

A campaign for clothes by a guy not wearing any

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In about a dozen videos posted over the last two months to YouTube, a man claiming to be "the world's fastest nudist" streaks through high-profile locations in New York City clad only in running shoes, tube socks, and a strategically positioned frontward fanny pack.

"The first time you run by, they're like, 'Oh my god, that guy's nude,' " he says in one video. "But the next time you run by, they're like, 'That's the world's fastest nudist!' "

Popular blogs like Gothamist, The Huffington Post and Gawker featured the videos in September, with Gawker's post drawing more than 25,000 views. On YouTube, the videos have garnered more than 60,000 views.

On Sept. 29, "Anderson Cooper 360" on CNN broadcast a video, with Mr. Cooper joking that, "This does not faze New Yorkers — believe me we have all seen much worse than this."

It turns out, however, that the nudist was actually an actor in a viral video campaign for Zappos, the online shoe store that since 2007 has sold clothing as well.

The campaign, by Agent 16 in New York, underscores that Zappos sells clothes, as demonstrated in the latest video, uploaded to YouTube on Oct. 21, which mentioned the company for the first time. The runner — played by Kyle Overstreet, 30 — is sprinting when a van screeches to a halt and several passengers emerge wearing Zappos T-shirts and carrying Zappos boxes. Moments later, the passengers reboard and the van pulls away, revealing that Mr. Overstreet is wearing a pair of pants and a dress shirt.

"I'd say I got too big for my britches, but as everybody knows I don't wear britches" explains a caption on YouTube. "Thank you Zappos.com for snuffing out the most important part of being the world's fastest nudist with your blazing fast delivery of clothes and shoes."

Robert Manni, president of Agent 16, said that since the agency did not pitch to Mr. Cooper's show, to "have a viral video go out over CNN was a breakthrough."

A CNN spokeswoman did not respond to a message seeking comment.

Mr. Overstreet, the actor, said in a telephone interview that the largely improvised videos, shot in July, were challenging.

"A van would drop me off in my shorts, with my shirt off," Mr. Overstreet said. "I really didn't know what I had gotten myself into until those shorts first came off and I was like, 'Oh my god, this is insane.' But I would drop trou, run, and try not to run into any policemen or children."

He was not quite nude.

"I had this thing called a 'Houdini' " said Mr. Overstreet, who also works as a bellman at the Bowery Hotel. "And I was wearing sheer panty hose, too, so with the nudity laws I could sort of defend myself to a cop."

Viral campaigns generally introduce material online, often making no reference to the brand until the video or Web site grows popular. The revelation is, ideally, followed by fans transferring goodwill about the videos to the brand — but it doesn't always work that way.

In September, Amber Duick, of Los Angeles, sued Toyota Motor Sales USA for a 2008 viral marketing campaign, by Saatchi & Saatchi Los Angeles, that enabled a friend to sign her up to

have a fictional character, an Englishman named Sebastian Bowler, repeatedly send her e-mails saying he was on the run from the police and en route to her house with his pit bull. After a week Ms. Duick was informed that this was a well-intentioned prank and a promotion for the Toyota Matrix. She is seeking \$10 million in damages for “emotional distress.”

Mr. Manni, of Agent 16, evoked both the Toyota campaign and the recent suspected hoax involving a Colorado boy erroneously believed to have floated away in a homemade balloon — and compared his Zappos campaign favorably.

“We’re not preying on anyone’s emotions,” Mr. Manni said. “This was all about fun.”

One media outlet, however, may think otherwise.

On Oct. 9, The Park Slope Courier in Brooklyn (part of Courier-Life Publications, a unit of News Corporation) published an interview with the naked runner. The interview was conducted over the telephone with Mr. Overstreet, who stayed in character and told the reporter, Gary Buiso, that his name was Donnie Montero and that last year in Barcelona, Spain, he won the World Nude 10K race, which does not exist.

The reporter requested the interview through the character’s Twitter account, fastestnudist, according to Agent 16. Informed that he had been misled, Mr. Buiso declined to comment and referred questions to Kenneth Brown, editor in chief of Courier-Life Publications. Mr. Brown did not return messages seeking comment.

Bloggers first posted the videos because they found them entertaining, with little discussion about their provenance — The Huffington Post even posited that that the videos might be a “viral marketing ploy” — but the reporter who got snookered ends up looking as exposed as the fictional streaker.

Mr. Manni, of Agent 16, brushed aside questions about deceiving the reporter, stressing that the agency did not pitch to him, but rather responded to his request.

“We’re not going around trying to fool everyone — if the reporter was really doing his job he would have asked follow up questions” and discovered the truth, Mr. Manni said.

Mr. Overstreet, meanwhile, who avoided New York’s finest in his streaking excursions, has come full circle: next month on an episode of “One Life to Live,” the ABC soap opera, he plays a cop.

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