

Mad Men

By Reg P. Wydeven
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I've mentioned in numerous articles that I'm a huge fan of the show 'Seinfeld.' Who could forget such classic scenes as Kramer dropping a Junior Mint into the open chest cavity of a surgery patient, Elaine laughing during George's girlfriend's piano recital after Jerry put a Pez dispenser on her leg, and Jerry bribing Newman with a Chunky Bar.

Come to think of it, products were the subject of several plot lines during the series' run. The show featured Kenny Rogers Roasters, Drake's Coffee Cakes, Snapple, Bosco, Ovaltine, Tic-Tacs, Arby's, and many other products. While the sitcom was innovative for being a show about nothing, it was credited with pioneering product placement on American primetime television.

The show's creators have claimed that they did not engage in a product placement strategy for commercial gain. However, due to the copycat nature of Hollywood, many other shows followed suit and did integrate specific products into their plots and dialogue for a fee. With the growing popularity of digital video recorders like TiVo, TV viewers are now fast-forwarding through the commercials while watching their favorite shows. Advertisers now rely even more heavily on product placement to hock their wares.

Viewers have taken notice. The Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood, a coalition of 31 consumer and family television programming advocates, reported that the number of product placements in prime-time television programs rose 13 percent in 2007. Advertisers paid for 26,000 product placements during the top 10 broadcast television shows that year, while they paid for 160,000 spots during cable shows.

The watchdog group felt the practice was growing at such an alarming rate, it asked the federal government to investigate it. The Federal Communications Commission complied by reviewing new rules on notice requirements for programmers to inform viewers when a show's "props" are actually paid product placements.

Presently, FCC rules require TV programmers to disclose when sponsors have embedded products into shows. However, these disclosures are generally aired during the credits at the end of the show, which typically scroll by very quickly in fine print, if viewers are even watching at that point.

The agency is now considering requiring programmers to use bigger print for these notices and having them displayed for a longer, defined period. One of the options the FCC is considering is requiring product placement notices to mimic those for political ads. These notices would require sponsorship messages to be in a print at least four percent the height of a screen and displayed for at least four seconds.

In addition, the FCC is also considering even stronger rules for disclosures in children's programming. The aim of the new regulations is for advertisers to clearly let viewers know when they are being exposed to product placement, especially during children's shows. Members of the Campaign liken product placements to the subliminal advertising of the 1950s.

The Writers Guild of America, West, a Hollywood writers union, wants the FCC to take these rules even one step further. The writers claim that they, along with actors, are increasingly being pressured by television studios to integrate product placement into their scripts. The union proposes requiring programmers to include real-time notices of product integration and placements in tickers running across the bottom of the screen to deter the practice.

I don't think product placement even works. But it is strange that every time I watch 'American Idol' I get thirsty for a Coca-Cola.

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