

# Turn on consumers with entertainment – not ads

**Chris Goldson, sponsorship and promotions director, Virgin Radio, argues that branded content can – and must – be entertaining and compelling**

Judging from the column inches dedicated to branded content in the past six months, you'd be forgiven for thinking the concept was new. Yet it has been around in one guise or another for years – look at branded content magazine *British Airways High Life*, which was launched around two decades ago.

As the media fragments, branded content is being turned to as a marketing solution across a range of channels. While spot advertising remains an effective brand-building tool, marketers are realising that content is a good way to extend the time audiences spend with them. Customer magazines, for example, command an average reading time of 25 minutes.

But marketers must realise that branded content can only be effective if the connection between brand and medium is relevant and meaningful to the audience.

Successful branded content is all about good storytelling and understanding why the tale is going to matter to the person you want to connect with. Otherwise, it can smack of 'embarrassing friend syndrome' – a sense of shame surrounding the association. This comes about when a media owner believes branded content somehow

compromises (and cheapens) editorial standards.

Commercial media owners must embrace branded content. They need to work brands into programming in a seamless and relevant way to engage their audiences and add value to the relationship. Consumers might not understand the precise premise of branded content but they know how to spot a fake. The challenge is for agencies, owners and brands to work towards creating an equal partnership.

## Access all areas

For this reason, we try to offer brands access to all areas of our schedule, enabling them to become embedded in the content. We also ensure we have buy-in from our DJs. They are fully aware of the commercial nature of Virgin Radio, so they are comfortable with working brands into their shows.

The Christian O'Connell Breakfast Show recently teamed

up with 20th Century Fox to promote *Jumper*, starring Samuel L Jackson. The film centres around individuals who can teleport, so O'Connell set his listeners a challenge to find out how resourceful they could be and to 'jump' as far as possible from the radio studios on only £100.

Listeners were encouraged to enter a competition online, from which four contestants were selected and sent on their mission live on the show. O'Connell linked up live with the contestants for daily round-up of their progress.

The competition gained a huge amount of interest from listeners and employees. The Breakfast Show team dedicated extra time to the promotion with genuine enthusiasm.

## Always there

Because people listen to the radio when they wake up, at work and in the car, it can mix well with other media channels. A recent survey we commissioned found that 74% of listeners use the internet while listening to the radio.

Complementing other channels is essential in today's media environment and one of the biggest advantages of branded content is that it can exist across many different platforms.

Entertainment opens up a wealth of rich content opportunities for brands to exploit. In the US, Unilever piggybacked on the success of Fox TV series *24* for its deodorant brand, Degree. It launched a parallel storyline called 'The Rookie', which centred on an appealing and ambitious young member of the Terrorist Counter Unit, around which *24* is based.

'The Rookie' was brought to life through a multi-channel marketing campaign that drove audiences to a microsite, where Degree was able to tell the brand story with action and humour in an environment that worked for its target audience.

As media owners become more switched on to branded content, the number of opportunities for advertisers can only increase. Indicative of this growth is the number of agencies now getting involved. We have already seen the launch of branded content divisions such as Saatchi and Saatchi's Gum and TBWA's brand entertainment agency, Stream. It's a very exciting space to occupy, but one that could come crashing down around our ears.

Brands, agencies and media owners alike must realise that the consumer is boss and – contrary to what some might believe – definitely isn't stupid. They know when they are being sold to, albeit very softly, through branded content.

So remember that campaigns must be relevant, entertaining and, above all, honest. ■



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