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## Products Are Stars in New Ad Strategy

**Firms team with 'The Apprentice' to place their goods center stage. Producer Mark Burnett says that fits the show's business theme.**

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This season on **NBC's** hit series "The Apprentice," the Donald has been sharing the spotlight with several other big names — brand names, that is.

Beginning with the season premiere in September, when two teams battled to design a new toy for **Mattel Inc.**, producers of the so-called reality show have regularly and seamlessly woven major advertisers into their story lines. Forget traditional product placement, when a bag of Tostitos or a box of Pop Tarts appears like a prop in the background of a TV show. On "The Apprentice," entire episodes have been built around **Procter & Gamble Co.'s** Crest Refreshing Vanilla Mint toothpaste, **Levi Strauss & Co.** denim jeans and **Pepsi-Cola North America's** Pepsi Edge.

What viewers aren't told is that companies are paying "product integration" fees of up to \$2 million to put their goods center screen, plus in some cases hundreds of thousands more to buy ad time from NBC. That money buys them a large measure of control over how their products are portrayed. Company executives even appear on the show, which stars real estate mogul Donald Trump.

"The products have become the stars of the show," said Gary Ruskin, executive director of Commercial Alert, a Portland, Ore.-based nonprofit group that monitors "ad creep" into entertainment programming. "I wonder how Mr. Trump feels now that he's been upstaged by Crest?"

How much control do the show's corporate partners have? Just ask the folks at **Mars Inc.**, whose new M-Azing candy bar is featured on tonight's episode. They say they nixed a suggestion from producers of "The Apprentice" to mimic the classic "I Love Lucy" episode in which Lucy and Ethel worked a speeded-up candy assembly line. The company feared the inevitably chaotic outcome would send the wrong message about the bar, which is filled with M&M bits.

"We have strict regulations and high quality standards," said Janis Smith-Gomez, vice president of marketing for Masterfoods USA, the snack food division of Mars. "That's what M&M candies are all about. It isn't some Lucille Ball-schlocky product."

Viewers tonight will see the show's five remaining contestants competing to make candies good enough to pass inspection by 10 Masterfoods quality-control officers.

In an era when networks and advertisers are becoming increasingly concerned about the threat of commercial-zapping digital recording devices such as TiVo, "The Apprentice's" blend of promotion and drama offers an alternative to 30-second spots.

Mark Burnett, the show's creator and executive producer, is seen as the king of this kind of blurring. In his **CBS** show "Survivor," hungry contestants competed for Pringles potato chips.

"It's an innovative, new, fun way of selling," said Burnett, whose production firm pockets the fees companies pay to get their products embedded in "The Apprentice."

A former British paratrooper who once hawked T-shirts on Venice Beach, Burnett disagrees with critics who say his show has morphed into a high-end infomercial.

"The show is entirely about entertainment," Burnett said, adding that instead of turning viewers off, the corporate presence bolsters the show's credibility. " 'The Apprentice' is supposed to be about business, so it's very appropriate to have these big companies with name brands testing these young guns who want to make it big."

Each week, two teams of ambitious young competitors are assigned a task to test their ingenuity. At least one member of the losing team gets bumped from the show each week, when Trump says, "You're fired!" The winnowing comes to an end Dec. 16, when the surviving contestant will win a six-figure job working with the unabashedly self-promoting Trump. Although the show's ratings are down from last season's stunning numbers, "The Apprentice" remains one of TV's top hits.

In the first season, Burnett said, corporations didn't line up to participate in the show. "The Apprentice" contestants had to make do with low-tech tasks such as selling lemonade and operating rickshaws.

But when the program took off in the ratings, Burnett said, his phone began ringing.

Though some industry observers had predicted that product-focused plotlines would turn off sophisticated consumers, those worries appear to have been unfounded. NBC Entertainment President Kevin Reilly said viewers weren't complaining.

"We're a consuming society. Products are a part of our lives, so we can relate to them," Reilly said. "It's only when we put products out there in an awkward and clumsy way that it screams crass and commercialism."

For viewers and for advertisers, Reilly said, "it's a big win-win." He predicted, "All of the networks are going to be doing more of this as the business evolves."

So far, companies that have teamed with "The Apprentice" have been pleased with the results.

Mattel has put Morph Machines, the toy that "Apprentice" team members invented, into production. The toy is priced at \$27.99 on the Toys R Us website. It is due on store shelves in January, said spokeswoman Sara Rosales. She called the show "a fabulous opportunity to highlight our talents and our Mattel brands."

Procter & Gamble, which launched its Crest Refreshing Vanilla Mint toothpaste on "The Apprentice" in September, said it received 800,000 hits on its website within two hours of the broadcast. About 40,000 viewers requested samples.

Pepsi-Cola North America also reported a jump in visitors to its website last week after an episode aired in which teams had to design a bottle and marketing campaign for a new soft drink, Pepsi Edge. The company is sponsoring a contest to win tickets to the show's finale in New York. Some entrants will get "limited-edition replicas" of the winning bottle.

"We're always trying to reach consumers in new and unique ways," said Lauren Hobart, director of diets and flavored colas. She noted that the bottle-design contest received additional airplay when Katie Couric did a segment on it the next morning on NBC's popular "Today" show. "We got good PR beyond the show."

Mars executives began discussions with "The Apprentice" producers last spring after getting a call from Burnett's company. Executives from the candy company's procurement, marketing and legal divisions met with Burnett's production team to kick around ideas. Both sides agreed that shooting inside a chocolate factory would make for good television. But Mars executives were reluctant to allow cameras inside their main factory near Chicago for fear of revealing production secrets.

Instead, Mars refurbished its "pilot plant" in Hackettstown, N.J., for the "Apprentice" segment, leaving only the equipment necessary to make the bars.

In June, the factory was "locked down" with limited access for M&M workers, who signed confidentiality agreements promising not to discuss the segment until it aired.

During the nearly 48 hours that Burnett's crews spent shooting in the factory, 24 people from the candy company's machinery, standards, ingredients and research and development divisions were on hand. If the M-Azing bars didn't pass muster, quality-control officers decreed, the "Apprentice" candidates couldn't sell them.

"There's a lot of time, research, energy, technology and science to produce the utmost in perfection in a chocolate bar," said Jeffrey Moran, a company spokesman.

Mars is counting on "The Apprentice" to deliver that message to its customers. "That's how you create brand evangelists," Moran said.

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