

The New York Times

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 28, 2006

Old-School Sponsorship From a Digital-Era Company

By **STUART ELLIOTT**

MATCHMAKER, matchmaker, make me a match. So sang the daughters of Tevye in "Fiddler on the Roof." For a TV comedy series that begins tonight — about a young woman's dating life, appropriately enough — Madison Avenue is playing matchmaker, bringing together an advertiser and a network for an elaborate sponsorship deal.

The matchmaker is MediaHub from Mullen, the media planning and buying division of Mullen, an agency owned by the Interpublic Group of Companies. MediaHub is hooking up Match.com, the dating Web site operated by IAC/InterActiveCorp, with the TBS cable network for a season-long sponsorship of the new sitcom, called "My Boys."

Under the agreement, estimated at \$1 million to \$2 million, Match.com will be featured in all 13 episodes of "My Boys," which chronicles the adventures of a twentysomething who covers sports for a Chicago newspaper as she juggles her career and social life. The Web site will be featured prominently in two episodes and play cameo roles in the rest.

Other elements of the deal include identification of "My Boys" as "sponsored by Match.com" in a television, print, radio and online promotional campaign that TBS is creating for the series; the posting of a profile of a character from the series on Match.com; billboard-style ads for Match.com on a special "My Boys" Web site (tbs.com/shows/myboys/); and a discussion of "My Boys" and Match.com during an episode of another TBS show, "Movie and a Makeover."

The sponsorship is another example of an advertising technique that is being revived, decades after fading from the media landscape. Known as branded entertainment, it recalls the days when announcers intoned at the start of TV and radio shows that they were being "brought to you by" some name-brand consumer product.

Branded entertainment is returning to television because of its ability to interweave product pitches into the story lines of the shows that consumers want to watch. The goal is to counter viewers' increasing ability to ignore or avoid more interruptive advertising like traditional commercials.

Among other advertisers that are taking part in the revival of branded entertainment are Coca-Cola, General Motors, Philips Electronics North America, Procter & Gamble and Unilever.

In some instances, they are even getting marquee billing in the names of the shows they are sponsoring, a throwback to the era of "Schlitz Playhouse of Stars" and "The United States Steel Hour." For example, the AMC cable network announced yesterday the creation of an ad package to be called the "Lincoln Friday Night Feature," sponsored by the Lincoln Mercury division of the Ford Motor Company.

The screenshot shows a Match.com profile for a woman named Stephanie Layne. The profile includes a photo of her, her name, and a headline: "Chicago Girly Girl seeks Lincoln Park Manly Man". Below the headline, it says "28-year-old woman Chicago, Illinois, United States seeking men 21-40 within 50 miles of Chicago, Illinois". There are buttons for "EMAIL HER" and "WINK AT HER". A "matchWords" section lists categories like "chicago", "fashion", "french", "movie", "romantic", "strong", and "writing". A list of personal details follows: Relationships: Never Married; Have kids: None; Want kids: Definitely (1); Ethnicity: Black / African descent; Body type: Slender; Height: 5'7" (170.2cms); Religion: Agnostic; Smoke: No Way; Drink: Social drinker, maybe one or two.

A Match.com profile will appear on the new TV show "My Boys." Kellee Stewart, who plays Stephanie Layne, appears above.

The image is a promotional graphic for the TV show "My Boys". It features a large photo of a smiling woman with blonde hair in a blue halter top. In the background, several smaller photos of men are shown falling from the sky. At the bottom, there is text: "new comedy series premieres nov. 28 tuesdays 10/9c", the TBS logo with "very funny" underneath, and "Sponsored by match.com".

Match.com will sponsor the new TBS program "My Boys," whose young characters are searching for love in Chicago.

"After two years of successful TV advertising, buying a lot of syndicated shows like 'Seinfeld' and 'Friends,' this is, for us, stepping it up," Jim Safka, chief executive at Match.com in Dallas, said of the agreement with TBS.

"It's a fully integrated campaign that feels less like a sponsorship or advertisement and more like a part of the program," he added.

In threading Match.com through the episodes of "My Boys," Mr. Safka said, "it has to feel seamless and natural," otherwise it could annoy or even alienate viewers.

Doing more than what the deal calls for "would be heavy-handed," Mr. Safka said, "and it's not how our brand fits into someone's everyday life."

"It's taking some risk," he added, "but we've had a good preview of the show and we think it's going to deliver the goods."

MediaHub made the deal for Match.com during the recent upfront market, where advertisers agree to spend money with networks before the start of the fall season.

John Moore, senior vice president and group media director at MediaHub in Wenham, Mass., said the agreement made sense because Match.com wanted to promote a brand identity as a Web site for "long-term relationships, not casual dating, and 'My Boys' is about a group of friends going through the trials and tribulations of trying to figure out long-term relationships."

"The characters are a reflection of the people on Match.com," he added. The creative agency for Match.com is Hanft Unlimited in New York.

This is the first time MediaHub has signed a season-long sponsorship for a client, Mr. Moore said, and the deal is not without its challenges.

"The 'leap into the void,' " Mr. Moore said, "is this show has no track record," unlike TBS shows like "Sex and the City," which are reruns of series that proved successful on other networks.

"But we think the rewards outweigh the risks," he added, because "TBS is giving 'My Boys' its most coveted time slot, after 'Sex and the City,' " and because of the pedigree of the production team behind "My Boys."

Among those involved in the production of "My Boys" are Jamie Tarses, the TV executive who is the basis for a character on the NBC series "Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip," and Betty Thomas, an actor-turned-director who has worked on "Hill Street Blues," "The Brady Bunch Movie" and "John Tucker Must Die."

TBS was "looking for a launch partner, if you will, for 'My Boys' that would be a like-minded brand," said Linda Yaccarino, executive vice president for advertising sales and marketing at Turner Entertainment in New York, which like

TBS is part of the Turner Broadcasting System unit of Time Warner.

Branded entertainment projects "are easier when it's an organic fit," Ms. Yaccarino said. "Otherwise you're just going to turn off the viewer, and then all of your work was for naught."

"As long as we respect the creative process, and that takes the lead, that'll keep the viewers watching."

The deal is "the biggest co-branded effort that Turner has ever done," Ms. Yaccarino said, "and I think you'll definitely see more of this."

Early reviews of "My Boys" are mixed to positive. In Touch magazine gave it two stars out of four, while a sibling magazine, Life & Style, gave it two and a half ("Worth a first date at least"). Life magazine called it "fresh" and the critic Matt Roush, in TV Guide, praised it as a "winner."