

The Birdcage, and 4 other marketing gimmicks that worked better than ads

The advertising industry is quite a well organised one. Agencies (be it traditional or in more recent times, digital) charge businesses a fairly significant amount to create content. The same businesses (in the case of 'above the line' marketing spend) then need to pay media buyers even more money to place the ads with outlets like TV stations or newspapers. Perhaps unsurprisingly, start-ups and other businesses which weren't incubated in the Mad Men era tend to balk at the cost of traditional advertising (often sticking with digital marketing unless they get a significant outside capital injection).

But while many new businesses (perhaps justifiably) shun traditional marketing channels, there are plenty of other ways to get your brand recognised. Sometimes clever marketing campaigns or publicity stunts can be preferable to an advertisement on *The Voice* – and generally, is far more cost effective. Below are some of my favourite examples of businesses who've achieved a lot of media coverage and attention by being creative.

1. THE GRAVY CHIP

In 2008, before they became TV stars, Hamish and Andy were without peer Australia's most successful radio personalities, syndicated nationally on Austereo. One day, the duo received a call from a listener asking about potato chip flavours. From there, the comic duo appeared to ad lib a competition from listeners to create a new flavour of chip. For weeks, Austereo heavily promoted the competition across the network during its shows. Eventually, the winner was the 'gravy' chip, which was produced by Smith's (initially, 495 packets were produced, before a further 60,000 were created due to demand). It would later be revealed that the initial call was not random and that the entire tactic had been pre-planned and paid for by Smith's, which received probably millions of dollars' worth of in-show content for a fraction of what it would have paid for similar advertising time.

2. THE BIRDCAGE

Few things grasp Australians' attention like celebrities and expensive stuff - and few have done it better than the Victorian Racing Club, and its elite Birdcage enclosure at Flemington during Melbourne Cup week. In 2000, the luxury marquees didn't exist (the only place to be was the Members' Committee Room) – today, they're a showcase of glamour and celebrity. And no one has done it better than Dubai-based Emirates Airlines, a name now synonymous with luxury (no doubt partially due to its eponymous marquee). While the semi-fixed marquees don't come cheap (Emirates has plumbed toilets, and serve exclusively Mumm champagne to a combination of celebrities, politicians and frequent fliers), the brand value achieved nationally through pages of media articles and regular television live crosses is probably worth tens of millions of dollars annually.

3. HUDDLE

Few Australians have heard of Huddle (a software company that provides systems which allow employees to collaborate more effectively on projects). In 2011, the UK-founded business showed up at a convention being held by Microsoft for its Sharepoint software (which essentially, does the same thing as Huddle) with a 130-piece marching band all bearing Huddle's logo. The band continued to march in front of the venue until it was shut down, only to return a few minutes later, garnering significant media attention while making their main competitor (and sometime partner) to look like autocratic fools. Pretty effective marketing for the cost of a marching band.

4. APPLE

When it comes to getting cost-effective publicity, few do it better than the world's largest company. Despite generating \$US40 billion a year in profits, Apple is able to get probably billions of dollars in free marketing exposure every time it releases a new product. The pitch remains constant – a few months before releasing a product, an employee will accidentally leave it in a bar, which will then find its way to the likes of TechCrunch and mainstream media. Then Tim Cook or Johnny Ives will stand in front of a big screen showing off the latest product (which is usually not all that different to the previous one) before it goes on sale really early in the morning. There are apparently never quite enough phones for everyone, which means some people, who for some reason can't wait a week for a new phone, spend all night lining up in the cold. Swarms of media then film these people lining up, figuring the item must be good if someone is willing to wait in the cold to buy one. Miraculously, a couple of weeks later there is enough stock to sell iPhones or iPads to everyone who wants one – but not before Apple gets reams of free air time.

5. MESSAGES ON HOLD

Sometimes the simple things can be the most effective. One of the best ambush marketers in Australia is Kym Ilman, the founder of Messages on Hold. For years, Ilman would give tickets to football fans to sit behind the goals at West Coast Eagles games – Ilman would then require the recipient to hold up a giant finger emblazoned with Messages on Hold. Every time a goal was scored, Messages on Hold would get free publicity (and again when the goals were replayed on the evening news). Ilman later went a step further and one year paid someone \$1,000 to stand behind the finishing post of the Melbourne Cup wearing his infamous giant foam finger. As Ilman noted, "year after year, that image has been replayed to preview the Melbourne Cup. It's achieved unbelievable coverage that cost me just a thousand bucks."

By Adam Schwab