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Top of Mind

Here's One Bridge That Went Too Far

—BY ERIC VAN DEN HEUVEL

NEW YORK We've ALL heard a hundred variations of the same lament, each tinged with more panic: "Ad environments are too cluttered," "Media is fragmenting," "Marketers have lost control to customers" and my favorite: "The 30-second TV commercial is dead."

While there is an underlying truth to each of these exhortations, the greater issue at hand is the marketing industry's collective response to them: Disruption is the way we'll get noticed! In fact, being disruptive has become a key criterion we use to judge the ideas we create for our clients.

I, however, wish to question the efficacy of what we're doing and, in good faith, submit one question: At what cost?

Unfortunately, the most recent example of disruption (disruption run amok, I should add) generated so many headlines that mine is no longer a question being pondered by marketers alone. I speak, of course, of the Cartoon Network's "Mooninites" invading Boston on Feb. 1, and being mistaken for terrorists in the process.

Although the guerrilla-marketing program commandeered attention far in excess of its news worthiness, was it good attention? And if you'll excuse me for using the old definition of good advertising: Did it work? Did it build the brand? Did it create a valuable dialogue between the brand and the customer? Or was it disruptive merely for the sake of being disruptive?

While all of us in the marketing business have much to learn from the legendary P.T. Barnum, I have begun to seriously question one of his most famous snippets of wisdom: "There's no such thing as bad press."

Sorry, Mr. Barnum, but there is such a thing. Sure, media hype can get people to

notice your product. Yes, the press can get people talking about it. But there is a line, and when that line is crossed, we've gone too far.

Some in our profession seem to have forgotten that our craft, by its very nature, is a part of a larger social fabric: the culture. This being the case, we have a responsibility to apply our creativity within our culture's unspoken rules of good conduct; we need to use a little good judgment and professionalism.

For the same reason one does not yell "fire!" in a crowded theater, we should not go to extremes merely to get attention. We should not sacrifice being civil-minded in the name of exposure for a brand.

It's hard to believe that not a single person at Cartoon Network (which is owned by the Turner Broadcasting System) or Interference, the agency it retained, did not step back and think: "At a time when 19% of people in North America cite terrorism as their biggest or second-biggest concern, is it really a good idea to place flashing electronic devices on public transportation and beneath bridges in major cities across the U.S.?"

I'll give the agency the benefit of the doubt by assuming there were intelligent people working on this campaign. My assumption further leads me to venture that the campaign went forward with its creators fully aware that the magnetic Mooninites would, to some people, look a lot like explosive devices—and that they would attract press attention. The Boston project was launched two weeks before the bomb scare ensued. It makes one wonder if the call that started the panic may have been made specifically to ignite the press.

Before I come off as an unmovable foe of marketing that takes creative risks, I submit this: Marketing borne of good

judgment can still be every bit as engaging. The BMW campaign showing a Mini perched atop a parked SUV charmed us; the Charmin campaign in Times Square gave us the novelty of a clean public restroom. Both programs used disruptive approaches to engage us. But both were tied to criteria more meaningful than disruption for its own sake.

Where in the Mooninites event was the unique brand benefit communicated? How did leaving flashing boxes beneath bridges narrow in on target consumers? How did this guerrilla project open up a useful dialogue between brand and customer? Quite simply, it didn't. Interference's marketing, in this case, wasn't marketing at all; it was a stunt.

Professionals in our industry should stop using the excuses of fragmentation, clutter and surrender of media control to customers to justify taking shortcuts that only result in fleeting, valueless noise. When we travel down this road, both marketer and consumer lose. As the Cartoon Network and its agency so ably showed us, this road only leads to annoyed consumers stuck in a traffic jam.

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