

# Branded Content: More Than Just Showing Up

Woody Allen is reputed to have said, "Eighty percent of success is showing up." Unfortunately this cannot be taken for granted in the world of branded content, even though many brands pay for the privilege of showing up in movies, TV programs and video games. How can marketers maximize the value of these appearances for their brands?



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Brands have been appearing in movies and television shows for decades. Now, however, as advertisers struggle to engage the attention of today's over-marketed consumers, they are looking with renewed interest at the placement of brands in various entertainment genres. Many options are available to them, ranging from simple product placement to brand integration, branded entertainment and ultimately branded media channels, such as Anheuser-Busch's broadband video site, *Bud.TV*. Each option has its own requirements in terms of planning and investment, and offers different risks and benefits for brands. How should marketers choose among these alternatives?

## From Placement to Entertainment

While product placement is still a relatively simple undertaking, requiring only that brands engage a placement firm to represent them, the development of branded content and entertainment is a long-term, strategic commitment that requires a far greater investment of time, money, and outside resources. For example, the production of the TV special *Gamekillers*, which featured Unilever's male grooming product Axe, involved the help of writers from *The Daily Show* and the media and entertainment company *@radical.media*. The challenges in producing content are further complicated by the fact that rules and regulations governing the use of product placement and branded entertainment differ widely around the world, from little regulation in countries like the United States, Argentina and Australia to stricter controls in the UK and Europe.

## The Integration Continuum

Traditional product placement has evolved over the years. Once used merely as props to enhance the realism of a story, brands can now play a much more active role. Today we observe a continuum from passive brand placement to active brand integration, with the potential brand benefit increasing with the depth of integration.

Passive placement may help keep a brand salient through repeated exposure, but communication through placement is purely associative and implicit. For example, Coca-Cola's appearance in *American Idol* communicates that the brand is contemporary and ubiquitous, but little more.

Building a brand into the plot of a movie, show or game provides scope for more explicit communication. For example, Toyota's Prius hybrid has become synonymous with the environmentally conscious character Christine, played by Julia Louis-Dreyfus on the CBS sitcom *The New Adventures of Old Christine*. An episode in which the Prius has a run-in with a gas-guzzling Hummer provides an opportunity to emphasize the economical gas consumption of the hybrid.



Branded entertainment differs from brand integration in that the brand owners actually produce the content. They can, if they choose, place the brand at the center of the plot, which greatly increases the scope for direct and indirect messaging. They also gain the opportunity to build appreciation for the brand by making the content an “offering” from the brand to the viewers. For example, OfficeMax developed a reality TV special called *Schooled*, aimed at high-school and college students. The 60-minute program, which aired with no commercials on Disney’s ABC Family Channel, featured a surprise performance by teen idol Jesse McCartney.

If the content is compelling enough, the target audience may even be willing to pay to interact with a brand. Burger King sold 2 million video games featuring their advertising icons, the Subservient Chicken and the King, in just the first four weeks of the game’s release (price: \$3.99, with the purchase of a value meal).

***The brand should fit naturally with the content, adding to the story in a relevant and tangible manner.***

### What Makes Integration Successful?

Research companies and academics have carried out a number of carefully controlled research experiments on brand integration. Based on the findings from these studies, as well as our own observations, we believe that the success of brand integration and the magnitude of the associated ROI depend on three major factors: Fit, Focus, and Fame.

These factors are interrelated, allowing brands to compensate for a deficit in one area, such as interest in the product category, by superior execution against other factors, such as the power of the integration.

#### ***Fit: Does your brand have mojo?***

It is an unfortunate fact of life that some product categories are more interesting than others. The sight of a flashy new mobile phone used by a character in a movie is guaranteed to attract attention. The opportunity to

interact with an exciting new car in a video game may pique even more interest. The same cannot be said, however, for household cleaners or convenience stores. For less interesting products, the context in which the brand is placed must engage people and focus attention on the relevant brand.

Success Factors for Brand Placement/Integration	
Fit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The degree of interest in the brand or product category</li> <li>The relevance of the content to the target audience</li> <li>The fit between the content and the brand</li> </ul>
Focus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The degree to which the integration is engaging</li> <li>The degree to which attention is focused on the brand</li> </ul>
Fame	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The level of additional supporting activity (advertising or publicity)</li> </ul>

Ideally, the brand should fit naturally with the content, adding to the story in a relevant and tangible manner. A U.S. study conducted by Millward Brown compared one brand’s placement in two different programs. In a program that showed the brand making a difference in people’s lives, perceptions of fit were far better than in a program that used the brand in a more typical entertainment context. Stronger perceptions of fit resulted in higher consideration of the brand.

Low-interest brands must work hard to create a compelling fit with the content. After two years of promoting its environmentally friendly image with traditional advertising, the North American waste and disposal company Waste Management decided to use brand integration to reinforce its message. But this integration, intended to highlight the company’s status as the largest recycler in North America, did not feature the company’s familiar green collection trucks. Instead the action featured a Waste Management Recycle America collection center. Contestants from Bravo’s hit reality show *Project Runway* found themselves sifting through mounds of trash at the center in Port Newark, New Jersey, searching for material to create their outfits. Michael Knight’s winning creation was fashioned from a vinyl-coated burlap peanut sack dressed up with Mylar tubing and clear plastic reclaimed at the center.



