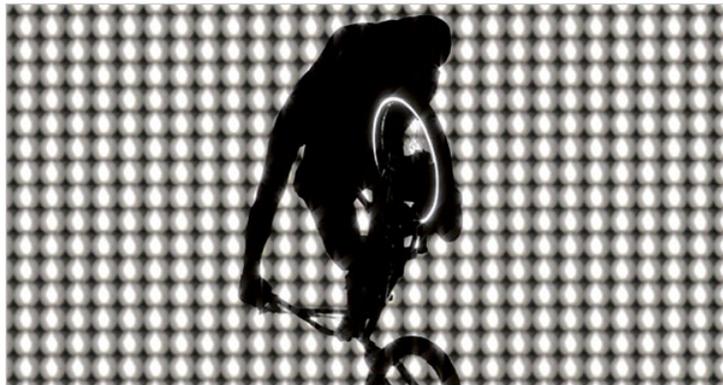


## The vice and the virtue of marketing

Andrew Adam Newman



*A Virtue ad for the Summer Dew Tour features a bike rider airborne against a wall of lights.*

As publications continue to struggle or fold because of dwindling advertising revenues, one is thriving by selling not just ad space, but entire marketing campaigns.

Vice magazine has its own antonymous agency, Virtue, which serves as an advertising firm, Web site developer and branding partner. In what may rankle media traditionalists who favor a bright line between advertising and editorial, Virtue's approach includes using editorial staff at Vice to help develop marketing plans for clients.

Now Virtue is introducing its biggest campaign since its inception three years ago, for the Alliance of Action Sports, or Alli, whose Summer Dew Tour features skateboarding and BMX bike competitions. The effort includes television, radio, and print advertising, as well as a Web site.

Vice, which started humbly as a free newspaper in Montreal, is now a publishing juggernaut, a glossy magazine based in the hipster center of Brooklyn's Williamsburg neighborhood. It publishes editions in 13 other countries, including Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom, France, Japan and Australia. During the next two years, it plans to introduce editions in a dozen more, including Brazil in June and Argentina in September.

Still free, nearly one million copies of Vice are circulated worldwide to young consumers in their native habitat: bars, cafes, music stores and art galleries.

Online, Vice paired with Viacom two years ago to start the video site VBS.TV, with original videos that draw 3.5 million monthly unique visitors, who spend an average of nearly 15 minutes on the site, the company said.

"With each new territory that launches, our hold on the elusive and rare bird known as the 'tastemaker' grows," Vice says cheekily in its media kit for advertisers. "Together, we can grow drunk and bloated with power."

The trend-watching Cassandra Report, which is published three times a year, includes a poll of 1,000 people it identifies as young trendsetters, who consistently rank Vice among their top five magazines, according to Melissa Lavigne, director of marketing for the Creative Artists Agency subsidiary the Intelligence Group, which publishes the report.

"Vice isn't scared about what people are going to think," Ms. Lavigne said. "And one of the things that we hear over and over is that they like that Vice is really irreverent and risk-taking."

Peppered with profanity and nudity, Vice includes articles like one in the May issue that describes making and igniting napalm, and may put off some people born before the Carter administration. But it has assembled what a Vice co-founder, Shane Smith, calls a "recession-proof demographic" aged 18 to 30, and 65 percent male.

Mr. Smith said that with the economic downturn, brands eager to reach younger audiences in nontraditional ways are falling into his arms.

"Readers are leaving newspapers, and people are having an even harder time getting to our demographic," Mr. Smith said. "If things were going along tickety-boo, Vice wouldn't be the go-to solution for these brands."

Mr. Smith said Virtue's approach is simple, "All brands should think of themselves as media companies."

To that end, for its current campaign for Alli, the sports alliance that is a joint venture between NBC and MTV, Virtue built a Web site that features short documentaries about skateboarders and BMX bike riders who compete in the Dew Tour, sponsored by Mountain Dew, a PepsiCo brand.

Rather than trumpeting Alli, the networks, or the soft drink, the videos highlight the competitors' backgrounds, aiming to engage even those with little interest in skateboards or BMX bikes.

Virtue also produced a 30-second spot featuring those same competitors airborne and silhouetted against a wall of lights. The ad made its debut on May 10 on networks including NBC, MTV, Comedy Central and ESPN.

"We wanted to make these athletes look like rock stars, so we made in essence a rock video," said Spencer Baim, founder of Virtue, of the spot, which was directed by Warren Fischer, of the band Fischerspooner.

Mr. Baim said that while agencies typically circulate a client brief to a few copywriters and an art director to generate advertising concepts, at Virtue, he confers with any number of Vice's 480 international employees, most on the content rather than the business side.

"The process at an advertising agency — and for the most part the process works — is you do research, you understand the customer, you get an insight, and that insight is translated into creative," Mr. Baim said, referring to the idea that is taken back to the client. Virtue, however, avoids focus groups and turns to the young writers and filmmakers plugging away at Vice, who presumably are a microcosm of clients' target market.

"I have just been amazed at how they come up with ideas that are on-brand," Mr. Baim said.

Mr. Smith, meanwhile, said that although Vice editorial staff members are consulted about marketing and advertising campaigns, the editorial content in the magazine remains independent. Still, he disputes the notion that editorial staffs should be enclosed in a cocoon.

"We always have been honest about the fact that advertising pays for our content," Mr. Smith said. "We don't have a disconnect between the creative and the business."

Clients' exposure in content produced by Virtue varies.

For Red Bull, the energy drink, Virtue produces a series of videos hosted on VBS.TV called "School of Surf," about high school surfing team competitions that are themselves sponsored by the beverage, whose logo figures prominently in the footage.

For another client, Dell, Virtue produces a documentary series about technology, "Motherboard," and the computer maker's logo is incorporated in the show's logo but is never featured in content. The series also is seen on VBS.TV. Michael Tatelman, vice president for sales and marketing at Dell, said functioning essentially as an underwriter for "Motherboard" on VBS.TV helps build Dell's profile with Vice's audience.

"Brand presence is just kind of creating a connection," Mr. Tatelman said. "We want to be a presence in that community, and in order to be a presence you can't always be hawking product."

New York Times, New York, 27 maio 2009, Media & Advertising, online.

A utilização deste artigo é exclusiva para fins educacionais