

Hollywood Unions Object to Product Placement on TV

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By SHARON WAXMAN

LOS ANGELES, Nov. 13 - A group of show business unions are denouncing the creeping practice of "stealth advertising," the integration of commercial products into the story lines of television shows, which they say deceives audiences and forces writers and actors to do jobs they were not hired for.

The Writers Guild of America, West, and the Writers Guild of America, East, with the support of the Screen Actors Guild, will hold a news conference Monday calling for a code of conduct to govern this latest twist in the world of advertising, in which product placement has become increasingly central to plotlines.

Reality shows like "The Apprentice," soap operas like "All My Children" and even prime-time scripted hits like "Desperate Housewives" have all adopted the practice of writing products into the shows as a way of attracting ad dollars that have faltered in the age of TiVo and hundreds of cable choices.

One episode of "Desperate Housewives" last season on ABC, a division of the Walt Disney Company, involved one of the characters getting a job as a spokeswoman for Buick's LaCrosse, in which she extolled the virtues of the car. Buick is owned by General Motors. WB has a deal with Procter & Gamble for inserting its products in "What I Like About You." But reality shows are the most popular vehicles for product placement, with everything from contestants on NBC's "The Apprentice" being required to write a new Burger King jingle, to "The Restaurant," also on NBC, which mentions an American Express credit card numerous times in a number of episodes.

A spokesman for NBC, which is owned by General Electric, declined to comment without having seen a position paper the writers guilds are expected to release on Monday.

That paper says: "We are being told to write the lines that sell this merchandise, and to deftly disguise the sale as story. Our writers are being told to perform the function of ad copywriter, but to disguise this as storytelling."

"Just as there is an established right to truth-in-advertising, there should be a similar right to truth-in-programming where advertising is concerned," said Alan Rosenberg, president of the actors guild, in a statement also to be released on Monday. "The sharp increase of product placement in film and television too often takes place without any compensation to the very performers that are expected to push those products and more often is done without any consultation with those performers."

The unions are calling for clearer disclosure to viewers when products are integrated into a show's story line, and for greater say in the practice by actors and writers. "Failing that," warned the writers' memorandum, "we will seek additional F.C.C. regulation."

Patric M. Verrone, president of the Writers Guild of America, West, said the practice had become worse in the age of reality programming. "They started doing it in reality TV, where writers don't have union protections and are easy marks for getting this kind of material in there," he said. "You're less likely to find it on network prime-time series, but the creep is moving in that direction. It has become intrusive and overwhelming to us as a union of writers."

Gary Ruskin, who runs the consumer advocacy nonprofit group Commercial Alert, said the networks were already in violation of existing Federal Communications Committee regulations regarding sponsorship disclosure, and that more rules were needed.

"Product placement is dishonest advertising," he said. "It's stealth advertising," adding that his group had already petitioned the commission to require greater disclosure.

"Sponsorship identification has been required since the outset of television advertising, but it hasn't been designed to handle sophisticated product integration such as this," he said. "The rules need to be updated."

Writers and producers said they struggled with juggling their primary jobs, to create entertaining programs, with the often last-minute demands of product integration.

Scott Miller, a story producer on the reality show "American Dream Derby," a horse-racing contest that appeared on GSN earlier this year, said he was required to get Diet Dr. Pepper, a product of Cadbury Schweppes, into every episode, complicating his efforts to get contestants to interact in ways that served a story line.

"These were moments when people were crying, or two cast members were screaming at each other, or two allies were sneaking off to strategize, and there were several times when it was: 'Let me stop and make sure everyone has a can of Diet Dr. Pepper,' " Mr. Miller said. "I'd literally be below the frame line, handing a can of Diet Dr. Pepper to someone who didn't have one. First and foremost, I want to tell a good story. I'm not necessarily there to help make a commercial."

Rich Cronin, president and chief executive of GSN, which is jointly owned by Sony Pictures Entertainment and the Liberty Media Corporation, said the network took care that the placement of the soft drink was not intrusive. "I don't think it's that big a deal, to find one point in a one-hour episode to have someone have a beverage," he said.

And he warned that the unions were swimming against the tide. "Because there are so many TV networks, because TiVo and personal video recorders are so popular, there's going to be more product integration," he said. "But networks have to be careful to do it organically, otherwise viewers will reject the programming."