Creative

A New Playing Field

Some of the smartest creative ideas are right outside your window

BY MAE ANDERSON

Remember the billboard-turning-soccer field that TBWA’s Japan put up for Adidas in Yokohama and Osaka last summer? Earlier this month, the agency staged a 10-day sequel—a 2-foot deep instead of two soccer players dangling from 25-foot ropes and going head-to-head on the board, a man on a bungee cord dunked a basketball attached to a tether. Crowds in the Shibuya district again gathered to watch the action.

John Merrifield, TBWA’s chief creative officer in Tokyo and Asia Pacific regional creative director, promises a bigger show in June for the Summer Olympics in Athens. Outdoor going up in five cities will make the previous two billboards “look like kindergarten,” he boasts.

Creative stakes are rising in the outdoor-pd world. As consumers’ attention gets harder to grab, a burst of originality—albeit with more sophisticated technology—is helping to make one of the oldest forms of advertising hot.

“Outdoor is becoming a very interesting option,” says Paul Veldhues, founder and creative director at Venables Bell & Partners. “For a while it was, take your print idea and just resize it, and voila, an outdoor campaign. But more people are realizing outdoor is a different medium—it’s its own game.”

Take, for instance, a billboard for BMW’s Mini by Taxi in Toronto that put the car in a sling shot and Crispin Porter + Bogusky’s billboards for Ikea that dangle on a bungee cord... Turn them around to look like price tags. Both these executions are cited by Rick Boyko, managing director at the VCC/ADcenter and jury chair of The Olive Awards, as examples of new creative twists on the traditional outdoor execution.

“The dynamics of outdoor are changing. The medium is becoming more dimensional and interactive,” he says. The Olive will be presented Tuesday by the Outdoor Advertising Association of America in Scottsdale, Az., during the Traffic Audit Bureau’s annual conference.

Advances in digital technology are helping to fuel the ads’ interactive component. A Times Square billboard that went up at the end of March for Yahoo! Autos features a 45-second car-racing videogame that consumers can play via their cell phones. After dialing a number displayed on the sign, people are put in a queue to play; they can go up against a computer or another person, using the numbers on a cell phone to speed up or slow down.

The game, displayed on a digital Reuters sign and using technology originally developed for Reuters, was created by R/GA in New York. “It’s not just a Bezeaus player in the back of the Nasdaq ad bringing full-motion video on a large scale in Times Square—it’s completely programmable,” says agency chairman and CEO Bob Greenberg.

The technology also gives the client a good idea of how well the ad is connecting with consumers. By the time the sign goes down, on Thursday, Yahoo! estimates that more than a thousand passers-by will have played the game and 80,000 will have seen it. “We know how many people are engaged and how much time they’re spending with the sign,” says R/GA’s vp of technology, John Miny-Smith, who helped create the videogame. “We also get a sense of how many people are coming back.”

Interactivity is extending from pedestrians to drivers via a technology from Phoenix company Mobitek that allows billboards to monitor which radio stations passing cars are tuned in to. Then, based on the resulting estimates of driver demographics during different time periods, ads on a LED-screen board shift throughout the day, each one flashing for 4 seconds. Smart Signs, Media in Sacramento, Calif., which has signed up about 200 digital advertisers, uses the system on 10 signs around the area.

Interactivity doesn’t have to be technology driven—plain ingenuity works too. Last month, BBDO New York put up two billboards in Times Square, each featuring the face of ahythm car vendor stationed on a sidewalk below. “I serve my Dew with such speed, you’ll be chugging it near to no time!” says vendor John Galas, who drives around the corner, Angeles Piasky counters. “It assures you, I serve your Dew far colder than John’s, Buy your Dew from me!” (BBDO says both vendors have been moving more Mountain Dew since the billboards went up.)

The idea stemmed from edl Bill Brodey’s direction to “think about the location and what sorts of things were going on in that area,” says Melinda Ward, assistant art director on the campaign. “I think people are interested in looking at and see the are actually there. It’s a whole other experience to make a connection.”

That’s true whether an ad is Times Square or in a restaurant’s bathroom. “All the outdoor media have a very part-of-your-life theme,” says Eric Zemsk, vp of sales for two
alternative-outdoor agencies, Autoworks FreeCar and Add On Jaguars. "You interact with the ads on a different level." Ad space is becoming available on everything from dry-cleaning bags to shopping-cart dock stations, and everywhere from restrooms to movie-theater lobbies to major-league ballparks to fitness clubs.

