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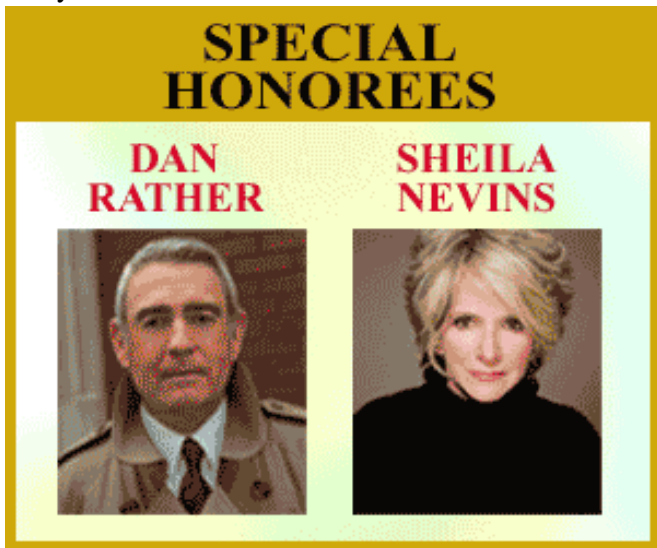
Brands Can Shine Outside the Box

Displaying Products at Pop Culture-Related Events and Venues Provides Exposure to Hip Young Audiences

By Mark Dominiak

Special to *TelevisionWeek*

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It's no secret that one of the best ways to build hype or incremental sales for products or services is to tap into properties that are hot in popular culture.

Just a few months ago inflatable Darth Vaders were waving light sabers over Burger Kings nationwide, while Frito-Lay products were enticing consumers to find Yoda. Even the M&M guys were negotiating with Darth.

It's not just film properties that are hot. How about seeing Donald Trump answering his door for the Domino's three-for-\$5 deal? While Mr. Trump alone is a strong spokesperson choice, it doesn't hurt that "The Apprentice" has been so hot.

What if you a brand wants to tap into hot pop culture properties generated by film or television but doesn't have resources to cut that big deal with Burger King or doesn't have the budget depth for big network buys? Are there things you can do to tap into what's hot?

The answer is yes. Here's one example pertinent to brands targeting young males.

Comics Are Cool

One powerful way is to tap into properties immersed in the pop culture world and use not only their expertise but their connection with that crucial, buzz-inciting fan audience to hype brands and other pop culture properties. In recent years one of the biggest generators of hot properties has been the comics industry.

Think about the magnitude of box office and product tie-in sales generated by the "Spider-Man" and "X-Men" franchises in the past few years. Just this year comic genre properties "Sin City," "Batman" and the "Fantastic Four" have all generated sizable box office returns and product sales and significant pop culture energy.

On the near-term horizon, new "X-Men" and "Spider-Man" properties are on the way, not to mention Superman's return to the big screen along with actor Nicolas Cage in the role of a lesser-known comic genre character, The Ghost Rider.

Wizard Entertainment is widely considered the leader in the world of comics, having covered the comic industry for the past 14 years. Its flagship magazine sports a monthly circulation of 200,000. Its position as leader in the comic arena makes it an important player, given the massive energy the genre has injected into the popular culture engine the past five or six years.

Wizard's core audience is young males who are tapped into what's hot in popular culture. Wizard is their gateway to comics buzz, but they're not just comics geeks. They're also early adopters who can make or break new show offerings on networks or in syndication. Wizard readers have helped give boosts to shows, including "The Simpsons," "X-Files," "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" and "Smallville," over the years.

Wizard has its finger on the pulse of the hype building during production and launch of these kinds of properties and higher-profile films and brings that info to readers of its publications monthly. And Wizard offers real multichannel capabilities as well.

Wizard turns out several magazines, comics, toys, trading cards and a series of nationwide conventions. It also has a vibrant online presence. But while the magazines and online properties are powerful, the conventions deserve their due as well.

Conventions Rock

Many business models make use of event situations to build relationships with consumers, but not many have the media hype ability one can find at Wizard World Conventions. That ability flows from a genuine desire on Wizard's part to connect its readers to the hot pop culture properties they love.

As such, not only will a Wizard World Convention be jammed with comic industry product and service vendors, but there will be significant opportunities for convention-goers to interact with popular creators in the comic industry and celebrities that bring those creations to life on the small or big screen.

At this year's Chicago event, celebrities including Evangeline Lilly of "Lost" and Margot Kidder of "Superman" appeared. In recent years Sean Astin ("Lord of the Rings"), Ray Park ("X-Men," "Star Wars") and stars from properties such as "Smallville" and classic television shows were on hand.

Celebrities are not the only draws Wizard provides. The more than 71 exhibitors at the Chicago event this year included not only the leaders in the comic industry but also representatives of Buena Vista Home Entertainment, DreamWorks SKG, Lions Gate Entertainment, Marvel Entertainment Group, Nintendo and Sony PlayStation.

These exhibitors have the opportunity to preview or demonstrate properties or products just hitting the market or soon to be launched. For example, Paramount used Chicago's Wizard World to promote its release of "Aeon Flux," MTV's cult animated series being brought to the big screen Dec. 2 and starring Charlize Theron. In addition, TNT promoted its new series "Wanted" with custom-made comics inserted into each convention-goer's gift bag.

In 2004 Wizard's Web site reported Wizard World events across the country drew a record turnout of more than 110,000 attendees. This year's Wizard World event in Philadelphia in June generated around 30,000 attendees. The Chicago event, which took place Aug. 5-7, drew more than 56,000. Those numbers put the shows on pace to beat 2004's numbers.

Wizard World will be in Boston at the end of September, in Texas early in November and back in Los Angeles in May 2006. Timing of the shows is advantageous. The Los Angeles event occurs just as the summer film season is kicking off, while Chicago's date is particularly good because it reaches its audience just in advance of the fall TV season and at the very start of the holiday film hype building.

Building on the success of its comic conventions, Wizard is rolling out Toy Wishes on Tour, an event displaying the hottest toys for Christmas in 12 malls across the country. As you might suspect, all the events are cross-promoted within the pages of Wizard publications and on Wizard's Web site, providing participating brands with a nice multimedia communication platform.

Underused Venues

Why, in this age of fragmentation and clutter, more brands aren't using powerful events like Wizard World as a channel to connect with their target consumers is a good question to ask.

Film and television producers are taking advantage of the venues, as folks from the gaming industry seem to be. But it also seems like a natural environment for other products that tap into pop culture to spur sales. What about the electronics and music industries? How about apparel? Even some beverage brands such as energy drinks and niche soft drinks make sense. How about snack brands?

Here are two thoughts to leave you with. First, if you're a planner on a brand that could successfully use events like Wizard World to better connect to its target and tap into pop culture energy generated by film or television, why not take a deeper look into event opportunities that may be out there? Second, if this type of event makes no sense for your brand's target, realize there are many other event-based opportunities out there serving different target profiles with multichannel opportunities.

Mark Dominiak is principal strategist of marketing, communication and context for Insight Garden.

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