

# Going Overground

**Under increasing pressure, advertisers look for novel ways to reach consumers.**

By Steven Heller

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A few years ago Kirshenbaum Bond + Partners stenciled New York sidewalks with the line: “From here it looks like you could use some new underwear,” for an intimate apparel company. I don’t remember the brand, but I do know it sold some panties. Last Christmas the “Cheer Pass” campaign for Starbucks, produced in collaboration with Wieden + Kennedy, involved affixing red paper cups precariously on dozens of cab roofs. If a Good Samaritan warned the taxi’s passenger about the errant cup before driving off, a free Starbucks gift card was awarded.

This is *guerrilla* (or perhaps stealth) advertising, a term the industry uses to label a breed of “edgy” urban campaign. Known also as “never been done before” (or NBDB) ads, this strategy was co-opted directly from DIY alternative culture and wild posters, and involves the semisubversive planting of messages in venues and on objects ordinarily free of advertising: banana peels, body tattoos, even urinal- disinfectant pucks.

Today’s newest tactic—which has produced another buzzword (“the most awful of the month,” says Brian Collins, director of Ogilvy’s Brand Innovation Group)—is viral advertising. Usually passed along through blogs and e-mails, it is, according to Collins, “anything that inspires and supports word-of-mouth stories about a brand.” He points to last year’s Dove “Evolution of Beauty” campaign as an overnight viral sensation when more than a million people watched a time-elapsed video of a model made gorgeous on YouTube. “It became such a phenomenon. The video got front-page news coverage and was on *The View*,” Collins says. “It broke without traditional media in less than a week.”

Alternative campaigns like these—as well as *ambient ads*, which involve legally and illegally commandeering novel public spaces—have been so successful that some agencies and marketing firms are devoted exclusively to colonizing urban sites and the Internet. The result is a profusion of advertising detritus—let’s call it adtritus. Predictably, most agencies hold that the ersatz grassroots approach is simply a new way to put the word out, another tool in their bulging media kits. But Stuart Ewen, author of *All Consuming Images* and *Typecasting*, sees a sinister side: “The main thing these appropriations ‘add’ to our lives is an intensified sense of distrust of and alienation from others. This grows out of the suspicion that any human interaction, any product used or opinion expressed, may be a commercially staged event designed to get us to buy, think, or behave in certain ways.”

Ironically, Ewen’s son, Sam Travis Ewen, is the founder and CEO of Interference Inc., a firm specializing in alternative marketing (and responsible for the guerrilla fiasco in Boston, where police arrested two artists for posting electronic contraptions advertising a Turner Network cartoon). “Guerrilla figures out how to bring a

message, demonstration, conversation, or icon to the public in unique ways,” he says. “When [it is] cleverly executed, the target consumer is not only interested in it but doesn’t feel ‘marketed to,’ and often seeks it out.”

Viral, guerrilla, and ambient methods have been adopted for a very practical reason. “Advertising, for all its immensity and importance, is in trouble,” NYU historian Stephen Duncombe writes in his new book, *Dream: Re-Imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy*. With the advent of such anti-ad filters as TiVo, and the downsizing of traditional media due to competition from the Internet and other disruptive technologies, mainstream advertisers are finding it difficult to target audiences efficiently. “Traditional spaces for advertising are drying up, and consumers are harder to reach,” Duncombe notes. So placing ads in unusual spaces or camouflaging them to be indistinguishable from everyday interaction is a predictable invasion.

Of course, exploiting emerging media and venues is not new. In the 1920s, advertisers conquered the heavens through skywriting, and the public loved it. Technology is a great seducer. Whenever a new one is introduced, advertisers immediately adopt it. These days the colonization of public space is the next frontier, and digital display technologies have made it infinitely easier to post, plaster, project, and affix messages on almost any surface. Despite certain ordinances prohibiting it, every nook and cranny appears fair game. But how much NBDB advertising will the public tolerate before it feels violated?

