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Life after the 30-second advertising spot

In response to ad-skipping technology, advertisers are turning ads into a storytelling medium.

By Gloria Goodale | Staff writer of *The Christian Science Monitor*

LOS ANGELES – Network television has always used its shows to sell the sponsor's soap. But as audiences find more ways to zap those commercial messages (think TiVo) and spend less time watching TV overall, networks are scrambling to find new ways to make shows sing for their supper.

In a recent episode of CBS's "CSI: New York," a cellphone rings with the song "Talk" by Coldplay, which the characters discuss. At the next commercial break, the audience is invited to download the ringtone for \$2.49. Over on NBC's "Las Vegas," sports fans en route to the Winter Olympics join the story line. The episode, which aired just prior to the Turin Games, then follows the group to Italy.

Welcome to life after the 30-second TV spot. These examples are a tiny glimpse of what one media pundit calls "desperation marketing" - advertisers going beyond simple product placement to capture the hearts and wallets of increasingly ad-wary consumers who are spending more time online and on cellphones and less watching TV.

While the traditional commercial is not extinct quite yet, it's on the endangered list. "That ship has sailed," says Joseph Jaffe, author of the book, "Life After the 30-Second Spot."

Dollars spent on TV advertising have been declining since 2004, when revenue hit \$9 billion. "We've witnessed the peaking of TV," says Mr. Jaffe. "We're incrementally dissipating that spending on TV as the number of viable alternatives and substitutions continue to proliferate."

The average American spends more than 15 percent of his media time online, as opposed to virtually zero 15 years ago, says Steven King, senior adviser for the Institute for the Future, a nonprofit research group in Palo Alto, Calif. But it's not just the outlets that are changing, says Mr. King; so is the consumer. Americans, he says, have long prided themselves on being nobody's fool, but customers are now pickier than ever.

Today's consumer, especially the under-35 generation raised on computers and cellphones, demand interaction with a product and prefer to do their own research prior to purchase. Advertisers are scrambling to adapt. "All of these things are an attempt to sneak by the commercial sniffer in the average consumer," says King. As a result, the line between content and ads will continue to blur, producing what he calls "deeply commercial" entertainment.

The online "digisodes" for Snickers candy bars are one example of that phenomenon. A series of digital films about hip-hop factory workers who gain superpowers after eating Snickers bars was created by ad agency BBDO, targeting the teen market. The series launched in June (InstantDef.com) and is meant to be watched like videos, not commercials. "This is a good example of the ad as a story line," says Jimmy Smith, who created the campaign. BBDO chose the hip-hop music and comic-book style to reach teens who get most of their information online, he says. "It's the kind of entertainment and product help that our product's target audience will enjoy," he says.

Cellphones are also being mined for their ability to leverage a consumer's lifestyle. A surfer on his way to the beach in Malibu can now use his phone to check wave activity. As he does, he logs into an online surfing community run by a local retailer, Beach Bum Surf Shop, and supported by AirG, a mobile service provider. He swaps tips with fellow surfers and, more important, maybe buys a board and hat during the call. Up in Palo Alto, a new company named Mozes has made it possible for phones to be used "almost like a remote control," says CEO Dorrian Porter. Users can save and retrieve a TV show or any other digital information from businesses that partner with Mozes.

Ads designed for commercial breaks are being retooled as well. A company named 1800GotJunk recently launched a national campaign for its junk-removal services. But it was not particularly successful. That's because it was driven by what ad maven Simon Sinek calls legacy-thinking. "It was full of information about their services, but nobody really cared about big shiny trucks and junk removal. They didn't understand what that meant for them," Mr. Sinek says.

Sinek worked with the company to create a campaign from the consumer's perspective. Instead of a standard "informational" ad, he turned it into a lifestyle question and came up with what Sinek calls the "nagging" campaign. "We had to re-create the spouse saying, 'Get that junk out of here,'" says Sinek, who teaches marketing at Columbia University in New York. Four single-screen, five-second ads said simply, "Did you clean the attic yet?" Each popped up once throughout a standard commercial break, concluding with a fifth screen that simply said, "Just Get it Done," with the 1-800-GotJunk phone number.

But while consumers may be getting savvier about skipping the 30-second spot, "smart targeting" and the saturation of commercial messages comes at a price, say some observers. "We're living in a prechewed world," says Matt Felling, media director of Center for Media and Public

Affairs in New York. In the fight for our dollars and eyeballs, he says, the media has turned us into commodities. Mr. Felling says we're all being categorized and then directed toward thinking that reflects our own. "Don't know what to think about the world? Just turn on cable news," he says. "Americans are being called upon to fight for their own independent thought. We need to get back to kicking tires on everything."

New network, new ads

The CW, a merger of the soon-to-be-defunct networks The WB and UPN, kicks off on Sept. 20 with a two-hour special episode of "America's New Top Model," introducing what executives call the next wave in TV ads: "content wraps," which are sponsored minimovies that both tell a story and push the sponsor's product.

The "cw's," as entertainment president Dawn Ostroff calls them, will replace the regular 30-second spot and appear sequentially so that viewers must stay tuned to the end of the hour to get the whole story.

"We've had a great response from the advertisers," says Ms. Ostroff. "They're always looking for new ways to engage viewers and get their messages across."



MINI ADS: 1-800-Got-Junk uses five-second commercial spots to grab viewers' attention.

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