com) and their responses to questionnaires. Most are women, in keeping with the appeal of "Oprah's Big Give," which features Oprah Winfrey and her friend Nate Berkus overseeing a competition to raise and distribute money to help the needy.

More than 4,000 people applied to be hosts for the Ford parties, said Kitty Kolding, chief executive at House Party in Irvington, N.Y.

"We find people who have strong brand affiliations and give them reasons to do something they do anyway, speak positively about the brand," Ms. Kolding said.

House Party clients pay \$100,000 to \$250,000 for the parties held on their behalf. The hosts are not paid; instead, they receive gift packs as thank yous.

House Party has overseen events for marketers and media companies that include Avon, Campbell Soup, Hershey, Kraft, Meredith, Sara Lee and Time Warner.

The NBC Universal Television Group, part of the NBC Universal division of General Electric, hired the company to put on parties to help build audiences for series like "The Biggest Loser," "Friday Night Lights" and "Lipstick Jungle."

"We've found it pretty effective," said John Miller, chief marketing officer at the NBC Universal Television Group in Burbank, Calif.

"People have to opt in to do it," he added, and if they like what they see "they become evangelists for the show."

"The down side is if they didn't like it, they talk about how much they didn't like it," Mr. Miller said. But that is, of course, true for any attempt to influence word of mouth.

Jarden Consumer Solutions, which sells appliances under names like Mr. Coffee and Sunbeam, hired House Party to put on 1,000 parties over the Memorial Day weekend to promote the Margaritaville Frozen Concoction line of drink-making machines, which cost \$199 to \$379.

"Margaritaville as a brand is all about the party," said Asoka Veeravagu, director for business development at Jarden in Boca Raton, Fla., which licenses the brand from the entertainer Jimmy Buffett. "What better to align ourselves with than house parties?"

"We have many retail partners" like Bed Bath and Beyond that sell the machines, "but we found that when people experience it, they buy it," he added. "The experiential product demonstration, interactive in the home, generates awareness of and excitement about our products."

The hosts of the Margaritaville parties will be supplied with promotional codes, Mr. Veeravagu said, which they or their guests can use to order machines on a Web site (margaritavillecargo.com). That will help measure the effectiveness of the event, he added.

The Ford parties on Sunday will borrow the altruistic theme of "Oprah's Big Give" with a pair of contests. One contest is for the hosts, and the prizes are two Fords and \$25,000, to be donated to a charity or cause the winner chooses.

The winner, to be selected from entries submitted to a section of the House Party Web site (houseparty.com/fordbigdrive), will be taped for a 60-second Ford commercial, scheduled to run during the season finale of "Oprah's Big Give" on April 20.

In the other contest, 10 parties will be selected at random to win a Ford, also to be donated to a cause or charity.

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