

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

Well-being Industries: Lifetime TV and the Case of Branded Health Entertainment

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What happens when the morning talk show and infomercial collide? How does the notion ‘pay to play’ change the relationship between media experts and the delivery of products to audiences as part of a branded content strategy? Television’s historical relationship to lifestyle and therapy culture has been a fundamental to the medium’s connection to audiences and advertisers. The early product placement of wellness and lifestyle products as part of a sponsorship model sets the stage for television’s embedded relationship between consumerism and therapy. As the relationship between advertisers and the purchasing of airtime has shifted over the recent decades, late night infomercials have become more important and infomercial production houses like Telebrands have become key players due to cheaper advertising slots and the ability to buy up more airtime. Basic cable channel Lifetime began airing a paid talk show/infomercial format in 2009, which also coincided with the network’s sale to A&E (Arts and Entertainment) channel. The lifetime network has constructed a brand image for itself by cultivating women-centered shows and audiences.

The recent public debate on the validity of well-being and the promotion of branded products selling quasi-legitimate claims of health has taken form in the past year with figure Dr. Oz and his health-centered talk show on the CBS network. The show itself features a variety of diet, exercise, and general well-being products as part of a consumer lifestyle culture. Dr. Oz’s recent FTC hearing made up of legislators and senators has brought public attention to the show in promoting diet and weight-loss pills without sufficient research and evidence. A recent *New Yorker* profile on Dr. Oz highlights this merging between medical expertise and the spectacle of talk show entertainment as “medutainment.” Even though the Dr. Oz show is promoted as a legitimate medical show, the line between medical practice and consumerism highlights a complicated mediated production of wellness as part of a distinct 21st century American experience.

I contend that a show like *The Balancing Act* reflects the tension between Lifetime’s brand image as a network, and the show’s business model that sells female-targeted products through the talk show and infomercial format. The personal and conversational form of the talk show lends authenticity to products that companies pay (often significant fees) to advertise. The show shares talk show format characteristics with two guest hosts who feature a series of products and interviews with their makers as part of the show’s informational focus. Airing Monday through Friday at 7am, the show’s consistent scheduling on Lifetime plays out like any number of morning show competitors. Performing a Google

search for 02 Media and The Balancing Act produces a range of results that warn potential business owners and individuals of the show's scam-like production. Perhaps what is key to understanding the show's production is the pay-to-play business model that solicits product makers and then asks for a deposit as part of the show's production costs. Finding reliable figures for what the show charges companies is difficult to locate; however, the range established by various online bloggers begins at \$4,000, and with some, reaches \$38,000. What becomes key in thinking about the economic model behind the show's viability is also how legitimacy operates and muddies the relationships between the network, independent producers, advertisers, and consumers. That is, the show's production of wellness-related segments and products becomes further negotiated when considering how the show solicits key companies and small business owners in paying for the product and show's marketing.

The promotion of wellness products (products aimed at improving the mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual side of one's life) continues to be centrally affiliated with television's advertisement-based business model. A show like The Balancing Act provides a glimpse into the contested relationship between the selling of wellness products and the TV economy that relies on the selling of cheap airtime in order to generate revenue. What is at stake here is the continued way and proliferation of wellness products as integral to TV advertising, but also how the sophistication of combining genres like the talk show with the infomercial, further blends how products become legitimized.