

VIEW FROM THE CHEAP SEATS



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Polluting the Mental Environment

Why TV advertising's effectiveness is melting away like the polar ice caps

On Sunday night, I sat down to watch a Fox News special on the threat of global warming. In a very Fox-like way, all the information was quickly edited, highly graphical and had a great soundtrack. But in a very un-Fox-like way, the point of the program was to present the viewpoint that yes, global warming was real, and yes, human beings are actively contributing to its advance.

So what kind of advertisers would dare to put their commercials on such a controversial show? During the first commercial break, I decided to keep a list of all the spots I saw during that hour.

First off, there were 32 commercials in this one hour. Thirty-freakin'-two. I wouldn't have recalled a single one of them if I hadn't written them down. That's 16 minutes worth of commercials—not counting Fox's own promos. Simply put, there's too damned much advertising for any of it to be effective. When will TV networks get the hint?

But quantity of ads is an easy fix. What intrigued me even more was that as I was confronted with melting icecaps, fragile ecosystems and some very dire predictions, not one marketer thought this program and its subject matter deserved any special attention or special message.

The first commercial of the hour was for a new one-use plastic dental floss device that's already pre-threaded. So right off the bat, I'm hit with a product whose main benefit is that you can use it once and throw it straight into the garbage. Which, in turn, goes to some landfill somewhere, never to decompose. While this product may have an interesting benefit, the first thought I had after seeing this commercial was how wasteful the product is—and how wasted the client's money was placing it on this show.

5 car manufacturers were brave enough, or foolish enough, to advertise on Fox's global warming special. 3 of them touted cars with V8 engines. And one was specifically promoting a car with an "air-cooled glove box" - which I'm guessing simultaneously keeps your stuff cool in our now extra-globally-warmed environment and spews more crap into the environment because of the extra needed refrigerant. More wrongheaded media planning.

The only oil company that advertised on the show wasn't advertising its cleaner gas, alternative fuel sources or new environmental initiatives, it was pushing a credit card for its gas stations. Another dubious media placement.

The rest of the spots seemed incredibly random—beer, investments, assorted pills, delivery services, an electric shaver, a couple of dot-coms, wireless service, a diabetes meter. And a couple of hideous local TV spots for extra suffering.

After I reviewed the list of advertisers, I wondered: Where's all this supposed creativity in media? Where's the planning? Is anyone responsible for these ad placements paying attention?

Why was I watching a TV show on global warming and no one tried to sell me a hybrid car or a bicycle? I was in the mood to listen. Whether a product represented a major lifestyle change or a little eco-friendly gesture, any advertiser seeking to appeal to an environmentally conscious audience had their chance—and blew it.

Now, I'm not a media planner. So I couldn't tell you if there's a way to always ensure that appropriate messages match the appropriate TV programming. But as TV ratings come under increasing scrutiny, the key to television advertising's future effectiveness may not come through numbers, but through the relevance and appropriateness of when and where people see that advertising. Of course, you can't convert that idea into an equation and slap it into an Excel document to justify your 15% commission.

So thanks to Fox, I learned quite a bit about our environment—both the physical and mental ones. If you don't believe me, do what I did. Sit for an hour and watch TV uninterrupted. Pay attention to what pops up during the commercial breaks.

The power of television advertising won't die, but it's melting away. And while it's partially a function of time and technology, it's also partially something the ad industry has brought upon itself. And the time to take action is now. Otherwise, all of our careers could be facing extinction.