



AD SKIPPERS BEWARE: ASK.COM GOING AFTER YOU WITH TV CRAWL

Campaign Aims to Send Users to Site by Posing Questions During Shows

By Brian Steinberg

NEW YORK - Guess what, ad skippers: Someone's got your number.

In an effort certain to raise eyebrows, search engine Ask.com just started an ad campaign that relies mostly on "crawls" that show up in the lower part of the screen during selected cable programs. While the marketer will still run traditional commercials, it also hopes to capture attention by posing questions to viewers at the bottom of the screen about the very subject matter they are watching at the moment. To get the answer, those watching will need to surf to the company's search site.

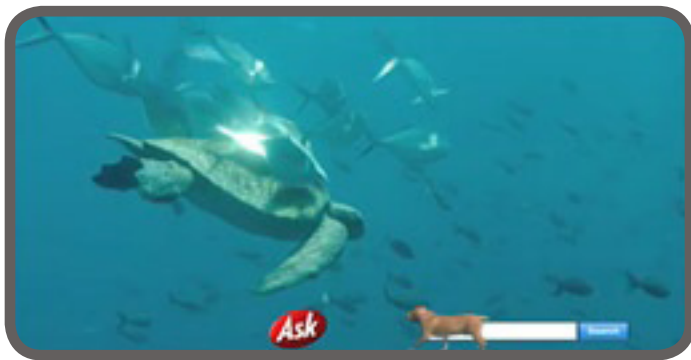
Ask.com didn't intend to force a showdown over the state of TV advertising today, but its hard-to-miss promotions could do just that. The TV industry is sorting out how to deal with an ever-increasing number of viewers armed with fast-forwarding DVRs who skip the ads that support the programs they love to watch.

"The reality is consumers can't have it both ways. They can't have content for free and content without advertising," said JOHN MOORE, DIRECTOR-IDEAS AND INNOVATIONS AT INTERPUBLIC GROUP'S MULLEN, the agency that negotiated placement of the ads. "Will this be the advertising of the future? I don't think this will be the end-all and be-all, but this could be a tenet."

It's no secret that viewers are most interested in what's on their TV screens when it entertains or excites them. And it's certainly clear that commercials don't always fall into that category. About 30.5% of households with TVs will have DVRs by the end of this year, according to Interpublic's Magna, and that figure could rise to nearly 44% by the end of 2014. Even TV executives say they believe that about 60% of DVR owners use the machines to speed past the ads - in the process wiping out a fundamental pillar of the economics that makes the industry hum.

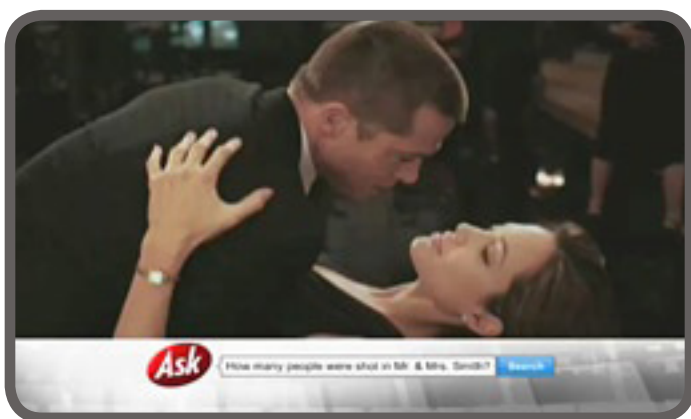
INCREASING 'SNIPES'

So how can TV advertising continue to thrive? No one will say it overtly, but there's a growing consensus that one way to do it is to weave it even more intrusively into programs. TV networks have known this for years; in addition to increasing their reliance on product placement, they regularly promote their own comedies, dramas and reality fare with an array of in-show promos known as "snipes" that have grown increasingly obnoxious over the years. You may have witnessed AMC run a hard-to-miss promo for its "Breaking Bad" during key moments of "The Godfather Part II." Last summer, TBS ran a promo for its "Bill Engvall Show" that had Mr. Engvall click a remote to stop the action of the show running over his head so attention had to be paid to his pitch. NBC took things a step further: The Peacock has run ads for movies such as "American Gangster" and "Evan Almighty" -- produced by an NBC Universal sibling studio -- during first-run episodes of "Heroes."



"There's always a danger here," said Mullen's Mr. Moore. "Let's face it: In the consumer's mind, this is the last vestige, or that last uncharted territory."

It's also some of the most effective real estate on the TV screen.



"We have definitely seen an increase in audience flow from one program to the next when we used in-content messaging to 'flag up' the next program coming along," said Guy Slattery, senior VP-marketing for the A&E and Bio cable channels. Promos during shows can also drive "an immediate spike in traffic" to a network's website, he said.

Ask.com is already seeing results from the in-show displays, said Jim Safka, the company's CEO, simply by monitoring website traffic and queries coming in. "It's a very creative way to connect in a much deeper way to the programming," he said.

WANT TO LEARN MORE? Ask promises to answer all your Brangelina, turtle queries.

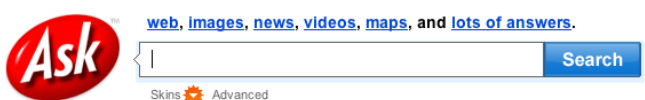
FITTING IN

To be sure, this stuff has bubbled up onscreen for a while. Who hasn't seen a trivia question sponsored by Kleenex show up at a particularly sad moment during a movie on TNT, or a "brought to you by" message from Chrysler at the bottom of the screen on TBS? More often than not, those placements came about by the channels' parent, Time Warner's Turner Entertainment, offering interesting packages to clients, said Katherine Johnson, senior VP-promotions and marketing at Turner, which will run Ask.com crawls on TBS, TNT and TruTV. Eighteen channels will run the program-specific commercials, including AMC, FX, National Geographic Channel, MLB Network and NFL Network. The Ask.com ads will do their best to blend in with the programs in which they appear. They might ask a specific question about a movie, pose a legal query during an episode of "Law & Order," or even mix with animals during an appearance on National Geographic. Networks appear to sense that consumers have a higher tolerance for ad shenanigans in particular categories of programming. On FX, that means you might see Ask.com questions in movies but not in signature dramas such as "Damages" or "Nip/Tuck." At Turner, the promos will run during reruns of "Law & Order" and "Home Improvement" but not in "Friends" or "The Closer."

Indeed, Mullen had to navigate entire fields of concern. "We could do it in certain programs and not in certain programs, in certain dayparts and not in other dayparts. That was the laborious process," Mr. Moore said. "How do you price these? Are they worth more than a 15-second spot?"

As set-top boxes from cable, satellite and telecom providers grow more sophisticated, in-show ads are likely to become as much a part of a program as your favorite actor or actress. Marketers will prompt couch potatoes to learn more about their goods and services with a click of the remote. With every popping logo or pitch, however, comes the danger that the viewer will throw up his or her arms and watch a DVD.

"It's a delicate balance between breakthrough and intrusiveness," said Bruce Lefkowitz, exec VP, Fox Cable Entertainment Networks. "If you cross that line, [viewers] are going to tell you. They're going to vote with their remote."



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