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Today's ads can sneak up on you

While global promotion and ads migrate to some pretty unexpected places, they are also being augmented in size and subtlety to catch the eye of today's capricious consumers.

Research has discovered that the average consumer fails to remember ads 24 hours later, and it is reported that this level is at its lowest level in history as many folks ignore ads altogether. The net result is that advertisers are now paying more to get less.

What has resulted is the marketing and media practice of jolting target audiences. The practice involves nipping away at traditional media and tucking promotional messages into some surprise spots. Here in the U.S., the Atlantic magazine featured signage in muffin displays. The Economist advertised in pizza boxes as well as in the game of Twister.

While recently touring Vietnam, I photographed advertising on manpowered Cyclos for a new drink product. Throughout Hanoi and Saigon, a ubiquitous form of advertising for concrete and demolition work was the illegal stenciling of a cell phone number on walls. You couldn't nip the size of an ad any tighter than that.

During the recent presidential campaign, Obama ads touting online voter registration and early balloting in ten battleground states were strategically tucked into 18 games on Microsoft's Xbox Live service to reach young males. This was the first presidential candidate to advertise via online video games.

On the same subject, an advertising agency turned stoplights into pro-Obama ads by printing hundreds of transparent decals of the Obama "sunrise" logo sized to fit over the green circle in a stop light throughout North Carolina, Georgia and Virginia. The subtle result was visible to some, but not all passersby, depending on your speed.

With the never ending, growing battle with clutter, the length of ads continues to be expanded. MTV has 16+ minutes; ABC has 15+ minutes; Fox has 15+ minutes; CBS has nearly 14 minutes. Electronic Arts, believing their ads must be different to keep the attention of its target audience, uses "Cwickies," a series of tightly nipped 10-second spots. Interestingly, the result of this trend is that cutting through the clutter may have resulted in creating yet more clutter.

Advertising professionals are split on the value of blanketing the consumer environment with marketing messages, from ads imprinted on eggshells and digital displays on elevators to ads projected on floors and sidewalks. While some believe the strategy of ubiquitous advertising is a necessary consequence of the global media-fragmentation trend, others feel the saturation of advertising messages creates a kind of "sensory overload."

Businesses and entrepreneurs have always had the need to stand out. It will be a tough marketing environment around the globe in 2009 but if no one knows you exist and what product and services you sell, will anyone buy? Creativity and the ability to nip, tuck and expand your messages property may be a great line of defense.