

ADWEEK

Marketing 0.0: Promos on the Cheap

Forget social media. Never mind Twitter. Enterprising brands are discovering that low-tech (and no-tech) marketing still turns heads 3/22/2010

Big yellow chickens proved the perfect sales force for Cluck-U. Weaving through the throngs of St. Patrick's Day revelers at the Hoboken, N.J., parade earlier this month was the usual turnout that you'd expect for an event like this -- local girls wearing green-beaded necklaces and green-tinted sunglasses, frat boys in green-felt top hats and tape-on leprechaun beards, and sturdy men stomping the asphalt in kilts. There was a lot of singing, of course, and a lot of beer. It was, in other words, a standard holiday turnout.

Then the big, yellow chicken showed up.

Actually, two big, yellow chickens -- man-sized fowl sewn from craft-store fur, complete with orange wattles and buggy eyes. Both birds wore breastplates that explained what coop they'd just flown from: Cluck-U, a local fried-chicken chain popular with the college crowd. The birds eased on down the sidewalk, high-fiving the kids -- who wasted no time begging their parents to take them to the restaurant. Later, long lines outside the Cluck-U near Second Street proved that the feathered ambassadors had done their job. "Twenty-five percent of what we bring in," says Cluck-U CEO J.P. Haddad, "is because of those chickens."

Stop and think about that for a second. This is the age of Web 2.0, of iPods and iPhones, Twitter and Facebook. Brands have learned to harness just about every high-tech advancement in our lives and press it to the service of marketing and advertising. So what's it say when a dude in a chicken suit still works just great? It says that smart brands are still conscious of the power of low-tech marketing in the overall mix. At a time of shrunken budgets and media clutter, many brands have discovered that sometimes the old-school ideas still work very well -- even better, in some cases, because the public hasn't seen them used in a while. All of which has given way to a renaissance of ideas like sandwich boards, balloon messaging, in-store taste tests and other grassroots gambits that the Web age was supposed to have rendered irrelevant. Instead, such decidedly analog methods are being trotted out and made over as companies big and small realize they can get more bang for their limited advertising bucks with the

tried-and-true marketing methods of bygone eras.

Just ask Mark Voysey. As co-founder of New York-based Cunning creative agency, he's made an entire business out of offering nontraditional marketing for clients ranging from Unilever to ZenithOptimedia. Low-tech marketing, he says, "cuts through the fragmentation of today's media." Cunning's exploits have included what chief creative bloke (yes, that's his title) Floyd Hayes terms "voicevertising" -- a low-tech stunt reminiscent of the old carnival midway barkers. Hayes himself walked around New York City and periodically shouted out the brand name Hall's Breezers (a fruit-flavored throat lozenge). "I didn't have a megaphone, and, of course, I didn't have a sore throat," Hayes explains. "We got 150 million hits via CNN Money, Wired and Fox." Such off-the-page, in-your-face campaigns, says Voysey, are "now guaranteed in the vertical mix."

Vertical was an idea that Amsterdam-based agency BSUR took literally when it created FSE-1, a 40-foot-tall inflatable rocket ship that housed a "moon walk" for kids. The idea -- aimed at promoting top-selling U.K. beverage Fruit Shoot -- was little more than a futuristic-looking take on the old inflatable "bounce house" that's appeared on circus midways for generations. But the FSE-1 (which coincided with an existing, space-themed ad campaign for the drink) looked startlingly like a rocket on a launch pad -- one that literally drew kids in during a recent European tour. (Plans call for bringing FSE-1 to the U.S.)

According to BSUR's Gordana Lucic, the inflatable diversion upped Fruit Shoot sales by 15 percent -- a very good ROI. "The rocket cost 30,000 euros [about \$41,000] -- the equivalent of a single [consumer magazine] advertisement," Lucic says. "It was low-tech, low-budget, the kids loved it and it generated attention everywhere it went."

