Marketers Get Creative To Stave Off Ad Fatigue

Executives Seek Ways To Vary Spots, Venues; Analyzing 'Wear-Out'

By GEORGE ANDERS

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When the same ad runs too often, consumers grow bored, annoyed or hostile. But some marketing executives are finding new ways around the problem, by varying their messages and media.

Overexposure of individual ads was a frequent concern when Mark Addicks joined General Mills Inc. in 1988 and television dominated the food company's advertising. These days, though, the Internet lets him target loyal customers with messages related to General Mills brands without offending casual buyers with repetitive ads.

"You can use the same piece of creative work in so many different ways," says Mr. Addicks, now General Mills's chief marketing officer. When he sought maximum impact from a Cheerios ad showing two newly adopted children and their new parents, he aired one version on television, a longer version in movie theaters and a third version on the Internet. That variety helped General Mills reach a bigger, more diverse audience without taxing viewers' patience, he says.

Advertising wear-out has fascinated researchers since the 1970s. Studies, generally focusing on television commercials, have suggested ads can be viewed anywhere from three to 25 times before losing effectiveness. After that, says Brian Sternthal, a marketing professor at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management, people "dismiss the information as old news."

More recently, analysts have examined which ads show greater longevity. In a 2003 study of 3,000 households, Starcom MediaVest Group found that ads with storylines wore out more slowly than ads with an aggressive call to action. Putting humor and music together helped, too. And ads that went off air for at least 12 weeks could restart with their original effectiveness.

Starcom's analysis is borne out by one of the most durable campaigns of modern times: Anheuser-Busch Cos.' "Real Men of Genius" radio ads for its Bud Light brand. The ads combine a bombastic announcer, sappy 1980s rock music and outlandish tributes to trivial achievements,
such as the invention of the foot-long hot dog. They leave male audiences giggling. And they have been a staple of sports-radio broadcasts since 1999.

Bob Lachky, an Anheuser-Busch executive vice president, says he knew the ad format could stretch a ways. But he didn't expect it to generate more than 100 sequels, saluting everyone from "Mr. Toupee Wearer" to "Mr. Fantasy Football Manager Guy."

"Part of my job is to keep new brand managers from killing it," says Mr. Lachky. "We want to own the idea of having fun, and this helps us do it."

Bud Light rotates the ads so no one spot plays incessantly. But Mr. Lachky says he doesn't mind if ardent baseball fans hear some of the Bud Light ads more often than researchers say is effective. "Consultants make big money by telling people stuff that has no application to real life," he quips.

For Bud Light devotees who can't get enough of these ads, Anheuser-Busch is marketing three music CDs filled with 20 commercials apiece. The company says it has sold 200,000 of those discs.

Anheuser-Busch doesn't rely solely on the radio ads to support Bud Light. Its biggest spending for the brand is on television; radio ranks second, but the company also spends heavily on stadium advertising, outdoor signage and other forms of marketing.

In an article in the Journal of Marketing Science published earlier this year, University of Texas, Dallas, researchers examined advertising and customer data from a European telecom company and found that using different advertising themes reduced wear-out risks.

Co-author Norris Bruce, a UT-Dallas assistant professor of marketing, says the finding is important because most studies of ad fatigue have assumed that companies are projecting only one message. That makes it seem as if ads wear out faster than they actually do; in reality, he says, viewers often reset their expectations as they encounter various messages from the same advertiser.

Sprint Nextel Corp. is using the Internet to connect with its most prized customers. It is running ads on football telecasts this fall, promoting a sports-trivia game that it offers as a premium service to mobile-phone customers. Ardent users are encouraged to visit a Web site where they can test wits against quarterback Peyton Manning.

Most TV viewers won't go to the Web site, says Michael Goff, Sprint Nextel's vice president for advertising and marketing. But the ones that do are likely to be the wireless carrier's best customers. "You can take a message and really blow it out this way," Mr. Goff says. He declines to share Web traffic data but says results so far are good.

New digital technology also makes it easier to customize ads slightly without having to incur the time and expense of recreating them from scratch. Rajeev Batra, a marketing professor at the University of Michigan's Ross School of Business, says such modest alterations can slow down the process of ad fatigue.
And in some cases, a simple ad takes on timeless appeal for reasons that even its own creators can't fully understand. For the past 10 years, General Mills has been featuring the same Cheerios ad on television, showing a grandmother at Christmas time making an imaginary map on the tray of a baby's high chair. She uses Cheerios to show the infant where various relatives live in the U.S.

"We wanted to show that Cheerios were an intergenerational food, connecting families," says Mr. Addicks. "But it's become iconic for the people who like our brand most, the brand champions. We get testimonials from them saying: 'I saw your ad. Now I know that it's the holidays.' So we show it every year."

Write to George Anders at george.anders@wsj.com

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