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TOYOTA PRIUS SCORES A PERFECT PRODUCT PLACEMENT

Why 'Six Feet Under' Was an Uplifting Brand Experience

By Marc Graser

The deal: Prius buddies up to Hollywood's environmentally friendly producers and filmmakers.

The result: The Prius hasn't just helped promote hybrid technology, it has also introduced Toyota's lineup of vehicles to Hollywood's production community.

Fans of HBO's *Six Feet Under* mourned the end of the mortuary drama's five-season run last month. But you won't be seeing Toyota executives shedding any tears over the finale.

If you do, they might be tears of joy.

'*Six Feet Under*' and Prius proved to be a perfect match for Toyota.

All you have to do is take a look at the series' final six minutes. During a sentimental montage that wraps up what happens to each of the show's lead characters, shots of one of them is shown driving off into the sunset down a desert highway behind the wheel of a Prius.

The image is a lasting one -- one that even mirrors the final season's ad campaign that featured the show's iconic green hearse headed down that same desert road.

Hollywood love affair

But for Toyota, it's also the latest example of Hollywood's love affair with the Prius.

Since its introduction in 1997, the gas-electric hybrid vehicle has been adopted by environmentally friendly celebrities such as Leonardo DiCaprio and Cameron Diaz. It's been written into the plots of shows like *The West Wing*. Larry David drives one on HBO's comedy *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. It's also served as an "alternative limo" at the Academy Awards.

The car will soon appear in the Julia Louis-Dreyfus (*Seinfeld*) sitcom *Old Christine* on CBS, the Fox legal comedy *Head Cases* and the romantic comedy *The Last Kiss* from DreamWorks and Paramount Pictures.

It's not as if Prius really needs the extra exposure to boost sales.

The car has quickly become Toyota's third best-selling model behind the Camry and the Corolla, with many customers often waiting months to receive their

vehicles.

More than 100,000 of the cars have been sold worldwide. Toyota recently announced that it would build 100,000 of the cars for the U.S. market alone -- up from the 36,000 units that the carmaker had originally thought it would produce for the second generation of the vehicle, introduced in 2003.

Toyota eyes trucks

As more car buyers are steering toward hybrid vehicles, Toyota is hoping to use entertainment to promote its lineup of hybrid cars and trucks. Rivals like Ford and Honda also have hybrid editions of their Escape SUV and Civic sedans, respectively.

But because of its unique design, Prius has become the poster child of most hybrids.

“The Prius is such a visually distinctive car,” said Rob Donnell, CEO of Brand Arc, a Santa Monica, Calif.-based branded entertainment shop that reps Toyota and its luxury brand Lexus. “It makes a statement. And it makes it better than any other vehicle out there.”

That image has also helped make it appeal to Hollywood.

Past Prius integrations have occurred because cast members or producers drive a Prius themselves and wanted one to be in their movie or TV show. Other requests were made because of what it says about a character.

“It’s not about saving money on gas,” Mr. Donnell said. “It’s about driving a cleaner vehicle.”

'Six Feet Under' finale

In May, Six Feet Under’s producers approached Mr. Donnell to use the Prius in the finale, which would be shot in June.

The last six minutes of the 'Six Feet Under' finale was essentially a commercial for Prius.

Because the script was being kept a secret, producers couldn’t disclose how the car would appear in the episode. Because HBO doesn’t accept integration fees from brands, Toyota couldn’t control how the vehicle would be shown.

“They said ‘Don’t worry about it. You’ll love it. It’ll be excellent placement,’” Mr. Donnell said.

But Mr. Donnell didn’t object.

The show appealed to Prius’ target demo: people who are influencers and trendsetters that adapt to new ideas and new ways of thinking. Once others see them taking it on, there’s a groundswell around it.

“That show hits the Prius demographic better than most on network television,” Mr. Donnell said.

Mr. Donnell also knew that the sequence would represent a character “moving forward with her life,” which is part of Toyota’s brand positioning of “moving forward and having a better life.”

It also fit with the character of Claire Fisher, who drives the Prius in the finale, and is shown angrily berating owners of SUVs in earlier episodes.

Four million viewers

Nearly 4 million people watched the finale of Six Feet Under Aug. 21. HBO has been repeating the episode since the initial airing.

Toyota calls the placement in episode a “home run.”

“It was such a natural fit,” said Mark Simmons, national manager of advertising strategy and media for Toyota Motor Sales USA. “On a 1 to 10 scale, it was a 10.”

The placements of the Prius is only part of Toyota’s recent strategy of aggressively going after TV and film properties to showcase its vehicles -- hybrid or not.

In January, the automaker hired Mr. Donnell to represent its brands in Hollywood. That involves, for the first time, operating a fleet of 40 vehicles in Santa Monica to offer productions. Mr. Donnell had previously spent the past four years serving as Ford’s Hollywood rep through Amplify, which was the branded entertainment unit of WPP Group’s JWT. He works with Toyota consultant Rich Frank of The Firm and media-buying agency Zenith and agency of record Saatchi & Saatchi, Los Angeles, both part of Publicis Groupe, to broker placement deals.

“When it comes to placements, we are getting more aggressive now,” Mr. Simmons said. “Placement opportunities can be a wonderful way to define a vehicle, in terms of a linkage with a person or situation. We’re continuing to look into it in a world where traditional advertising can be zipped past. We’ve been very pleased with it and we’re trying to be more of a player in that market.”

But it won’t be easy.

‘Very easy vehicle to place’

“The Prius is a very easy vehicle to place and there’s tremendous amount of demand, but when we get into vehicles that don’t have that kind of iconic image, it’s a little more difficult. Our tougher challenge in the future will be placing less iconic vehicles.”

Mr. Simmons said Toyota will be especially focused on placing its lineup of trucks in productions.

“To get the right kind of image for our trucks is going to be very important for us in the future,” he said.

So far, Toyota’s new strategy has worked.

Toyota sponsored the summer concert series of NBC’s The Tonight Show, which featured a different model each week. And Sandy Cohen, a lead character played by Peter Gallagher on Fox’s The O.C., will replace his BMW 7-series with a new Lexus this season. Another will drive a Highlander hybrid.

“The fact that there’s someone out here doing this now on a day-to-day basis for them really helps,” Mr. Donnell said. “Toyota finally has a presence. There’s always been the simple logistics of getting this done. You’re dealing with two different cultures. In Hollywood, things need to get done quickly. Other big businesses don’t move as quickly as productions do.”

While he will consider film properties, Mr. Donnell will focus much of his attention on TV opportunities.

“TV is always more immediate,” he said. “You’re in production and a couple of months later you’re on the air. With film, you have to think 18 months ahead of whatever you’re doing.” There’s also the additional exposure of a show’s initial airing, repeats, syndication and DVD sales.