

Attention-Deficit Advertising

Madison Avenue is betting distracted consumers will respond to pitches that deliver helpful services

By Burt Helm

It's the catch-22 of today's advertising world. Marketers, only too aware that consumers are ignoring traditional ads, have adopted the "more is more" approach and have begun advertising everywhere—intaxis, fitness clubs, hospital waiting rooms. But the clutter is numbing consumers to all the messages. When they're not fast-forwarding through TV commercials or clicking away from ads online, people are getting pretty good at tuning them out.

Johnnie Walker's mobile avatar "Jennie" will call a cab when you've had too much

That fact is challenging admakers worldwide, forcing them to look for new ways to capture consumers' attention. One trick you will start seeing a lot more of: messages that, in and of themselves, provide a service. Nick Law, chief creative officer of the agency R/GA, has been doing this kind of thing for years, most notably with Nike+, a site that helps runners track their performance. "You have to ask, why would anyone care about this [ad]?" says Law. "In the traditional advertising world, that was never a question asked with much rigor."

Taking a cue from the social-networking and texting crazes, marketers are rolling out services that help people connect with one another. A pioneer in this area is the Chicago-based mobile ad firm Vibes Media. At a series of outdoor concerts during the Final Four weekend of the NCAA Basketball Tournament, Vibes displayed viewers' text messages on screens above and next to the stage. Messages

rooting for teams, shouting out to friends, and sending birthday wishes appeared below prominent AT&T or Coca-Cola logos. Some 5,000 people sent in 11,000 messages, according to Vibes. The firm also has been offering bar patrons in Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, and Atlanta the chance to send text messages to the television screens at their local watering holes. Alex Campbell, Vibes' CEO, says pick-up lines typically abound, from "The blonde at the bar is smoking hot!" to



Why Marketers Like 'Useful' Ads

1 Consumers actively seek out services, even if they are veiled ads. And they spend more time with the brand than they would watching a 30-second spot.

2 When consumers sign up for a service, marketers can gather everything from demographic information to product interests to names and addresses—data they can use for a harder sell down the road.

3 When the ads work, consumers feel more loyalty to a brand because they feel like it did them a good turn.

"Turn around, I'm right behind you." As patrons stare at the screen waiting for their messages to pop up, they can't miss the Bud Light ads placed between them.

PASSING IT ON

Some of these newfangled ads don't just cut through the clutter, they inspire consumers to spread the message themselves. At the Hong Kong International Airport last year, travelers saw a familiar, if unexpected, sight when they checked into the gate area: photos of the friends and family who had just dropped them off. Through a special promotion, Motorola enabled loved ones to "Say Goodbye" via photos and messages sent from their phones to digital billboards in the departure area. The photos appeared there inside the image of a giant Motorola mobile phone. Motorola got thousands of Hong Kong's ad-inundated consumers to stare at a billboard longer than usual. It also invited departing travelers, via special instructions displayed on the billboard, to use their phones to send a Motorola-branded goodbye video featuring soccer star David Beckham and Asian pop star Jay Chou to their friends and families. As travelers sent the videos out, Motorola ads proliferated throughout the world.

In an age when widgets—small, Web-based programs—are all the rage, companies are increasingly creating online tools that offer to help their customers. Clorox,

for instance, wanted homemakers to know that it sells a range of cleaning products beyond bleach. It introduced TimeWise, a Web program where consumers could schedule reminders for cleaning tasks and kids' chores. The brand name was prominent on the site, naturally, as were offers for complementary products. Clorox won't discuss the promotion's efficacy, but it has been discontinued.

Appearing useful is of particular interest to marketers keen to place ads on mobile phones, a tricky prospect since the potential annoyance factor is so high. Hoping to sell more of its Johnnie Walker whisky in Singapore, liquor giant Diageo, with the help of OgilvyOne Worldwide, created a "digital personal assistant" for drinkers' mobile phones. An avatar named "Jennie" sends out VIP invitations, information about hot night spots, and Johnnie Walker promotions. For the inebriated, the service includes a "take me home" button that, when pressed, uses GPS to call a cab.

Companies are even wrapping ads around community outreach. Eager to reinvigorate its image as a basketball brand, Converse this fall began organizing games for Miami's inner-city youth. Kids got to try out new shoes and meet Miami Heat guard Dwyane Wade, who signed autographs and refereed. The program is moving to more cities and, to get kids interested, Converse created an application on Facebook that allows people to sign up friends to play an online basketball game. Converse says it now has more than 40,000 people to add to its database of potential customers, as well as information on where they live. Now *that's* useful. **BW**

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