

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

“Twenty-two Minutes of Content and No Burritos in Sight”: *Farmed and Dangerous* as Unbranded Entertainment

Kimberly A. Owczarski, Texas Christian University

Although deemed the “future of advertising” by at least one industry analyst, Chipotle’s four episode series *Farmed and Dangerous* harkens back to an earlier era when radio and television programs were sponsored and produced by major brands rather than the Hollywood studios. At a relatively modest budget of \$250,000 per episode, Chipotle’s sitcom was distributed via Hulu with one episode being released per week in February and March 2014, using a typical network release strategy while at the same time eschewing traditional television outlets as part of this advertising campaign. But unlike most advertising campaigns or previous versions of sponsored content, Chipotle itself hardly figures into the series at all. Other than a handful of jokes in its 90-minute run time, Chipotle the brand remains largely absent from the series, a conscious choice to mark *Farmed and Dangerous* as “unbranded content” according to the company’s press release.

If in previous iterations of sponsor-created content the goal was to make the consumer aware of the brand/product, Chipotle’s strategy seems highly unusual—using a web-based service to distribute a television program without the constant, highly visible signs of the company’s logo or key products. Representatives from Chipotle discussed the campaign as less about product integration as “values integration,” foregrounding key issues about sustainable agriculture that tie-in to the company’s overall mission statement and, of course, business plan. Over the last few years, Chipotle has used unconventional advertising strategies to promote that same message. For example, Chipotle worked with CAA Marketing in 2011 to create “Back to the Start,” a two-minute animated video that follows a horrified farmer who sees his small family farm transformed into an animal factory. With Willie Nelson’s cover of Coldplay’s “The Scientist” playing in the background, the video received ample buzz online from its original distribution via YouTube before playing in nearly 10,000 movie theaters and then airing during the 2012 Grammys in its entirety, the first ad that company had ever placed on television. In 2013, Chipotle created another animated video, “The Scarecrow,” to help promote and launch a game app about industrialized food production. Though the app was free, it contained a banner for Chipotle while at the same time the game’s narrative tied into the company’s sustainable food lens. Described as the “future of advergaming,” “The Scarecrow” is another example of Chipotle’s unique strategies for marketing both the company and its food.

By using online distribution outlets such as YouTube or Hulu, Chipotle takes advantage of the Web’s social networking capabilities which bring greater attention to its content through shares, comments, likes, and tweets. Targeting millennials as their primary consumer, Chipotle uses the unbranded entertainment aspect as a way to appeal to them directly as this generation is “skeptical of brands the perpetuate themselves,”

according to one executive. Indeed, Tim Piper, the director of *Farmed and Dangerous* as well as an advertising partner in Piro (the company that co-produced the series with Chipotle), stressed that the unbranded aspect is becoming the new reality for today's advertisers: "Brands need to make a decision. . . . They can either continue to interrupt entertainment, or they can inspire it."

While nontraditional, Chipotle's marketing strategies have clearly been successful. In 2013, the company earned \$3.2 billion in revenue, an increase of over 20 percent year to year. In fact, Chipotle's revenue has increased by that amount each of the last five years. While its revenue and marketing budget in no way compares to competitors in its category such as McDonalds, Chipotle's marketing strategies have grown in ambition as evidenced by its investment in and production of *Farmed and Dangerous*. Still, the company offsets these costs through selling music tracks on iTunes (though a portion of those sales do go to charitable organizations) as well as through the advertising seen during the show's breaks on Hulu (such as commercials for Best Buy, 5-Hour Energy, various drug companies, and Think Thin protein bars, among others). In that sense, they are clearly vehicles for consumption, even if the content itself makes that objective less clear.

Ultimately, Chipotle's *Farmed and Dangerous* has been a successful campaign because it incorporated the strengths of traditional media with the capabilities of new media distribution, all while effectively effacing its role as advertising. Piper labeled *Farmed and Dangerous* "strategic entertainment," content that functions both as entertainment and as a strategic ad campaign. Rumors have circulated since the series' highly viewed debut that additional episodes would be produced for television distribution. Even if a second season is not produced, Chipotle is already at work on a new series for online distribution which will concern the same corporate values espoused in its previous marketing campaigns. Without a burrito in sight, Chipotle has managed to build the image of its brand skillfully through creative, strategic content.