

BMW Turns to the Web for Its 1-Series

Stuart Elliott

Remember when Procter & Gamble peddled Ivory soap as "99 and 44/100 percent pure"? A campaign for a new model from BMW, which makes extensive use of nontraditional media, is trying to promote the purported purity of 1.

The campaign, now under way, introduces the BMW 1-Series, a compact in coupe and convertible versions. The car, starting at \$28,600, is meant to appeal to a younger, somewhat less well-heeled driver than the current BMW model lineup.

The campaign seeks to reassure potential buyers that the new model is indeed a "pure BMW" despite being smaller and less expensive. The ads are the result of a collaboration between two agencies: GSD&M Idea City in Austin, Tex., part of the Omnicom Group, and Dotglu in New York, part of the Kirshenbaum Bond & Partners division of MDC Partners.

Almost half the spending for the campaign, estimated at \$15 million to \$25 million, is being devoted to online media. By comparison, executives at BMW of North America say, Internet ad spending for other models ranges from 1 percent to 15 percent of the total ad budgets.

The online elements of the 1-Series campaign include letting members of Facebook, the social-networking Web site, design virtual cars and send them to Facebook friends; buying dominant positions, known as take-overs, on the home pages of msn.com and yahoo.com; posting video clips on YouTube; and developing a microsite devoted to the 1-Series (bmwusa.com/new1).

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The campaign is indicative of efforts by mainstream marketers to alter their media mixes as consumers change their media habits. A recent survey by PQ Media projected that by 2012, advertisers will increase spending by 82 percent from 2008 in areas like search-engine marketing, online video and e-mail messages.

The automotive category, which spends more each year on advertising than any other, is no exception. Automakers were initially slow to adapt to the realities of the new media but have begun to embrace them.

The goal has become "to give people a reason to engage with or participate in your advertising," said Patrick McKenna, manager for marketing communications at BMW of North America in Woodcliff Lake, N.J.

The introduction of the 1-Series represents "the highest concentration of nontraditional media of any BMW launch," he added.

The new media offer "a great opportunity to get to a new audience," Mr. McKenna said, which he identified as "20-somethings and 30-somethings" who consider driving fun rather than a chore.

To match that attitude, "we're trying to let our hair down a bit and have some fun" with the campaign, he added.

That is evident in the offbeat ads being created for Facebook, which include the chance to design virtual cars.

Other applications being developed include a "road trip," allowing Facebook members to send a make-believe 1-Series on a journey from one profile to another, and a virtual toss of car keys between Facebook friends.

"The online generation is all about controlling the brand experience," said Brendan Starr, interactive media supervisor at Idea City.

"It's their choice if they want to draw a car," he added. "We're not pushing anything down their throats."

Facebook members have not been shy about demonstrating their displeasure at the presence of advertisers if they perceive the paid content to be pitching rather than entertaining.

"That's why we try to make what we're doing simple and fun," said Marc Hartzman, associate creative director at Dotglu.

"If they can interact with the brand in an entertaining way, it's not something that would turn them off," he added.

Mr. Hartzman said he was heartened by data showing that as of Friday, more than 6,000 Facebook members had already entered a BMW contest, which began on March 29, by submitting car designs.

There are some unconventional approaches for the traditional media, too. Three magazines — City, Dwell and Paste — are printing pure-white covers that are glued over the actual front covers of the issues; there are ads for the 1-Series on the other sides of the extra covers.

And magazines like City and AutoWeek are running tiny ads for the 1-Series with numerical themes at the bottom of editorial pages, which double as page-number identifications.

For example, there is an itchy-bitsy white car on page 26 of the April issue of the magazine City next to this sentence: "26: number of bones in right foot you'll use to crush the gas pedal on the all-new BMW 1-Series."

At the bottom of page 60, there is a miniature red car and this sentence: "60: m.p.h. you can reach in 5.1 seconds with the all-new BMW 135i coupe."

Publishers, "today more than ever, have to figure out how to do different things that wake people up and make a higher impact," said John McDonald, editorial director and publisher at City in New York, part of Spark Media.

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BMW of North America spent \$147 million to advertise in major media last year, according to TNS Media Intelligence, a division of Taylor Nelson Sofres, compared with \$134.6 million in 2006.

The 1-Series campaign joins an autobahn's worth of new ads vying for attention as automakers struggle to connect with consumers in a weak economy.

They include campaigns for Volkswagen of America, featuring a 1964 Beetle that speaks with a German accent, by Crispin Porter & Bogusky, part of MDC; Porsche Cars North America, focused on the Boxster and Cayman, by Cramer-Krasselt; and the new G8 from the Pontiac division of General Motors, by Leo Burnett, part of the Publicis Groupe.

Disponível em: <<http://www.nytimes.com>>. Acesso em 7/4/2008.