

Carefully screened, plugs can put wind in the sales



Whole new Ball game: The Lucille Ball we loved will soon have digitally inserted product placement.

- **John Elder and Daniel Vigilante**
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THE cunning placement of products on the screen, now banned in Britain, is going great guns in Australia.

While British film and television producers moan about £30 million (\$A62 million) in lost revenue because of the controls, in Australia there are no signs of legislative interference.

According to James Grant Hay, of the In Shot product placement agency, the Australian market is worth "in the order" of \$150 million a year, the world's fifth-biggest.

"It's definitely on the rise in Australia," he said. "We're following the US trend, where the overall value is about \$2 billion."

Mr Grant Hay, whose job largely entails reading scripts, looks for the best moments to place products alongside the human stars.

"We evaluate scripts day in and day out on behalf of producers looking for those brand opportunities," he said.

"We then approach the brand owners, such as car makers or fashion houses."

Instead of selling a traditional 30-second commercial ad spot on television, Mr Grant Hay sells momentary appearances within storylines.

"We don't like to intrude on the story narrative, and certainly the producer doesn't want the story to change. The real value in all this is scripted integration, where an agency like ours can sit down with a

producer or a writer and work out how a product can be scripted into the storyline.

"As with James Bond driving an Aston Martin, which is in context with the character. But as an advertising strategy, when done well, the placement goes unnoticed by the viewer."

Mr Grant Hay said all local free-to-air TV networks had set up programs specifically geared to integrating brands into the shows.

He said Channel Seven was taking the lead with a made-to-order department designed to "extend brand presence".

Judy Allen, who heads the department, did not return calls from *The Sunday Age*.

Product placement is not new. It began in the film industry, where producers approached companies for products to appear as props, thereby lending the action some familiar realism.

Digital technology lies behind the rise of embedded advertising. When consumers can easily record, then program out the ad breaks from their favourite shows. And not just with new programs. Those *Love Lucy* reruns, for example, will soon have digitally inserted advertising in the form of product placements.

In other words, zany Lucy and Ricky will be eating, drinking or using cleaning products that never existed when they were alive.

Media analyst Steve Allen, of Fusion Strategy, agrees that the trend is being aggressively pursued in Australia.

"It is in strong demand here, so a high-demand area," he said. "This said, many advertisers now know you have to be careful with product placement. It has to be compatible with brand values and product use and positioning.

"It's effective only if the placement is not a forced fit or completely illogical and unsympathetic. The public smell a con pretty easily, and react adversely."

Jane Scott, a researcher at the University of NSW's school of marketing, says research has consistently found positive attitudes to product placement, including high levels of awareness and acceptance.

"This level of acceptance, liking and processing is higher among younger audiences than older audiences," she said.

"Heavy media consumers are generally more accepting. It is only when there is too much of it, it is too gratuitous, or 'too obviously paid for' that consumers will form negative attitudes towards the program, the advertiser, and the practice as a whole.

"Any objections to product placement are generally made on ethical grounds, with attitudes towards the placement of products such as guns, alcohol and cigarettes far less favourable."

A spokesman for the Australian Communications and Media Authority says if producers are getting paid for product placement, it needs to be clearly disclosed and distinguished from the rest of the program.

If viewers complain, the authority will investigate, but he could not recall any investigations requested in recent years.

Merchandising moments

- The *Transformers* film featured \$3 million worth of strategically placed Chrysler cars.
- Tom Hanks vehicle *Castaway* had been otherwise described as one long **FedEx** ad interrupted by beach scenes.

- James Bond has always been a commercial whore — but 1997's *Tomorrow Never Dies* was widely described as "more commercial than movie", too obviously featuring **Avis cars**, **Smirnoff Vodka** (shaken, not stirred), **Visa** credit cards, **BMW** cars, **Omega** watches and **Heineken** beer.
- After the release of *Toy Story*, **Etch A Sketch** sales reportedly increased 4500%, sales of **Mr Potato Head** increased 800% and **Slinkys** were brought back on to the market, with more than \$US27 million worth of them sold since.