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**SKIPPING THE ADS**

## As more people avoid commercials, product placement takes over tube

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People may not be watching as many commercials as they once did, but that doesn't mean they aren't seeing them anyway.

The use of digital video recorders, which can recognize and skip commercials, is growing. More than 90 percent of DVR owners report that they opt to skip the ads.

Another survey shows that only 16 percent of TV viewer say they watch the pitches. The others claim they switch channels or do something else while they're on.

All this has the advertising industry and sponsors worried. Television has been the principal way of reaching the most people with their messages. Some media people go as far as to say that TV commercials have been the major force driving the American economy in the past 50 years, encouraging people to buy products, which in turn, creates jobs.

Executives at the networks and local stations are biting their nails, too, because advertising brings billions of dollars into their bank accounts.

As a result, advertisers are taking another tack to reach those viewers who are avoiding commercials. It's called product placement, and it simply means placing a product in a scene of a TV show. Some observers call it stealth advertising, but it's really nothing new.

Companies have been paying movie studios big money to have their product seen in movies for decades. That billboard for Pepsi in the background of a film didn't get there by accident. Somebody paid to have it included.

In the early days of television, sponsors backed some shows, and their logos were integral parts of show titles and sets. But then TV backed away from this arrangement, with sponsors buying commercial time instead. Directors avoided letting products slip into camera range. In the old sitcoms you can see the characters pouring cereal out of boxes with made-up names on them.

That's all changing in a hurry.

Now the camera shows that can or cup of Coke sitting on the desk in front of "American Idol" judge Simon Cowell. Having a star drinking Coke on TV is even better than a commercial for the soft drink, especially if viewers are going to ignore the commercial.

Other shows, such as "The Apprentice," have become hourlong commercials in which contestants work on designing a new pizza for Dominos, a promotional campaign for Burger King or a project at Home Depot. The arrival of reality shows seems to have flung the doors wide open to product placement.

It's not just Cokes on "Idol"; it's Ford Mustangs on "The O.C." or a guy drinking Heineken on "American Casino." Suddenly product placement is everywhere.

At least one TV show has been doing it for decades. "The Price Is Right" is the granddaddy of product placement. It has models proudly prancing around the prizes, and it lists the companies providing the merchandise at the end of the show.

At the other end of the spectrum is a much more subtle form of product placement, which is becoming increasingly popular. When Oprah Winfrey gave everybody in her studio audience a new Pontiac earlier this season, General Motors, not Winfrey, picked up the bill for the cars, although she probably could have.

Anyway, the new age of advertising seems to have arrived. Sponsors like product placement because it lets them avoid the hard sell.

It also lets an advertiser stand out and not be just another 30-second ad crammed into a half-hour sitcom.

So expect to see more such covert advertisements -- even if you're watching fewer commercials.

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