On ad might pop up outside a supermarket in the form of a BMW Mini that's set up to look like a little ride. Last year, Crispin Porter + Bogusky won two media Lions at Cannes and Best of Show at the ONE Show for its outrage Mini work, which included the supermarket installations. "The more you can make things interactive, the better it is for you," says CP+B's Jim Poh, director of creative content distribution. "Now you're drawing people into ads rather than just having them in the background for people to ignore."

Poh recently helped CP+B create one of the largest billboards in the world atop a building near Los Angeles International Airport. Passers looking out their windows now see a 120-by-520-foot message proclaiming, "Go, Jet Set Group!" and the airline's logo. Passengers going in or out of JFK in Queens see a similar, somewhat smaller sign. The ads are a good way of targeting not only people who fly a lot, but the "soucheiste" demographic Virgin seems to reach, people likely to tune out traditional advertising, says Poh.

Last month, Venables, Bell & Partners put up a Times Square display that's unlikely to be turned off. The San Francisco shop installed two "prison" walls, complete with razor wire, a watchtower and two dummy guards on a building roof. The work promotes the DVD release of the third season of HBO's O.C. series about life in prison.

"What we were trying to achieve is to make the consumer pause for a split second in their day and have that visceral impression of what it's like to be in prison," says copywriter Eric Liebhauser, who created the work with art director Crystal English. "Visually speaking, a person on the street is interacting with that piece of communication the same way a prisoner actually in lockup does." (Liebhauser saw the majesty first considered putting up a shower stall in a New York prison to mimic prison showers, but "the MTV wasn't looking too favorably on that.") HBO, which runs its watercooler value in a prism, appreciates that the work itself is a conversation piece. "Particularly in the case of O.C., where our spending is both national and local, (广告) is helpful in terms of generating word-of-mouth," says Sofia Chang, vp of marketing for HBO Video.

"We love outdoor, because it's a shared medium," notes CP+B executive creative director Alex Bogosky. "If you and I take the same route in work, we know we've seen the same thing—it's possible we'll get to talk about it. It gets conversations going, which doesn't really happen on the radio. On TV it happens, but it's getting more difficult as TV gets more fragmented."

That shared experience reached a peak in Japan, where crowds gathered around BWV's billboards, giving ovations to their human stars. That in turn led to TV appearances for the interior players (billboard-industry workers who were also experienced rock musicians). Merrifield claims that the original billboard, which was about $180,000 to create, garnered as much as $14.10 million worth of publicity.

Soon, such claims can be backed up with data. Measurement has been a sore spot for what the OAAA says is a $5.5 billion industry (up 5.2 percent last year from 2002). Currently, the only data available are estimates of how many vehicles or pedestrians pass an outdoor ad's location. Both Nielsen and Arbitron plan to start offering ratings for outdoor, using global satellite positioning technology.

This month, Nielsen kicked off its first new measurement system in Chicago, adding will be available in June. Arbitron, which does not yet have a set launch date, conducted a test in late 2002 in which a random sampling of consumers in Atlanta carried GPS monitors and took notes on their whereabouts. Arbitron then calculated which outdoor ads those participants had passed.

The ratings that should be "huge" for outdoor, says OAAA chief marketing officer Stephen Freitas, "We'll be able to identify specific media demographics," he says, "wherein what we had was a general gross impression of a general audience. This could really change the way outdoor operates."

With the expansion of "alternative outdoor"—broadly defined as all out-of-home besides billboards—measurement services will have their work cut out for them. New York City is planning to start accepting ads on space such as installation kiosks and newsmagazines. The city finding a 20-year contract to an outdoor advertising company that would install and maintain the ads, bids are due June 30. And Autoworks' Zemski also sees even more unappreached opportunities. "We're not near saturation yet, even in a place like New York," he says. "The canvas is so much more dynamic."

Zemski sees clients becoming more comfortable with alternative outdoor even as ad companies are getting better at showing why outdoors is valuable. "They're coming toward each other in the middle," he says. "In some cases they're already met; in other cases, they can see each other coming."