Shampoo seems almost as unlikely a subject for popular entertainment as trash collection, but P&G earned a Silver Effie award in 2005 for an Herbal Essences campaign that included brand integration in the Mexican series *Rebelde*. After the teenage characters in the soap opera formed a band, they entered a contest sponsored by Herbal Essences, which required them to write an original song featuring the words “Liso Sensual” (the name of a new Herbal Essences line extension). The TV audience was invited to join the contest as well, with the promise that the winning song would be performed on the soap and recorded on a CD by the actual Mexican band RBD.

**The more engaging the role of the brand, the more memorable the integration will be.**

#### **Focus: The balancing act**

While the potential for messaging and ROI increases across the continuum from placement to brand-produced content, there is good evidence that even simple product placement can be effective, provided the brand is clearly recognizable. But getting the right balance between the degree of integration and the degree of attention can be tricky. If integration is completely seamless, people may be too caught up in the action to appreciate the role played by the brand. At the opposite extreme, if the brand integration is clearly superfluous, people may rebel against what they perceive as an attempt to persuade them.

This dynamic may have influenced the results of a controlled test conducted by Mediaedge:CIAs MediaLab and broadcaster CTV. The test, which compared brand advertising, placement, and integration in an entertainment news show, found that both placement and integration increased viewers’ enjoyment of the show. Placement, however, actually outperformed integration in its ability to improve trust and affinity with the brand. This suggests that the brand integration may have made people feel that they were being pitched, rather than entertained.

In the past, product placement has tended to be passive in nature, relying on recognition and inference alone. While countries like the UK continue to relegate brands to a supporting role for TV shows, movie

makers can earn good returns from turning brands into stars. In *Casino Royale*, the connection between James Bond and his watch brand, Omega, is reinforced in the brief dialogue between Vesper Lynd and 007:

Vesper: “Beautiful watch. Rolex?”

Bond: “No, Omega.”

While this integration would be too blatant for a brand that did not already enjoy a long-standing association with the Bond franchise, it illustrates the power of such a placement. Originally, brands were used in the 007 movies to illuminate the character of agent James Bond: He drove an Aston Martin and wore an Omega. Now that the Bond franchise is long established, brands such as Sony Ericsson aspire to be part of the films for what the association with James Bond will say about *them*.

Though fleeting, Omega’s time in the spotlight in *Casino Royale* was effective in identifying the brand. But brand recognition should not be taken for granted. As with traditional advertising, misattribution can occur, and screen time alone does not guarantee success. Bond’s sunglasses may be in view more often



than his watch, but how many moviegoers will notice the brand? Identified only by the steel Supreme arrow on the temples, the Persol sunglasses are unlikely to be recognized by anyone other than existing brand aficionados.

The more engaging — interesting, exciting, surprising, enjoyable, uplifting — the role of the brand, the more memorable the integration will be. According to research company IAG, the integration of the CVS pharmacy chain into ABC’s reality show *Miracle Workers* was the placement that generated the largest increase in positive brand opinion in 2006. In covering the costs of medications needed by patients after life-changing surgeries, CVS played a role that audiences could appreciate.





### ***Fame: Publicity beyond the placement***

The combination of product placement and advertising offers the opportunity to achieve considerable synergy. A study by Nielsen Media Research in the United States reported that brand recognition resulting from exposure to both placement and advertising was 23 percent higher than that achieved by advertising alone. Therefore, before product placement vehicles are released, marketers should look for opportunities to use advertising to prime the attention of viewers. Similarly, branded entertainment can be used to prime attention to more traditional advertising. Omega reinforced its appearance in *Casino Royale* with dual-branded print and TV ads as well as a special section on its brand Web site.

***Gratuitously highlighting a brand's benefits will detract from the appreciation of both brand and content.***

### **Extending the Reach of Branded Entertainment**

Given the increasingly fragmented nature of media today, simply finding content that is likely to appeal to a relevant audience of reasonable size can be a challenge. When using branded entertainment, companies have the opportunity to cost-effectively create additional content to broaden the reach of their offering. For example, the reach of the *Schooled* special produced by OfficeMax was extended with downloads of outtakes on Google Video and free DVDs of the show given away with every purchase.

Other branded entertainment initiatives leverage viral and mobile communications to exploit the power of buzz and pass-along. Toyota is reported to be spending more than \$10 million to create and promote a comedy series designed specifically for multimedia mobile phones. The car maker is targeting the series at young urban influencers, whom they hope will pass the mobile episodes (which feature the 2007 Camry) on to a wider audience.

### **Looking to the Future**

In the face of ever-increasing media fragmentation, ad clutter and consumer control, the use of brands in entertainment will continue to grow. Marketers seeking to engage their consumers through placement, integration, or branded entertainment would do well to remember the three F's: Fit, Focus, and Fame.

***Fit.*** Brand fit is critical to successful placement and even more so for branded entertainment. While engaging content can be used to highlight the role of even the most everyday brands, there must be a good reason for the brand to take part.

***Focus.*** Given the need for multiple partners to bring a successful integration to fruition, marketers must maintain a relentless focus on the project's communication objectives. This does not mean, however, that the strategy should be apparent to the intended audience. Rather than gratuitously highlighting the brand's benefits (which will detract from the appreciation of both brand and content), the action should focus attention on the brand and allow implicit communication of the brand's positioning and benefits.

***Fame.*** By their nature, branded entertainment opportunities tend to be targeted at small or niche audiences. Major movie placements are only open to brands that have budgets to match. For this reason, marketers need to seek ways to amplify and disseminate successful integrations via pass-along, word of mouth, advertising and publicity.

**To find out more about branded content, see [www.mb-blog.com](http://www.mb-blog.com).**

