

Pepsi, Audi -- it's time for your close-ups

By Candice Choi, Staff Writer, LA Daily News

The newest star of the box office isn't Jamie Foxx or Leonardo DiCaprio -- it's those in supporting roles as sneakers, cell phones and soda cans.

Pepsi had the most cameos in films from 2002 to 2004, appearing in nearly 20 percent of top films in that time frame, according to a study released Tuesday by BrandChannel. The soda company was given kudos for appearing in films ranging from "Alien vs. Predator" to "Dodgeball" to "Surviving Christmas."

Coke, Motorola and Nike were among the other brands that enjoyed top billing in recent blockbusters, according to the survey. Apple was bestowed the Lifetime Achievement Award for its ubiquitous presence in a cross section of genres including dramas to tween flicks.

Though it's hard to make a definitive link between the product placement and a company's stock performance, the power of big-screen stardom is clear, said Robin Rusch, editor of BrandChannel.

Still, many product placements can stick out awkwardly from plotlines.

One jarring example is the sudden appearance of the AFLAC duck in "Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events."

The children's story is set in a nondescript era, with no discernible signs of any brands. Then in a scene involving a row boat, a duck appears and makes a sound like "AFLAC."

"It was just so weird. We checked on it, and it was, in fact, a placement," Rusch said.

For every example of bad placement, Rusch said there are just as many examples of how powerful product placement can be.

In "I, Robot," Will Smith's character steps out of an Audi car in a shining moment for the carmaker, Rusch said. The moment is very effective because it conveys that Audi is a progressive car of the future, Rusch said.

Seeing brands in movies doesn't have to be jarring. Documentaries actually show more brands than regular movies, according to BrandChannel.

"Movies aren't as jammed with brands as our everyday lives," Rusch said.

Product appearances can simply be a part of the script, like when Clorox is used in "Million Dollar Baby" to mop the floors. In other instances, companies may just flood a movie set with crates of their products in hopes that they will make their way on screen.

"The industry's changed radically, especially recently with advertisers and marketers seeing the higher value of being on screen," said Gary Mezzatesta, president of Unique Product Placement in Burbank.

The company, which has been around since the 1970s, works to put a variety of brands on screen, including Uggs, Greyhound and Lexus.

A paid product placement give companies the most control in how it's portrayed.

"Motorola really hammers out its contracts," Rusch said.

Some unsought product roles can help a brand: Blackstone Pinot Noir enjoyed a more than 20 percent surge in sales after it was shown in the Oscar-nominated film "Sideways." The rising industry of placement agencies isn't necessarily eating into mainstream advertising. Rusch said there is room for both forms.

"I don't think one has to engulf the other. It's just another opportunity to get your brand out there."

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