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Mobile Advertising Sector Takes More Show on Road

By JOEL RUSSELL - 1/1/2007

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Blake Pollack opens his sales pitch by saying the San Diego (405) Freeway between the Sherman Oaks and Santa Monica is one of the most trafficked roads in the United States.

Then he asks: How can advertisers reach those motorists?

Most people answer "billboards," but it's a trick question. No billboards are allowed on that stretch of freeway.

Of course, Pollack has a solution. His company, **Mobile Vision Marketing** in Marina del Rey, puts advertising on the sides of semi-trucks that can travel the 405 during rush hour – or all day.

MVM clients can choose to pay for dedicated trucks that drive specific routes at specific times, or they can buy the sides of non-dedicated delivery trucks, such as those owned by supermarkets or vending machine companies that display the advertiser's messages during their normal travels.

"People want specific routes, so that is the majority of our business," said Pollack.

MVM campaigns run a minimum of four weeks. The cost depends on the number of trucks and the length of the campaign, but it ranges from \$3,500 up to \$25,000. The higher numbers go for dedicated trucks driving on advertiser-selected routes 10 hours a day, five days a week.

As for reach, the Transportation Advertising Council has found that vehicular advertising generates up to 700,000 impressions daily. A well-designed truck reaches all the cars in nearby lanes as well as 80 percent of the traffic in the opposite direction, according to Pollack.

Vehicle-borne advertising has been around a long time, back to the bygone era of milk delivery trucks. But Stephen Freitas, chief marketing officer at the Outdoor Advertising Association of America in Washington, D.C., notes that advances in technology have changed the game recently. At MVM, the ads are printed onto a thick vinyl screen that fits into metal tracks along the side of the truck. As a result, the ad looks more like a billboard than a semi trailer.

After delivery trucks came parked trucks with signs, usually beside freeways or large intersections. Obviously, it's cheaper to park a truck than drive it, but the geography of Los Angeles gives a competitive advantage to ad messages on the move. Favorite locations among advertisers include Beverly Hills, West Hollywood, the Wilshire Corridor and the 405. "You can't park a truck in there," Pollack said.

No accurate gauge

Spending on national outdoor advertising is estimated to grow 8 percent this year and increase to 11 percent by 2010, yet the number of billboards can't keep up with that growth, he said.

Pollack said that some media buyers are put off by the lack of an accurate gauge of audience, or the degree of engagement, for truck ads.

"They don't have a great tool for measuring transit yet," he conceded, "so it's hard to give an exact number of impressions. But a lot of people just get it. That's why we sell direct to the client. (Advertising) agencies buy by the numbers, but the clients can see what they're getting." He estimates only 20 percent of his business comes through agencies.

Mike Collins, a partner at the Long Beach office of consulting firm Outdoor Media Advisors, agrees that measurement with traffic-based advertising "is not as necessary because you're targeting these specific areas. You know you're targeting the audience geographically and demographically as well. It's not like some publication, where you don't really know who you're getting without data to show it. But measurement continues to be a little Achilles heel of the outdoor industry."

Beverage, liquor, online retailing, radio stations and video game distribution are among the sectors most attracted to the mobile outdoor medium. Some of MVM's current clients include 100.3 "The Beat" (KKBT-FM), Courtney Cox's new show "Dirt" on the FX cable channel, and the video game "Fatality."

"Movie studios do well with this advertising, especially if the art is powerful and eye catching," said Pollack.

For the holiday season, MVM picked up Delightful Deliveries, an online vendor of gourmet food baskets based in New York. The company hired MVM to give it a footprint in the L.A. market.

"With consumers tuning out traditional advertising, outdoor advertising is a great way to reach a captive audience using a truly unique advertising vehicle – a 50-foot long moving billboard," said Chief Executive Eric Lituchy.

Government regulation plays a role in mobile outdoor's appeal. Since the trucks can go

where billboards or parked vehicles aren't allowed, it gives mobile an advantage. The only limit is that trucks can't travel on certain streets, even though most large boulevards and freeways are fair game.

While estimates point to increased spending for outdoor in general, that doesn't mean the mobile niche will benefit. According to Collins, the industry has gone through a series of fads – first parked trucks, now mobile, and next digital. “There's a place for it, but whether it will be in the mainstream media buys for brands remains to be seen,” he said. “It's a little on the pricey side, with today's gas and drivers.”

Freitas at the OAAA agreed that the future is digital, a technology that MVM doesn't offer. With digital signs, the messages can change to reflect the demographics of the neighborhood.

With more money chasing a limited number of boards, Pollack is counting on dollars flowing to alternates such as transit and mobile outdoor.

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