

By SUZANNE VRANICA

The struggles of fictional paper company Dunder Mifflin to compete with real-life office-supply chains like [Staples Inc.](#) are a running joke on NBC's "The Office." Now, an online outlet owned by Staples is using the Dunder Mifflin name to try to sell more copy paper.

Staples' Quill.com has struck a licensing deal with NBC's parent company to launch a Dunder Mifflin brand. Priced largely above private-label copy paper, the Dunder Mifflin packages will be emblazoned with slogans such as "Our motto is, 'Quability First' " and "Get Your Scrant on," well-known phrases from the comedy series.

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NBCUniversal

Life imitates art: Dunder Mifflin.

The marketing deal is an effort to combat what Quill's chief marketing officer, Sergio Pereira, calls a "race to the bottom in the paper business."

In the estimated \$3 billion North American copy-paper market, sales have been declining at about 3% a year—even more during the recession, said Mark Connelly, an analyst at CLSA. The decline stems from a shrinking volume of workplace printing, in part due to the greater use of PDF documents and email. It doesn't help that consumers are most swayed by price when they buy paper, said Mr. Pereira.

The Dunder Mifflin deal is an example of "reverse product placement." For decades, marketers have worked to embed their brands in the plots of TV shows and movies as a way to stand out in a crowded ad market. Nowadays, they are seeing value in bringing to life fictional brands that are already part of pop culture. That can be far cheaper than building brands from scratch.

### **3 billion**

Estimated dollar value of the North American copy-paper market

Examples include Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans, a candy from the Harry Potter books, and Bubba Gump Shrimp Co. restaurants, inspired by the 1994 film "Forrest Gump."

In 2007, 20th Century Fox did a deal with 7-Eleven that included temporarily converting 12 of its stores into Kwik-E-Marts, the fictional chain in Fox's animated TV series "The Simpsons," as part of a marketing campaign for a new Simpsons movie. During the monthlong promotion, 7-Eleven, a unit of Japan's [Seven & I Holdings Co.](#), saw major sales increases at the U.S. stores that were converted. Fox is owned by [News Corp.](#), which also owns The Wall Street Journal.

For Quill, which has a roughly \$3 million annual ad budget, using the well-known Dunder Mifflin name is a way to draw attention to its brand without spending heavily on marketing.

As part of the deal, [Comcast Corp.](#)'s NBCUniversal will receive about 6% of the revenue from Dunder Mifflin paper sales, according to a person familiar with the matter. If sales targets are met, the two-year licensing deal can be extended, the person added.

As is standard for entertainment-related licensing deals, NBCU said it will share the revenue with the companies that produce the show.

The deal isn't without challenges. "The Office," now in its eighth season, recently lost Steve Carell, one of its most-popular stars. Average viewership has declined by about 20% from the previous season, according to Nielsen. Still, it has a large following online.

Not everyone is convinced the show can help revitalize paper sales. Mr. Connolly at CLSA said people buying paper care only about two things: that it looks good and that "it doesn't jam their copier."

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