

“Branded Entertainment”: Digital Advertising and New TV Business Models

Brand with Integrity: Content Marketing, Commodity Activism, and Comedy

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When the series *Farmed and Dangerous* premiered via Hulu in February of this year, its marketing push was less about it being a new web series, and more that it was a piece of marketing itself. Indeed, many industry journalists and bloggers wrote about the series as a bold stroke in the field of content marketing on the part of fast food burrito chain Chipotle (Weiss; Graser; Keslassy). In an era of competing screens and time scarcity, content creation marks one variant of the ways in which brand managers can gain attention and manifest identities for their brands. Though it has long been a part of the marketer’s toolkit, the practice has reached a new register in the recent past as the internet has allowed digital distribution platforms to proliferate, creating new and distinct opportunities for those interested in getting in front of consumer eyeballs and eardrums and facilitating the spread of messages that may only circuitously align with the commercial offerings of actual brands which fund their existence.

In the past decade, BMW, Dove, and Burger King have been touted as some of the brands most active in innovative content marketing, but one might trace this practice back much further – “freebie” recipe books, travel guides, etc. – but as this is a roundtable about television, early TV sponsorship is perhaps the most important touchstone to invoke. In fact, Elizabeth Weiss does so nicely in her post on the New York blog, making a connection to the long-running early drama series, *Kraft Television Theatre*. Yet, as Weiss points out, the storytelling of *Kraft Television Theatre* was the main attraction. Kraft hoped that the association of their brand with a valued cultural object would bring it a luster that would ultimately translate into greater consumer recognition and loyalty. *Farmed and Dangerous* bears the fingerprints of its brand in some more overt ways.

With the slogan, “Food with Integrity,” Chipotle has long endeavored to define itself as a fast food chain offering consumers the option of eating healthily both for the sake of one’s body as well as the ecosystem. The four-episode series aligns with this, functioning as a satire of the industrial farming practices to which the brand has been positioned in opposition. It pivots around agribusiness industry spin doctor character Buck Marshall (Ray Wise), following his attempts to whitewash the transgressions of big agra. While the scripting and performances are somewhat broad, it comes across as more than just an extended riff on a typical 30-second TV spot, and Wise’s loopy charisma gives the comedy enough of an off-kilter edge that it acts as a hedge against the taint of commercialism that can threaten an enterprise such as this. Furthermore, the anti-industrial farming message is one that many viewers, as well as consumers, are already rallying behind, facilitating a connection to social values that allows Chipotle consumption to function as “commodity activism” of the sort that Sarah

Benet-Weiser identifies at play within the practices in contemporary branding . Chipotle was even successful in attracting at least one other brand with a similar corporate mission, Ben & Jerry's, to do some product placement within the miniseries. It is nothing if not a perfect sort of niche lifestyle/taste culture media object.

Ratings numbers are hard to determine, but the series appears to be seen as a success in the eyes of Chipotle, as they have been vocal about more series to come, and perhaps even an extension of *Farmed* (Keslassy). While this may appear as an outlier example, it really is an indicator of how the affordances of digital/social media are working as an alternative to television's traditional models of advertising in many ways, putting more pressure on practices of product placement and/or brand integration in order to, if not rise above, at least become part of the cacophonous slate of offerings that defines the present mediascape.

Where does this leave us? What is "television" when its forms (e.g. the sitcom) and functions (i.e. entertainment and visibility) are being dispersed to other platforms? How should we as media critics attend to such an object? As Weiss puts it, it may not be worthy of the praise some heap upon early TV objects like Kraft Television Theater, but for a certain audience it may be all the more potent as a tool of brand management.

Works Cited

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