

November 26, 2004

ADVERTISING

Ad for Television Show Becomes Element of the Show

By STUART ELLIOTT



A promotional idea for "Desperate Housewives" - ads on dry-cleaning bags - found its way into a story line on the ABC series.

A PROMOTIONAL ploy that helped "Desperate Housewives" become a hit for ABC has turned up during an episode of the show, in another example of how art imitates life - and how advertising imitates them both.

During the summer, before the premiere of "Desperate Housewives," the marketing executives for ABC Entertainment and their media planning agency, OMD, part of the **Omnicom Group**, came up with a list of unconventional promotions meant to help the series, a darkly comic nighttime soap, stand out amid the clutter of the new season. Among the ideas was emblazoning plastic dry-cleaning bags with ads for "Desperate Housewives."

In early September, a company called **Ambient Planet** distributed about a million such bags in Los Angeles and New York. They bore photographs of four principal cast

members of the series and the "Desperate Housewives" slogan, "Everybody has some dirty laundry."

Fast-forward to last Sunday, when during the episode titled "Anything You Can Do," the desperate housewife Lynnette Scavo (Felicity Huffman), trying to help her husband, Tom (Doug Savant), succeed, interrupted his presentation to business clients. Her suggestion to improve his campaign to sell the clients' make-believe product, Spotless Scrub, to women: advertise on dry-cleaning bags.

"My jaw hit the floor," said Perry King-Cerchio, president at Ambient Planet in New York. "We had no idea they'd be working it into a script."

"I was completely surprised," she added, "and extremely delighted."

Ambient Planet, started four years ago, specializes in the nontraditional marketing tactics that advertisers and networks are using to pique the curiosity of consumers and viewers. In addition to the dry-cleaning bags, which Ms. King-Cerchio called the company's most popular product, Ambient Planet also places ads on pizza boxes, on walls in nail salons and on bags that wrap newspapers for home delivery.

"The dry-cleaning bags were our big thing out of the ordinary to not only expose our target audience of women to the show, but to get them to talk about it," said Mike Benson, senior vice president for marketing in Burbank, Calif., of the ABC Entertainment division of ABC, owned by the **Walt Disney** Company.

The idea was taken from the pilot episode of "Desperate Housewives," Mr. Benson said, which included a scene "in which one woman is carrying a dry-cleaning bag."

"So we thought: 'You know what? Can we do anything on dry-cleaning bags?' " he added. "Plus it grew organically out of the 'dirty laundry' line."

Besides the dry-cleaning bags, the unconventional aspects of the campaign for "Desperate Housewives," which involved the Outdoor Media Group, a media buying agency, included ads in fitness centers through Health Club Panel Network in Encino, Calif., part of Captive Media. There were traditional elements as well, like commercials during ABC programs and ads in women's magazines.

The campaign played a role, Mr. Benson said, in the ratings success of the series, which is ranked No. 2 for the 2004-5 season to date, behind "C.S.I." on CBS. "We like to say that we underpromise," he said, "and then have the show overdeliver."

Mr. Benson said he was not surprised by the reference to the dry-cleaning bags because he and his colleagues read scripts and see tapes of episodes before they appear.

Still, "it put a smile on my face," he added. "I was flattered they mentioned it on a show watched by so many people" - more than 24 million, as estimated by Nielsen Media Research.

As for how the writers of the episode, John Pardee and Joey Murphy, knew about ads on dry-cleaning bags, Mr. Benson said: "We work pretty closely with the shows to make sure we're creating marketing campaigns that are true to the shows." Presentations describing the promotional campaign were made to the writers as well as the executive producers - Marc Cherry, Michael Edelstein and Tom Spezialy.

For another new hit series on ABC, "Lost," about the survivors of a plane crash stranded on an island, the ABC Entertainment promotional campaign included the distribution at beaches in California, New Jersey and New York of 1,000 bottles with "lost" messages inside. There were also mock missing-person posters that appeared at urban construction sites.

ABC, of course, is not the only network experimenting with offbeat promotional ideas. To draw viewers to a new drama, "Jack and Bobby," the WB network included DVD's of the premiere episode in Entertainment Weekly magazine and ran it online for subscribers of the AOL for Broadband service offered by America Online.

ABC is also not the only network to include inside-baseball jokes in episodes. In a scene set in a high school physics classroom during the Nov. 18 episode of "The O.C." on Fox Broadcasting, the Web log tvgasm (www.tvgasm.com) reported, three characters had the same names as agents at the Endeavor talent agency, which packages the series.

"To me it's fun to have messages like that," Mr. Benson said, adding that "one of my old bosses, Lloyd Braun," was perhaps as well known for lending his name to a character on "Seinfeld" as he was for being chairman of ABC Entertainment.

Mr. Benson described an unconventional idea he had to promote the return of the spy drama, "Alias," scheduled for Jan. 5, which features the actress Jennifer Garner: "Jennifer's always jumping on moving cars during the show. We wondered, could we have mannequins that look like her hanging on the sides of buses?"

"The bus company said there were too many reasons why we are not able to do it," a disappointed Mr. Benson said.