“Guerrilla advertising is filled with equal amounts of shamelessness and ingenuity,” Collins explains. On the shameless side, he cites a “plague of very suspicious ‘restoration’ scaffolding that smothers old buildings with ads for BMW, Mercedes-Benz, and Hollywood movies.” Still, he insists, “guerrilla thinking can redefine what an ‘ad’ is.” But, adds Sam Ewen, “it is very often done wrong. The backlash that Sony PSP got regarding its fake street graffiti is a prime example of that.” The company tried to exploit the graffiti genre rather than create a strategy whereby it would appear “naturally” in the environment.

When a guerrilla campaign invades the public’s space, says Rick Boyko, managing director of Virginia Commonwealth University’s Adcenter, it must “reward them.” A superb example, he says, was Charmin’s New York toilet pavilions, installed during the recent holiday season. Rather than a typical Times Square billboard, 20 fully stocked, meticulously maintained public restrooms were placed in a vacant retail space. The initiative—designed by experiential marketing consultants the Gigunda Group, from Manchester, New Hampshire—generated both goodwill and considerable national press.

The purpose of most advertising (and here guerrilla is the appropriate term) is to hit and run before the public becomes immune to it. Blitzkrieg-like strategies are perfect. Recently I came upon one such blitz in New York City: the stairway leading up from Pennsylvania Station to Seventh Avenue, a new prime spot to post huge ambient ads. Just days before the exceedingly high traffic of New Year’s Eve, the stairs were taken over by Kellogg’s. And while it may seem that walking over a Strawberry Special K ad would negatively impact the brand’s integrity by linking breakfast cereal to grimy shoes, the display’s sheer reticulated stair-step spectacle was curiously seductive.

Perhaps ambient gigantism is its own reward. The hybrid billboard in Times Square last summer promoting Cingular's claim of fewer dropped calls made a splash (or crash) with its sign perched precariously on the sidewalk to look as though it had literally "dropped" from the scaffolding above (all that was missing was the Wicked Witch's legs sticking out from underneath). Never mind that it also impeded foot traffic by causing small bottlenecks—the conceptual audacity was enough to ensure a memorable experience (and it was wisely removed before becoming an inconvenience).

Guerrillas cannot afford to make enemies of consumers, though they often take calculated risks. Last year MFP New York was commissioned to rebrand Rheingold, a New York working-class beer that had gone out of business, to appeal to a hip "downtown" clientele. Neil Powell, MFP's chief creative officer, decided to use a still somewhat controversial art form: graffiti. "With a very limited budget, the decision was to get street traction," he explains, and so he targeted the Lower East Side and Williamsburg, Brooklyn, where he learned that local store owners were responsible for keeping their protective pull-down night gates from being vandalized and were fined when they were defaced. This triggered Powell's idea of enlisting local street artists to paint "whatever they wanted" on the gates as long as somewhere they wrote in the word *Rheingold*—large or small. Three blocks of Rivington Street were filled with amazing paintings, and both the artists—most of whom worked at night and were paid in cash or beer—and the shop owners were happy. Even the community declared it a beautification program. And "since street artists respect other street artists," Powell adds, "the screens were unlikely to be vandalized."

But is this beautification or guileful promotion? Are other guerrilla campaigns adding value or stealing attention? And are they truly edgy? Back in the teens, Edward Bernays, the father of public relations, claimed that advertising, celebrated in his book *Propaganda*, was intrinsic to a healthy democracy because it informed the public. Of course, that was a whole cartload of spin aimed at justifying the practice. Ads were never meant to be social services, and alternative strategies—even those that provide public toilets for a few weeks during Christmas—are calculated to reach consumers who are geared to different delivery systems and virtually immune to conventional marketing tactics. As Stuart Ewen suggests, they're only subversive insofar as they weaken our trust filters. And soon enough they will become old and predictable, leaving still more adritus to fill our public, private, and mental spaces.

<http://www.metropolismag.com/cda/story.php?artid=2557>

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