

**A Good Soap Script  
Includes Love, Tears  
And Frosted Flakes  
As Ratings Slip, Daytime TV  
Gets Generous With Plugs;  
A Kiss Before Using OnStar**

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The writers of ABC's soap opera "All My Children" worked for days on a crucial hospital scene, scripting just the right way for the spoiled Greenlee to sob at the bedside of her comatose husband. Then, chief writer Megan McTavish got a message that nearly caused her to burst into tears.

The network had made a product-placement deal with Wal-Mart, a sponsor of the show, to plug a new Wal-Mart perfume. Because of the tight production schedule, the reference had to go in the episode Ms. McTavish was wrapping up.

"The timing couldn't have been worse," Ms. McTavish says. "Her husband just got shot. She's devastated. And she's supposed to think about perfume at a time like this?"

After a tense meeting, commerce trumped craft: Ms. McTavish retooled the script so Greenlee, a cosmetics executive played by Rebecca Budig, briefly put grieving on hold in order to chat about the scent with a hospital visitor. "It wasn't the best for the story," says the 55-year-old Ms. McTavish with a sigh, "but you do what you can."

*Greenlee: When Ryan comes to, he's gonna want to know about work.*

*Simone: The first thing he'll ask for is you. Then a double cheeseburger with fries. Eventually, he'll think about the office. All right. There's a tiny little glitch in some perfume bottle tops.*

*Greenlee: Not the Enchantment signature fragrance.*

*Simone: Don't worry. I've got it handled. Enchantment Perfume will hit the stores as planned.*

Product placement has been around for years, but now the practice is growing rapidly in daytime television. Butterball turkeys, Nascar shirts and Kleenex tissue have all taken recent star turns. Not only do the characters on "All My Children" smell good, but they also have been swilling a lot of Florida orange juice -- and not because they're thirsty.

Networks are pursuing more product placements in daytime programming in most cases to offset sharply lower ratings. Many soaps, in decline for years, are now hemorrhaging. Marquee shows such as "General Hospital" saw 10% drops in 2004 alone, according to Nielsen Media Research.

But despite the falloff in audience, they are still cash cows. ABC, NBC and CBS, the three networks that program soaps, generated about \$2 billion in daytime ad revenue last year. Eager to keep ad rates high and existing advertisers happy, broadcasters are giving away plugs to sweeten advertising deals. ABC, for one, doubled the number of product placements in its soaps last year. "You have to work harder to get your clients to spend money," says Brian Frons, president of ABC Daytime.

Soap operas, a carry-over from radio that started on TV a half-century ago as platforms to sell detergent, are also serving as guinea pigs for networks to test how far they can go with product plugs before viewers revolt. Soap audiences are notoriously obsessive about their favorite programs, so feedback is swift to arrive. "Fans get very upset if they feel we're taking seconds away from the characters," says Jerry Daniello, ABC's director of integrated marketing and promotions. In fact, he jokes, "the words 'hell hath no fury' come to mind."

Because advertisers are increasingly insistent that characters discuss their products -- a jug of Tide sitting in the background no longer does the trick -- the work of implementing these deals falls to beleaguered staff writers. Striking the proper balance is tricky: Items must be embedded naturally enough so they don't raise the ire of marketing-savvy viewers, yet overtly enough to satisfy clients. And, as in the case of the Wal-Mart perfume, over-the-top soap-opera storylines can be an awkward fit. "Let's say a character is tied to the railroad tracks," says Ms. McTavish. "I can't just have him sit up and drink a Lipton Iced Tea."

Writers also must deal with companies that have their own ideas about manipulating scripts. When ConAgra Foods and CBS agreed to incorporate Butterball turkeys into Thanksgiving plot lines on "As the World Turns" the meat processor thought it would be nice to have one of the program's most popular characters help serve up the birds. There was a small problem with that plan, however: She was eloping at the time.

Ms. McTavish, who got her start in the business in 1983 playing an ex-prostitute turned bartender on "Guiding Light," says she would never agree to give an advertiser veto rights over her words. Even so, networks go out of their way to ensure that there are no surprises. Writers and producers often spend hours on the phone with advertisers to learn the nitty-gritty about product-marketing plans, and some shows give advertisers plot outlines.

That's how OnStar, General Motors Corp.'s in-car communications service, caught a potential flub with a planned placement on ABC's "General Hospital." Writers had drafted a sequence in which authorities used the OnStar system to track a car. The problem: OnStar, sensitive to violating customers' privacy, doesn't track vehicles. "The company stepped in and said we were misrepresenting what they do," says Mr. Daniello. OnStar held an hour-long conference call with writers to tutor them on the system. "These shows deal in the fantastic," says Andy Young, OnStar's director of marketing, "but once we brought them down to earth, the experience was wonderful."

Things worked out more to OnStar's liking on an episode of "Young and the Restless":

Phyllis: *Are we just going to wait for the snow to melt?*

Jack: *Gee, it's a tempting idea. But maybe we better get out of here.*

Phyllis: *What are you going to do? Dig us out?*

Jack: *No, I've got OnStar.... I push that button right there and they come right away.*

Phyllis: *Wait a second. If these OnStar guys are as efficient as you say, maybe we should just wait until we push the button. (THEY KISS.)*

Advertisers pursuing product placement say daytime programs offer benefits that prime-time shows don't. Because the same actors often portray characters for decades, it's "not a stranger in a 30-second spot selling something," says Mr. Young. "It's a member of the family." Another big plus: Most soaps these days quickly repeat in the evening on SoapNet, providing a double dip. The cable channel, now in 40 million households, largely attracts an upscale audience employed outside the home during the day.

Placements don't just flow from the networks' business-development offices. Increasingly, writers identify potential deals themselves. "They know the evolution of this process could support these shows in the future," says Barbara Bloom, a CBS senior vice president. Sheraton Kalouria, NBC's daytime chief, recalls writers on "Days of Our Lives" recently working in a plug for Frosted Flakes. "They argued it made the scene more relevant to contemporary life," he says. He thinks NBC's ratings have been improving lately in part because of such tie-ins.

At ABC, Ms. McTavish says the 10 writers she supervises have figured out "clever little ways" to tuck placements into scripts. Throwing a few lines to a minor character is a favorite technique -- that's how she solved the perfume crisis. So is writing products into less-vital expository scenes. And don't get too self-important, she advises. "You have to play fast and loose," she says. "You can write in anything if you're clever enough."