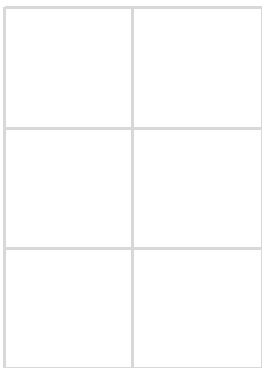




Behind Pepsi's 'Meta' Integration Into Fox's 'Empire'

da Brand Will Be Featured Prominently in Three-Episode Run Wednesday

By [E.J. Schultz](#), [Jeanine Poggi](#). Published on November 19, 2015.



Jamal Lyon (not pictured) and Lucious Lyon (not pictured) meet with Pepsi executives, from

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Pepsi-Cola has featured some of the biggest names in music in its TV commercials throughout its history, from Michael Jackson to Britney Spears. But in a reflection of today's ad realities, the soda brand's newest singing star is not a real person -- it's a fictional character on the hit TV show "Empire."

As part of a paid integration with the Fox program, Pepsi will be featured prominently in the plotline of three episodes, beginning with last night's show and ending with the midseason finale on Dec. 2.

The plot goes a little something like this (spoiler alert): Rising star Jamal Lyon, son of Empire Entertainment CEO Lucious Lyon, is approached by Pepsi about an endorsement deal. But he must beat out competing artists to become the new face of the brand. Jamal wins the assignment after creating a song for a Pepsi ad called "Ready to Go."

On the show, the commercial is directed by Lee Daniels, "Empire" co-creator and executive producer, who will make a cameo. Mr. Daniels did in fact direct the commercial in real life.

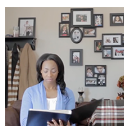
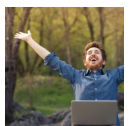
Then, in the Dec. 2 episode, Jamal will introduce the commercial during an awards nomination ceremony. Fox will cut from the show directly into the real 60-second commercial break it will debut the spot, and then go directly back into "Empire."

The ad will continue to run in "Empire" episodes when the show returns March 30, according to Pepsi.

The beverage giant is also considering running on other networks a version of the ad that features the actor who plays Jamal Lyon, Jussie Smollett, rather



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the character he portrays.

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placement deal -- and Pepsi was then approached for the integration, said Mr. Byrne, president-ad sales, Fox Networks Group. He noted that it was a natural plotpoint because stars are often tapped for endorsement deals.

"The integration works because it works for the show," Mr. Byrne said. "The storyline is true to the show. We made a great effort to make sure this paid storyline is natural and not overly commercial."

The paid integration is an example of how marketers must find new ways to put their brand names in front of viewers in an era of ad-skipping and ad blockers. Pepsi has done in-show integrations before, such as sponsoring the first two seasons of Fox's singing competition show "The X-Factor," which was canceled in February 2014 after three seasons.



But the "Empire" integration marks new terrain for the brand, said Emily Silver, VP-marketing for Pepsi America Beverages. It is a "truly authentic integration, life imitating art" that is "a breakthrough for us and the industry," she said.

Pepsi and Fox focused on "how do we make this as possible and that was our rallying cry," she added. Lee Daniels directed the commercial in real life and you see Lee Daniels directing the commercial on the show.



"This is taking a brand integration to a new, progressive execution," Mr. Byrne said. "It shows what is possible when you engage the best creative minds and bring them together."

"Empire" was attractive for Pepsi because it is the most focused show on TV, attractive to all demographics and multicultural, which is a very important plank for Pepsi, Silver said.

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week-to-week, with ratings declining nearly every episode this season.

Still, it remains one of the most-watched shows on TV, with a meaningful share of the all-important 18-to-49 demo. Its most recent episode averaged more than 11 million viewers and pulled a 4.2 rating in the demo. And it is worth noting that its commercial ratings in the three and seven days after an episode premiere receive extraordinary lifts.

The integration is part of an "Empire" sponsorship Pepsi struck over the summer. Wasserman Media Group helped broker the deal, according to

PepsiCo agencies working on the deal include OMD's Content Collective and BBD0, which was involved in the creation of the ad along with Mr. I. The song in the ad -- which does not include the Pepsi name -- was written by Swizz Beatz. But Pepsi gave "strong feedback," Ms. Silver said. "We felt really good about the song. We think it will be a huge hit."

Pepsi executives had access to scripts before episodes were shot, Ms. Silver said. But "we never made any substantive changes, partly because we spent so much time up front briefing the writers on what our brand stands for and the key truths to the Pepsi brand," she said. "There was language occasionally that we would massage, just to bring it slightly more in line with what we wanted or to make sure there was nothing that was out of our brand guardrails."

She added: "For us it was all about making sure it felt right for our consumers -- both consumers of the show and consumers of the brand."

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