

## MARKETING Ready for Your Product's Close-up?

The rules of product placement are changing. Here's how to land a starring role for your firm

WHEN CBS DEBUTS its hit TV drama *CSI* this fall, no one will be watching more closely than Laura Udall. The CEO of Züca Inc. will be glued to the tube hoping to catch a glimpse of her company's funky and colorful wheeled luggage, which was chosen by the series' prop master for possible placement in the crime tales. "We're really excited about it," Udall says. "It could be a big breakthrough for us."

Product placement is almost as old as television itself. But in recent years, it has surged in both popularity and impact. Reality TV shows like *Survivor* and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* prominently showcase a vast array of products. Even more traditional scripted programs often weave products and brand names into the story line—such as Carrie Bradshaw's obsession with Manolo Blahnik shoes on *Sex and the City*—a tactic marketers refer to as "branded entertainment" or "product integration." Whatever you call it, it's not just for the megabrands anymore. "Producers want to give their shows authenticity and street credibility," says Schuyler Brown, associate director of strategic trend spotting at ad agency Euro RSGC Worldwide. "In many cases, that will mean a unique upstart brand that can bring spice to a scene. There's a lot of opportunity for small companies."

Andrea Edmunds, president of PoshTots, a Richmond, Va., manufacturer of upscale nursery decor, recently received her 15 minutes of fame, leveraging a grainy screen grab from *Friends* into a major marketing campaign. Edmunds was contacted by an old friend of hers, a publicist in Hollywood, to see if the company could supply some furniture for an episode in which characters Ross and Rachel bring home their new baby. The products were not easy to spot in their



### You're Hired

Marquis Jet's appearance on *The Apprentice* helped break the ice with clients.

fleeting moments on prime time. But when Edmunds sent media outlets the fuzzy image of actor David Schwimmer beside the company's Princess Wall Hanging, the payoff was swift. The photograph,

alongside a mention of PoshTots, appeared in more than 200 publications, including *Child*, *American Baby*, and *People*. Sales of the item, which retails for about \$270, doubled in 60 days. And all it cost PoshTots was the price of shipping a crib and other items from Virginia to Los Angeles. "If we spent \$20,000 on an ad in a magazine, we could not have reaped the brand boost we got," says Edmunds. "It was very big for us."

Product placement can even work for companies that sell to other companies rather than to consumers. It was early 2003 when Ken Austin, executive vice president of Marquis Jet, a New York City company that leases time in corporate jets, got a call from the producers of *The Apprentice* asking if he would be interested in a barter deal. The involvement of Donald Trump made Austin think it sounded like a good way to reach corporate customers. So Marquis Jet signed a deal that put planes in four episodes of the show and allowed the company to use the Donald's name in its print advertising.

The buzz, according to Austin, has been unmistakable. Neighbors, colleagues, and competitors all ask how Marquis Jet became a Trump co-star. The association with the show even helped smooth talks with a group of big-ticket clients, helping to break the ice during an initial meeting. Even better, Marquis did not pay up front for the placement, but only had to shoulder the cost of providing aircraft and personnel to the shooting locations. The total bill: about \$75,000. "We're working on another program now that will cost us seven figures," Austin says. "We see this as a tremendous way to build our brand."

Still, in many ways product placement remains uncharted territory. Unlike most forms of advertising, there are no standard rate cards and no tried-and-true way of landing a deal. Some firms hire Holly-

## Hands On

wood-based agencies to get their wares in front of set designers. Others rely on their regular ad agencies or PR firms to do the pitching. Nor is there any agreed-upon way to measure the return-on-investment of a product-placement campaign—though that could be changing. The New York City-based consulting firm iTVX, for example, measures the value of product placement in a particular show based on how much it would cost to buy ad time in that hour. So a quick appearance on *Sex and the City* might be worth \$3,389 and a prominent role on *Friends* more than \$200,000.

Others are happy to measure the success of a product placement the same way they would a public relations campaign. Auntie Anne's, a pretzel chain with head-

quarters in Gap, Pa., was part of the airport food court set in the movie *The Terminal*. As is often the case in Hollywood, getting a foot in the door was no easy task. Not only does Auntie Anne's pay a retainer to a product-placement service (its pretzels have made TV appearances on *Yes, Dear* and *7th Heaven*), the company had to build an actual working shop—complete with ovens, signage, cash registers, and two full-time staffers for the two-month shoot. The payoff: Tom Hanks mentioned Auntie Anne's by name in *Time* magazine. "There are a lot of tasty restaurants in the food court area," Hanks said in a December 2003 story about the making of the movie. "Have you had Aun-



### A Date With the Donald

Marquis uses *The Apprentice* in its advertising.

tie Anne's pretzels yet? They're pretty good." "You can't buy that kind of publicity," says Susan Matson, the pretzel company's PR director.

Still, product placement is not necessarily a slam dunk. It is growing ever more competitive, with bigger companies paying bigger bucks for prime position. Consider the experience of Oop, a retailer of whimsical gifts based in Providence, R.I. The store supplied several items to MTV's *The Real World* when the show set up shop in Boston for its third season in 1997. The product-placement deal, which was sealed with a handshake and didn't cost the store a dime, was a huge success, helping to boost sales nearly 50% in two years. But when the reality TV craze took off, MTV came back to Oop with a price tag and a detailed legal contract. "They told me, 'You can't get this kind of exposure for nothing anymore,'" says owner David Riordan. But the idea of a bidding war with Fortune 500 companies for space on what was now a hot TV program seemed unwise. "I can't afford that," he decided.

Then there's always the fear that you won't like the way your product is portrayed on screen. Doug Renfro, president of Renfro Foods in Fort Worth, has his public relations firm send about 200 cases a year of his salsas and dips out to movie sets in the hopes they'll do more than be scarfed down by the cast and crew. That's how he got his salsa into the movie *Spy Kids*. But Renfro always worries a bit when his products leave for Hollywood. He hopes "they won't use a salsa jar as a murder weapon or something."

—Ellen Neuborne

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