

The body as billboard: your ad here

Andrew Adam Newman

Terry Gardner, a legal secretary in California, returned home from work recently to find two police officers waiting. They said her brother had told them he thought she might be having a breakdown because she had shaved her head.



Edward Carreon for Air New Zealand

Rita Thomas and Rob Powers were among 30 people who agreed to advertise Air New Zealand on their bald heads last November. They were paid in cash or free tickets to New Zealand.

Ms. Gardner, 50, said in a telephone interview that she had told the officers that she was fine and had shaved her head for an advertising campaign by Air New Zealand, which had hired her to display a temporary tattoo. She turned around and showed them the message, written in henna on the back of her head: "Need A Change? Head Down to New Zealand. www.airnewzealand.com."

Ms. Gardner was among 30 of what the airline calls "cranial billboards." For shaving their noggins and displaying the ad copy for two weeks in November, they received either a round-trip ticket to New Zealand (worth about \$1,200) or \$777 in cash (an allusion to the Boeing 777, a model in the airline's fleet).

Jodi Williams, director of marketing for Air New Zealand, said half the participants selected the flight, because many were either New Zealand expatriates or, like Ms. Gardner, had visited and wanted to return. The participants were, in marketing parlance, ideal brand ambassadors: when co-workers or strangers behind them in the grocery store line asked about New Zealand, they could speak enthusiastically right off the top of their heads — so to speak.

Peter Shankman, author of "Can We Do That?! Outrageous PR Stunts That Work — and Why Your Company Needs Them," applauds the airline for the "Tom Sawyer handing out paintbrushes" approach.

"My job at the end of the day as a publicist is not to personally get P.R. for my client," Mr. Shankman said. "My job is to get other people to do it, and if I get people who want to talk about something on behalf of a client, and they go and recommend it to their friends using their trust factor, then that is the very definition of social marketing."

Glenn Faulkner, 41, a carpenter who was born in New Zealand and moved to the San Francisco area 12 years ago, learned about the promotion through a fare-watcher e-mail alert from the airline.

"I'm always up for a challenge, mate, so I thought, 'I've got to do it,' " Mr. Faulkner said

Mr. Faulkner, who is 6 feet 4 inches tall and weighs 250 pounds, said the tattoo drew about 40 inquiries a day from people curious about the promotion, while others gave him a wide berth.

"I think a lot of people thought, 'This is a crazy guy,' and the message would be like, 'The world is going to end,' " he said.

With red hair flowing to her waist, Rita Thomas, 35, a stand-up comic and commercial actor from Los Angeles, had more to shear than any other participant. But having lost her mother to cancer a year ago, she took the plunge because the airline had arranged to donate participants' hair to Locks of Love, a group that makes hairpieces for children who have gone bald from illnesses. The gesture was lost on the man she had been dating for three months when he saw her bald head.

"He said, 'I don't find you attractive in the least bit,' " Ms. Thomas said. "And then he totally dumps me."

A similar marketing campaign in England in January for FeelUnique.com, an online beauty products store, paid 10 men and women to apply temporary tattoos with the company's Web address on their eyelids and then wink at strangers. Chosen randomly from more than 6,000 who applied online, participants were paid 100 pounds (about \$149) to wink at people 1,000 times, or 10 pence a wink, an allusion to pay-per-view Web advertising.



FeelUnique.com
Temporary eyelid tattoos promoted FeelUnique.com.

The campaign was run by the London public relations firm Mischief. Dan Glover, a creative director at Mischief, said the concept led to articles in regional, national and international media and — most important for the site, whose goal was to generate traffic — hundreds of links from other sites.

Tattoo-related advertising stunts go back to at least 2001, when Golden Palace, an online gambling site, paid the middleweight boxer Bernard Hopkins to wear a temporary tattoo with its Web address during a televised bout. The stunt drew the ire of boxing authorities and ESPN. Over the next couple of years, the casino also paid the former "Partridge Family" star Danny Bonaduce and others on a Fox celebrity boxing series to apply henna tattoos.

In 2005, Andrew Fischer, then 20 and living in Omaha, set up an eBay auction offering his forehead as a site for a temporary tattoo advertisement for one month. Green Pharmaceuticals' Snore- Stop won with a \$37,375 bid, and Mr. Fischer appeared on national programs, including "Good Morning America," and in scores of newspapers and Web sites. Soon afterward, Mr. Fischer sold his forehead a second time — to Golden Palace — but got just \$5,000 and scant media attention. His forehead has remained ad-free since.

"For 40 grand, I don't regret looking like an idiot for a month," said Mr. Fischer, when reached by telephone. "But it's not like the most fun thing in the world to walk around with a big ad on your face."

Golden Palace has gone the farthest in testing the boundaries of taste. In 2005, through an eBay auction, the casino paid Kari Smith, of Bountiful, Utah, who was then 30, \$10,000 to permanently tattoo its Web address on her forehead in large block letters.

It has also paid several pregnant women to display temporary tattoos on their rounded bellies, which they agreed to bare at malls and football stadiums. (Several phone messages and e-mail messages to the casino were not returned.)

Since 2005, Dunlop Tires has hired tattoo artists to work at its booth at the annual Specialty Equipment Market Association show in Las Vegas, geared to motorists who modify cars. Volunteers who agree to be permanently tattooed — either with Dunlop's logo or its trademarked tire tread — while onlookers gawk receive a set of tires worth \$500 to \$1,000, said Jim Davis, a Dunlop spokesman. About 200 people have been tattooed so far.

Ms. Gardner, whose hair has grown to crewcut length since she shaved it for the airline promotion, said some people at the time asked whether the tattoo on her head was permanent.

"I said, 'Are you kidding?' I might be crazy, but I'm not nuts."

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