

latimes.com

A new look for product placement

The era of logo-slapping is over. Today it's all about taking a more subtle approach.

By Adam Tschorn

Los Angeles Times

May 15, 2011

In a Feb. 3 episode of "Bones," Brennan demonstrates her Toyota's adaptive cruise control to Booth. A few days later, on "Glee," Santana shows Puck a jewelry box, and tells him it contains a ring from Jared jewelers. A Nielsen study will later find these are two of the 10 most-remembered product placements on TV dramas and sitcoms in the month of February, joining a list that includes Ugg boots, Apple computers and Vicodin.

Product placement — the practice of inserting merchandise into entertainment for publicity value — is not only alive and well, but thanks to innovations such as DVR technology, which allows viewers to skip traditional commercials altogether, it's a bigger business than ever. Spending for product placement in movies, TV and video games more than tripled to \$3.6 billion from 2004 to 2009, according to research firm PQ Media. The use — and disclosure — of product placement was reported to be an issue in the protracted negotiations that pushed the return of AMC's "Mad Men" into 2012, and the next installment of the James Bond franchise — long an unabashed showcase for all kinds of product placement — will reportedly be funded to the tune of \$45 million by brands appearing in the film.

But, according to experts, the traditional in-your-face style of product placement can backfire with today's consumer. Simply exposing a brand to viewers — particularly things like clothing, accessories and jewelry that may not be as instantly recognizable as the swirl of the Coca-Cola can on the "American Idol" judges' table — is no longer enough.

Frank Zazza, founder and chief executive of iTVX, a consulting firm that measures the value of product placement, explains. "If I'm on the screen wearing an Armani suit and I say, 'I have an Armani suit on,' or 'Hey, doesn't Armani make a great suit,' you're going to realize what's going on and your mind will reject it the same way it rejects traditional commercials or [email] spam.

It's what's known as 'cognitive rejection.'"

Which means, according to Zazza, "the era of logo-slapping is over. These days it's more about a brand's essence and its character — and those things are written right into the script but without mentioning the brand by name at all."

Jay Newell, an assistant professor at Iowa State University who studies product placement, also cites cognitive rejection as shaping the approach to product placement. "Academic studies have shown that basically you push back the minute you know you're being pitched to," he said. "So the approach has to be a lot more subtle."

Newell says while screen time might get a fashion brand exposure, it doesn't necessarily translate to sales. "If it were as easy as 'monkey see, monkey buy' we'd all be driving Aston Martins," he said. "But as far as a brand that's been really good about putting itself out there without hitting you over the head, the Gap is doing some really interesting things."

Newell points to a February episode of "Glee" in which a surprise song-and-dance number was set in a Gap store. The clothes weren't mentioned at all, and the name itself only in passing — the flash mob-type performance was referred to as a "Gap attack."

"Sure, you see it was set in a Gap, but it's so subtle you almost don't even realize it's product placement," Newell says.

Gap brand representative Olivia Doyne says the show's producers approached Gap because they thought it would be a good fit for the scene, but she declined to say whether or not any money changed hands as a result.

Further, the brand decided to forgo trumpeting the store's cameo in an official press release or email blast, preferring instead to post a gushing, fan-blogger style entry at the Gap Inc. "aDressed" blog the day the episode aired. The same approach was used when some 30 employees of Gap stores in Virginia volunteered to help unload trucks for an episode of ABC's "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition."

"We did post it to our Facebook page, and we did mention it on Twitter, but we wanted people to authentically find out about it on their own so we didn't do much promotion," Doyne says.

That's exactly the strategy Zazza and Newell say is needed in the era of more subtle product placement. "Social media has become very, very important," says Zazza. "Every story has a beginning, a middle and an end, and the online element is what helps bring the whole story to resolution."

Newell says it isn't just about being online either — it's about being everywhere. "What I think is really interesting about what the Gap is doing — and my overall research area is media saturation — is that the Gap is just plain everywhere. They were on 'Glee,' they were woven slightly into the [movie] 'The September Issue,' they're integrating online with the iPad-only series 'Glamour Girls.'"

According to Gap's Doyne, that's precisely the point. "Things are changing so quickly, and we've found that our customers aren't letting go of any form of communication, and they're constantly adding to the types of things they're doing."

"We always make a joke that our target customer is watching 'Glee' while she's Facebooking her friends on her iPad, with her iPhone next to her and a copy of Vogue sitting on the ottoman," Doyne said.

"It used to be that you did a TV [advertising] campaign and everything else — newspaper, radio and magazines — would support that," says Newell. "Now you need to be everywhere."

In other words, wherever your gaze falls, it's falling into the Gap.

adam.tschorn@latimes.com

Copyright © 2011, [Los Angeles Times](#)

