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And now a scene from our sponsor

By Lawrie Zion, Film writer
12aug04

PRODUCT placement is about to enter a golden age. At least that's the view of one of the emerging players on the Australian scene.

Speaking at a session at the Screen Producers Association of Australia's conference on the Gold Coast on Monday, James Grant-Hay, who heads a new company called In Shot, waxed lyrical about the potential of "branded entertainment" and the benefits it can bring to film and television.

But what exactly is product placement in the 21st century? And how well is the industry placed to embrace its supposed benefits to film and TV?

On the surface, product placement sounds straightforward enough. Your lead actor has to eat breakfast, so why not get a well-known brand to pay to have its cereal on display? Ditto if your action hero needs to get about in a zippy BMW, the car of choice for 007, who used to drive an Aston Martin.

Yet the reality is no longer so simple. One thing the SPAA panel was united on was that there is a lot more to product placement than getting big name stars to drive luxury cars or sip well-known soft drinks.

"Everybody is seeking to do it but not all are doing it well," argues John Gregory, chief executive of Freehand Group, whose company is producing the Australian version of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* for the Ten Network. Gregory says an estimated \$120 million was spent on product placement in 2004, which may signal a new high growth area. But any deals done still had to be reconciled with the integrity of the program.

He says the pay-offs for consumer brands can be lucrative. In the case of the US version of *Queer Eye*, product placement has worked not only for the featured brands but "has also grown for the entire men's grooming category".

A recent *Fortune* magazine article, stated the day after a *Queer Eye* episode, American men were five times more likely to go shopping than women.

Yet the dangers of overkill are considerable. When a makeover target of *Queer Eye* was presented with Crest Whitestrips, the result was an immediate surge in product awareness. But according to Gregory, the program producers were aghast when the sales department of the broadcaster declared they wanted the same product to appear an additional six times.

"It simply wouldn't gel with the story-lines of the series," says Gregory, who cautions the program's credibility will be compromised by excessive reference to one brand.

The challenge remains how to reconcile the high sales agenda with the editorial and creative damage that such sales can do.

It's a conundrum all too familiar to the producers of *The Block*, where Colgate Palmolive products made one too many gratuitous appearances during the second series.

Gregory stresses that one of the challenges faced by producers is that different audiences are likely to respond differently to branded entertainment. In Australia, a Universal McCann survey found that teenagers and those in the 18 to 24 demographic are incredibly

cynical and dismissive about product placement deals in general, while those over 25 are more comfortable about it "provided the product in question is relevant to the program they're watching".

Still, with media consumption habits constantly fragmenting, and new viewing technologies that will allow consumers to watch downloaded versions of their favourite programs without commercials, advertisers realise they need new strategies to maintain brand awareness. In Shot's Grant-Hay believes one outcome will be for more brands to become content producers themselves.

Grant-Hay is also encouraging feature film producers to send him their scripts so he can assess possible placement opportunities. Two of the films he has been involved with are the forthcoming Delta Goodrem star vehicle, Hating Alison Ashley, and the big-screen adaptation of Elliot Perlman's novel, Three Dollars.

But what do film producers really stand to gain from this process? Securing free product for props is the easy bit, but both Grant-Hay and Hating Alison Ashley producer John Brousek admit there's little likelihood of any real money flowing directly into the coffers of the production budget from any such arrangements.

Rather, the preferred outcome appears to be securing arrangements with brands such as Pepsi to become promotional partners at the time of the film's release - an arrangement that could significantly lower the cost of the media blitz required to launch the movie.

Brousek admits he would have struggled to attract any interest without the presence of Goodrem. For the time being, it appears that any movie hoping to attract brand power will need, at the very least, to have formidable star wattage of its own to bring to the table.

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