

Big screen product placements

Big screen product placements -- The not-so-subliminal tools of advertising seduction in movies like "Terminator 2" and "Thelma & Louise"

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The joke used to be that everyone and his grandmother was writing a screenplay. Now everyone is *reading screenplays* — searching for scenes where they can plug a brand name product. The Pentax camera a tourist will carry in *Terminator 2*, the Firestone tires in *Thelma & Louise*, and, yes, the *Entertainment Weekly* in *Soapdish* — have all been placed into the movies as a subtle, some would say almost subliminal, form of advertising. Even the U.S. Postal Service has hired a product placement agency to do the Hollywood thing.

As movies begin to take on the tone of the Home Shopping Network, a counterattack is being mounted by the Center for the Study of Commercialism, a nonprofit Washington-based advocacy group opposing the "excessive commercialization of our society." After tallying the brand names appearing in 1990's five top box office hits — in *Home Alone*, for instance, 31 brand names were shown or mentioned 42 times; *Ghost* was 16 for 23 — the CSC has asked the Federal Trade Commission to require that movies with product placements begin with this notice: "The following film contains paid advertising for the following companies and products (list of products)."

"If I see Tommy Lasorda or Bo Jackson on TV doing a commercial for a product, I know they're being paid to like it," says CSC spokeswoman Jill Savitt. "But I don't know necessarily that Julia Roberts is paid to like Diet Pepsi."

Most studios refuse to comment on the controversy, but some placement brokers will talk trade. A few movies have "gone overboard," admits Gisela Kovach, a partner of the Catalyst Group, an agency that helps clients such as Nissan, Kraft Foods, and TDK tapes get into the movies. "*Back to the Future* was one of them, (Bill Cosby's) *Leonard Part 6* was another," she says. But some logos and trademarks should appear in movies, she argues, because in real life "we eat, wear, and drive brand name products." And if the products are there, anyway, "It only makes sense for the studios to say to the manufacturers, 'This is going to be an advertisement for you and we'd like something in return.'"

What they get in return can range anywhere from \$10,000 to \$500,000 per placement, says Marvin Cohen, president of Marvin Cohen & Associates in Sherman Oaks, Calif., though most placements are in the \$25,000 to

\$50,000 bracket. This makes product placement an estimated \$20 million to \$50 million annual business — not bad for an industry that barely existed before 1982, when Reese's Pieces popped up in E.T. and sent sales soaring 70 percent. Now companies scan scripts for scenes where a sneaker, an appliance, a snack food — anything that can be sold—could plausibly be present.

Some film companies structure deals for placement. Disney, which seemed almost heroic for refusing to screen its films in theaters that show commercials *before* the movie, evidently has few qualms about product placement during the movies. The CSC says Disney's Touchstone has offered advertisers a breakdown: \$20,000 to show a product, \$40,000 to mention it, and \$60,000 for the star to hold it up. Disney would not comment.

Ironically, the CSC proposal to list movie sponsors could backfire in a thoroughly modern media way. While some film folks generally wouldn't mind listing product placers in the end credits (and some already do), they think it gauche to do so beforehand: That would make the movie into a logo treasure hunt, they say. But many advertisers and their reps would actually like this particular "punishment." "It's one more place I can get their name mentioned," says Allan Winneker, president and CEO of Cato Johnson, the promotion arm of ad agency Young & Rubicam.

That's advertising!