Art of Speed microsite tests medium’s ability to reach key influencers

By KRIS OSER

Nike’s new “Art of Speed” blog on gawker.com is a public experiment that other marketers will watch closely. The results of this collaboration, a branding concept Nike is pushing leading up to the Olympics, may reveal a lot about whether a mainstream marketer can marry its message to the hip, satirical content of a blog such as Gawker, and in doing so, gain access to the influential, early adopter blogging crowd.

The Art of Speed, which appeared earlier this month, showcases the work of 15 innovative filmmakers to interpret the idea of speed—a branding concept Nike is pushing leading up to the Olympics. It was masterminded by interactive shop R/GA, which developed the site, the trailer and the introduction of nikelab.com. While R/GA is responsible for the overall Art of Speed campaign, creative for the blog is handled by Gawker’s creative team.

As a film-showcase microsite sitting within a blog, Art of Speed lacks the typical personal voice and diary-like qualities that would normally earn the moniker “blog.” But that maybe beside the point, interactive analysts say.

“If Nike’s use of the description ‘blog’ is going to get people to come visit, then it’s good marketing,” said Nate Elliott, associate analyst at Jupiter Research, who runs his own blog through Jupiter.

Gawker’s credibility is what really matters, said Colleen DeCourcy, executive creative director at online-communications agency Organic. “In some circles, Gawker has more authenticity than Nike. That’s why blogs really work for advertisers, because of the credibility of the blog.”

Blog readers see themselves as insiders who get the big picture, said Steve Hall, founder and editor of adrants.com, a blog about advertising with a satirical, in-your-face slant. “People read Adrants because it’s irreverent, but there’s more,” he said. Adrants has the attitude that “we’re on your team, fighting a big corporation.”

“Doing business on gawker.com is like being a shoe company the blog because it would be inauthentic,” said Joseph Jaffe, president of Jaffe, a new-marketing consulting firm. “They will become the evangelizers and influence subsequent purchasers.”

‘EVANGELIZERS’ AND INFLUENCERS

“Nike is talking to the right people—instead of the most people—who happen to be the influencers,” said Joseph Jaffe, president of Jaffe, a new-marketing consulting firm. “They will become the evangelizers and influence subsequent purchasers.”

Beyond counting on the cool factor, Nike isn’t measuring response. “We’re getting some good traffic at nikelab.com right now; as a result of Art of Speed, look what’s being said about Nike,” said Joseph Jaffe. “But we don’t think there’s any [precise] way of quantifying response.”

Nike is not the only net-savvy marketer turning to blogs to take advantage of the blog upswing. Microsoft, working on MSN Blogbot, which presents relevant blogs to consumers in response to search queries, said Becky Emmett, MSN spokeswoman. Oxygen Media launched a blog to promote the show “Good Girls Don’t.”

Other marketers are doing more traditional online ads on blogs such as Mr. Hall’s Adrants. Such blogs use a number of advertising formats, including advertorials, Google Adwords sponsored links and ads through BlogAds, a network for ads on these sites. But, said Mr. Hall, the key is “not bring in enough to live off.”

Whether or not blogs will develop into a fully mature medium for big brands depends on whether or not they can figure out how to use these sites in the same spirit readers do.

Marketers can’t really take part in the dialogue on the blog because it would be inauthentic, said Joseph Jaffe. “It’s like plastic surgery; you can tell it’s fake.” Ms. DeCourcy said.