

Adventures in alternative advertising

Graffiti performances. Pizza-box ads. Touchscreen in taxicabs. Upstart agencies are going beyond billboards and TV to sell your products

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Adam Watson was on his way out of a tanning salon one day last year when a bright ray of inspiration left its mark. Here was a retail venue whose clients were mainly young, trendy women with enough time to wile away part of the day under a sun lamp, working on their appearance. "I started thinking, this is a very, very specific demographic that a lot of companies would love to get their hands on," says Watson, the 23-year-old founder of Statements Media, an upstart Toronto firm.

Since then, Watson has cut deals with 500 salons across Ontario, allowing him to install mini-boards directly in their tanning rooms. His firm then rents the ad space to clothing and cosmetics companies, spas and lifestyle magazines. Watson knew that nightclubs and restaurants were filled with such billboards, but he reckoned it mad more sense to "hit consumers before they go out. You're putting something right in their hands."

In the age of Google ads and increasingly ubiquitous outdoor advertising, the search for alternative media has become something of a growth industry as entrepreneurs scour the everyday environment — both real and virtual — for high-visibility, high-impact venues suitable for plugging product. As Watson puts it, the typical person sees 3,000 ads each day, which means you've got to be especially well-placed or really obtrusive to win the consumer's attention.

New strategies abound. Online, advertisers have flocked to virtual worlds such as Second Life, plastering these populous online environments with digital ads targeted at hundreds of thousands of avatars and their respective puppet masters.

In the real world, so-called "environment buys" — large wallpaper-type ads — have become commonplace in transit stations and airports. Niche players like Boston's Alt Terrain Engagement Media offer a smorgasbord of options — both conventional approaches, such as sampling events and blogs, as well as quirky options, like graffiti performances, where street artists are recruited to paint brand murals at concerts, extreme sports competitions and other "experiential marketing events."

The trick, of course, is connecting the venue with a desirable target audience. Last year, Golnaz Mindell, a 29-year-old Vancouver-based marketer, launched Fresh Tracks Media Inc., a three-person Toronto outfit that puts eye-catching ads on pizza boxes. "It's a guaranteed breakthrough," she says. "It's hard to miss a box that's being delivered right into the home."

Mindell, who's worked in the U.S., had seen the concept south of the border and in Europe, but nothing on Canadian pizza boxes. The reason: 30% of Canada's 9,000 pizza joints belong to national chains that want to advertise their own products on their boxes. Instead, she and her partners struck an alliance with Canada's largest pizza box distributor, whose customers are the hundreds of independents and small chains.

Their first customer: Alliance Atlantis' Food Network, which dialled up a national media buy last fall. Mindell says it's all about getting the timing right rather than having an advertiser paying hefty sums to maximize impressions. "We're getting a pizza box in front of people while they're eating and figuring out what to watch on TV."

Watson followed the same logic with another alternative ad venue he's lined up: the poly bags that swaddle your drycleaned clothes. As with the pizza boxes, the bags provide large, visible surfaces, and end up traveling to the inner sanctum of the typical home: a closet. What's more, Watson says, drycleaners cater to an affluent, well-educated, professional consumer — the second most popular quarry for advertisers, after the hotly pursued 15-24 crowd. The advertisers include leading brands such as The Bay and Country Style Donuts, as well as independent mortgage and insurance companies.

For both companies, the advertisers may regard such alternative venues as just one more channel in broadly based marketing and promotional campaigns that are often quarterbacked by national media buying companies.

With many alternative advertising firms, however, digital screens represent the real pot of gold. With equipment costs dropping sharply, such programmable screens now offer the possibility of running many ads that can be remotely rotated and updated, rather than one static ad on billboards that just sit there and attract (un-staged) graffiti.

Onestop Media Group, a Toronto media firm, has been installing digital screens in retail stores and hotels, and has controlled exclusive rights to the TTC's crowded subway platforms since 2004. Many stations now feature bright overhead screens showing a mélange of Citytv newscasts, consumer products ads and public service spots.

For his part, Watson has his eye on the digital screen market as well. In June, he launched a pilot project that saw small screens installed in back seats of a hundred taxis in Durham Region, a suburb east of Toronto. A test run in Toronto begins in October.

These electronic ads can already be found in cabs in New York and Shanghai. Watson's will be interactive, with touch screens that can both print coupons and take some passenger abuse. "They're designed to withstand a punch and they can be turned off," he says. Imagine: an e-ad that fades to black. Now *that's* an alternative medium.

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