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Axe Follows Guys Into Mobile Chat Rooms

By Joan Voight

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SAN FRANCISCO As Facebook and MySpace have grabbed media attention and hordes of online members, another type of social network has been quietly growing in the last two years. These networks cater to mobile-phone users and are accessed via handsets.

Observers call them chat rooms in your pocket. AirG, the world's largest mobile community, has attracted 20 million unique users worldwide, compared to MySpace's 59 million unique users. And since members freely provide their personal information, it offers advertisers targeting capabilities as good or better than online social networks.

Trendy youth brands, such as Axe's personal care products for men, have taken notice of both the numbers and the targeting. But perhaps the biggest draw for these brands is that mobile networks provide access to a group of young consumers who don't spend much time online.

Members of mobile social networks are "not the niche of affluent, iPhone-chasing users. They are not the digerati," says Fred Ghahramani, CEO of Vancouver-based AirG. "For wired consumers, the phone is an inferior device compared to their PC. But for this group the phone is not inferior, it is part of their work life and social life and they look at it every five minutes," he says.

AirG research shows that most of its members are between 18-30 years-old and work in service industries, 60 percent did not go to college and more than half don't own a PC. Almost all bought their phones for \$100 or less, says Ghahramani.

Members used the network to locate friends or make new ones, send instant messages or join interest-based "lounges" to chat with multiple users about various subjects. They share photos and video and search for dates, just like on MySpace he says.

As the price of network-enabled phones dipped below \$100, user numbers have skyrocketed. According to Juniper Research, the number of users of mobile chat and dating services worldwide is expected to rise from 40 million in 2007 to 260 million in 2012, with revenue expected to exceed \$1 billion in 2010.

The growth has proceeded despite the complexities of the mobile industry. AirG's community, for instance, has different names depending on which operator carries it. Boost Mobile uses the name "Hookt," Sprint has "The Digital Lounge" and Verizon sports "Friendz." To join such a social network, members pay by the call, day or month, with fees averaging \$3-5 per month. Perhaps most importantly, a Boost member can talk to members of Sprint, Verizon and other carriers in the AirG network. Marketers, on the other hand, can run ads on only one carrier at a time.

Spreading a Message About Lusty Girls

Unilever's Axe brand wanted to target 18-24 year-old males on a dating-oriented mobile social network to its extend the reach of a new online mini-film. The spoofy five-minute video, "The Axe Vice Naughty to Nice Program," about sex-hungry women, was created by Bartle Bogle Hagerty and appears on Axe's Web site.

The company worked with AirG and mobile agency Ad Infuse (with input from BBH and media agency

MindShare) to develop a seven-week banner and video-sharing campaign that offers members of the 4-million-strong Hookt network free teaser versions of the video to share with friends. The mobile campaign was unveiled at the end of September.

Why did the brand opt for the mobile platform on a social network? Axe's strategy is based on going beyond TV, print and the PC to find additional consumers who would enjoy the video and bond with the brand's personality. After the company commissioned the clip, it searched for ways to extend its reach, explained Trevor Hamilton, director of national advertising sales at Ad Infuse. Axe found mobile social networks could target customers that online networks couldn't, offering a new level of personalization, he says.

"We know our audience of young guys are mobile phone super-users who use phones not only for communication, but also entertainment, so we thought this could be a fun way to introduce them to our new vice video," says Sam Chadha, director of antiperspirants at Unilever. "Digital media in general, including mobile social networks, provide a fun area to play where we can create unique and surprising experiences for our guy," he adds.

A crucial insight that came from the Axe's foray into mobile social networks is that not all offerings in the space are the same. "Brands have to consider the mindset of the consumer when he is using the network and marry the mindset with the ad objective," Hamilton says. For Axe, the Boost Hookt network has a reputation among young mobile phone users for making connections for dating and establishing relationships, so it is a "great fit for a campaign about lust," he says. Mobile networks that are strong on music, sports or news would not be as effective, he says.

And for Axe, targeting is key. Using a medium that is as targeted as mobile social networks helps alleviate questions from critics who charge that the work is offensive. Female bloggers have complained about Axe's past ads and The Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood launched a letter-writing effort on its Web site last week demanding parent company Unilever pull Axe ads including the vice video because the work is "sexist and degrading to women" and runs counter to Unilever's Dove ads which support girls' self-esteem, per the organization's newsletter.

The "unique and surprising" content of its vice video "is an over-the-top look at the funny things that happen when guys who wear Axe collide with girls in the mating game," says Chadha. "Our advertising aims to be as targeted as possible to the 18-24 year-old guy. We created this video to serve as nothing more than an exaggerated spoof on guys' desire to get noticed by women," which resonates with this group, he says.

In the Axe social mobile campaign, banner ads showing the logo and images of a "naughty" girl appear at the bottom quarter of the phone's screen only if the user's profile says he is male, aged 18-24 and has a phone with video capabilities. The banner asks the member to sign up to receive five 30-second clips from the Axe video (one each week). Once the member provides his phone number and clicks the sign-up button, he gets a full-screen picture from the video, a message that his first clip has been sent to his e-mail and the option to send the clip to other network members. Each user interaction is tracked, says Hamilton.

Industry surveys suggest that Axe is a pioneer among advertisers that are studying how to use mobile social networks. In mid-August, Jupiter Research forecast worldwide mobile-operator revenue from user-generated content will increase tenfold over the next five years—and half of that revenue will come from social-network services. According to Jupiter researcher Windsor Holden, "Major brands such as Match.com and Webdate have recognized that customers are willing to pay a mobility premium for 24/7 access to [chat and dating] services and are increasing deploying mobile applications."

A July survey from Airwide Solutions, a mobile messaging provider, indicated that 28 percent of global brands are considering implementing mobile marketing campaigns in the next year, double the number of brands considering such a campaign in January 2006.

"Mobile social networks are not for every brand," concludes Ad Infuse's Hamilton. They are best for brands "aimed at Gen-Y that want to experiment...and are looking for a specific, niche network of people."

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