

TV clutter dulls product placement

Research casts doubt on belief that reality shows offer superior exposure

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WHEN IT COMES to product placement, conventional wisdom says a reality TV show is your best bet. Notable appearances by famous names such as AT&T, Chrysler and Coca-Cola in programs including “American Idol” and “The Apprentice” have provided textbook examples of how reality programs can help burnish popular goods. But what if marketers aren’t using the programs as wisely as they could?

Lots of attention is paid to reality shows as a platform for in-show advertising, but an Australian academic group believes such product placement is, overall, “spectacularly average.” The research suggests that marketers have begun to rely on standardized methods, rather than trying to create placements that are unique and tailored to the reality programs in which they appear.

Even though reality shows seem to welcome product integrations, “if you actually look at the numbers, [placements] are no more prevalent than in some other genres,” said Jenni Romaniuk, Ph.D., head of brand equity research at the Ehrenberg-Bass Institute for Marketing Science, based at the University of South Australia. “The gut feeling at this stage is a lot of the

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placements are just going to pass people by,” she said. “It just seems unlikely in the vast majority of placements that the average viewer is going to notice them, let alone remember them in the future.”

Researchers at the Ehrenberg-Bass examined more than 1,000 brand placements in 85 hours of programming on U.S. prime-time

TV across 11 broadcast and cable networks. Among the elements they examined were the length of on-screen exposure and the amount of “clutter,” or other brand appearances or mentions, on screen at the same time. Ms. Romaniuk said placements included any mention of a potential product or service, no matter whether the appearance was paid for or not. If an actor or celebrity mentioned an upcoming project or if a destination was cited on screen, those counted as product placement, she said. Researchers found placements in reality shows lasted no longer than those in other genres. About 70% of visual exposures were less than five seconds and 19% lasted between six and 15 seconds.

Moreover, 41% of brand placements in reality shows were “slightly obscured,” while 57% were “fully exposed”; in comedies, 94% of visual placements were fully exposed. Comedy programs had three times as many “dual mode” placements—where the product is presented both visually and verbally.