Lucic is not full of hot air. In fact, back in the U.S., a host of outfits are doing a brisk business manufacturing weather balloons and advertising blimps (manned and unmanned) with brand names painted on their sides to function as high-altitude billboards. The USA Blimp Co. has built helium-inflatable blimps for the likes of Best Buy, Chevron and Budweiser. (A 24-foot nylon blimp goes for \$2,300.) "At first, it may seem like an unusual way to advertise," claims the company's literature, but USA Blimp boasts that its balloons can increase sales by 20 percent. Manned advertising airships (which Goodyear has used since 1925) are said to have a recall rate of 75 percent, according to Ormond Beach, Fla.-based Worldwide Airship Operations, which has flown ad blimps for the likes of TDK and Asahi beer.

"Corporations now make up 75 percent of our business," says Michael Arnold of Arnold Aerial Advertising in New York, which busies itself with a related business that's roughly as old as aviation itself: towing advertising banners behind prop planes. Arnold's single-engine planes have flown branding messages for the likes of Nutrisystem and Smirnoff. And with hourly plane rates starting at \$495 and millions of potential eyeballs below, the cost looks far more attractive than the average TV spot.

Brands as well-known as McDonald's and Fox News doing this kind of advertising is a significant turnaround from just a few years ago when most air banners hawked 2-for-1 deals at the local BBQ joint. But the reasons why bigger brands are going for this old-fashioned idea can be seen in the numbers. According to the company, 88 percent of consumers who see aerial banner messages remember them 30 minutes later.

Compare that to your average pop-up ad. "The bottom line," Arnold says, "is people see these ads in ways they don't see the others."

Of course, though these marketing ideas existed prior to -- and can function without -- the Internet, proponents are quick to point out that using a little Web 2.0 can boost an already effective idea and give it added reach. The ability to generate buzz may be this generation's most marked contribution to the ad techniques of its parents. "If we can get people talking on Twitter or posting something on Facebook, I can get the message out through talking to one person," says Sam Ewen, founder of New York based guerrilla marketing firm Interference, Inc. And there's no better buzz topic than a low-tech street stunt.

Take, for example, the small fleet of Mini Coopers that Red Bull has pimped out in its signature silver-and-blue livery. The "Can Cars," as they're known, feature a Gulliver sized can of Red Bull that's actually a refrigerated storage compartment for sample giveaways. (Red Bull communications chief Paul Yoffee declined to "discuss marketing strategies or approaches," but judging from the amount of Web chatter about the Can Cars, the idea has clearly made its impact.)

The tradition of brands using custom cars to turn heads dates to Oscar Mayer's "Wienermobile," which has been on the road since 1936, though brands from Hershey's Kisses to Red Lobster use them today.

It's the same case with mascots -- another idea as old as advertising itself. In addition to Cluck-U's chickens, there's "Mr. Bluelight," who will pose for photos with the kids out in front of the local Kmart. Call it corny, but according to Promotional Marketing Association vp Kathleen Mulcahy, people respond enthusiastically to friendly and familiar promotional tactics like this. "Consumers," as she puts it, "are in a show-me, tell-me mode."

And if the tactic includes giving away free samples -- still another marketing gambit invented decades before the Internet -- so much the better. That's one explanation why java giant Starbucks went far back to the future with one of the oldest marketing maneuvers in the book: the in-store blind taste test. To promote its new VIA extension of instant coffee, Starbucks launched a weeklong program that invited consumers to sip from side-by-side unmarked paper cups -- one with the traditional drip coffee, the other containing the instant brew. It was about as low-tech as marketing gets, but during a kick-off event

in New York, Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz said that the experience would serve to “surprise and delight” consumers, which at least does beg the question of how any digital or Web-based effort could have given consumers anything close to the same experience.

None of this means, of course, that low-tech marketing comes without its hazards. Cunning’s Hayes explains that even something as simple as dispatching a street performer is rife with hidden costs. “We live in the most litigious society in the world,” Hayes says. “You don’t want to take the spontaneity out of it, but you have to make sure [what you’re doing] is legal, and there are insurance costs involved.”

Cluck-U’s Haddad adds that while mascot use is relatively inexpensive (“the employee is already on the clock,” he says), a really good chicken outfit can cost upwards of \$2,500. Costume aside, however, Haddad says he’ll stick with the poultry ploy.

Over the years, he’s learned that the mascot marketing works better when he arms his ambassador chickens with coupons to hand out. “The chicken is one of our most effective tools,” the restaurateur says, adding that while many people will refuse to take coupons being handed out by an ordinary employee, “people will take them from a chicken.”