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The real market for fake brands

By Rhymer Rigby
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The 2007 film *Superbad* showed some heavy underage drinking. But its makers were faced with a problem. “Obviously, no booze company in the world wants their products to be associated with that,” says Burbank-based graphic designer Ted Haigh. “So I had to come up with 500 labels for bottles that gave a sense of the real thing.

Much of Mr Haigh’s work involves inventing fictitious brands for films and television. These might be anything from snack products that get a few seconds in the background to full-blown corporations that characters work for.

These ersatz brands are surprisingly ubiquitous. For example, *The Terminator* film franchise gave us Cyberdyne Systems, while the television show *Lost* features Oceanic Airlines. Meanwhile, the cartoon show *The Simpsons* has an entire invented brandscape – ranging from the Kwik-E-Mart to Duff Beer to the Canyonero car.

“If you can use something real, it’s great,” says Mr Haigh, “but that’s not always possible.”

Indeed, although product placement is rife, there are any number of reasons why producers might want to use a fictional brand. For example, if you need to use a delivery truck for a heist, UPS is unlikely to want its logo on the side. Similarly, many companies do not take kindly to their products being lampooned.

In many countries, there are strict rules covering product placement. The BBC, for example, is not allowed to give brands undue prominence, so the writers and script editors come up with names that are then checked to find out if they really exist. As the corporation says: “If you need an estate agent, you make it up.”

In commercial television, producers may want to invent brands so that the products used in the show do not clash with the adverts. If the broadcaster is running commercials for Pepsi during the breaks, it might look odd if everyone is drinking Coca-Cola on the programme.

Fictitious brands might also be needed if the programme or film is set in the past or future and requires period brands.

Sometimes, however, it is simply more fun to make up a brand.

Mike Judge’s 2006 satire *Idiocracy* features a sports performance drink that is used for everything from irrigating crops to nursing infants. It is called Brawndo, The Thirst Mutilator. *The Simpsons* has done similar things with the Krusty the Clown franchise, which is a sort of borderline credible parody of a children’s TV brand.

When ideas for brands go through a vetting process to ensure that they do not exist in the real world, some products and services can be much harder than others. Mr Haigh says that telecommunications companies are especially difficult because virtually every permutation of “com” and “tel” has already been taken.

With that cinematic mainstay, the large evil corporation, you may just want something that sounds generic – as many real corporations do. Usually, he says, you come up with several names and hope one will pass legal and creative muster. Then you design the graphics around them.

“What makes these virtual brands work is that people believe them in the context they see them,” says Max Raison, director of brand strategy at Interbrand, the brand consultancy. In some ways, he adds, the effect you are aiming for is the opposite of the kind of glaring product placement in films such as *Casino Royale*. If you get it absolutely right, adds Mr Haigh, people may even remember it as a brand they have seen elsewhere.

But while some people may believe fake brands are real, one man is doing his best to make fake brands really real. Pete Hottelet is the chief executive of Omni Consumer Products (the name comes from the fictional company in the film *Robocop*). In 2007, he launched **Brawndo, The Thirst Mutilator**, which had previously only existed on screen. “I contacted Fox, found the right person and put a proposal together,” he says. “Then I had to figure out how to make a beverage and have it canned and meet legal requirements – it took about a year.”

He attributes its success to the fact that “you have a brand that comes with a ready-made market”. Since Brawndo, he has gone on to breath life into **Tru Blood** (a drink from the vampire series, *True Blood*, pictured above) and **Sex Panther Cologne** (from the film *Anchorman*). The company is shortly to launch Stay Puft Marshmallows, which first appeared in *Ghostbusters* in 1984.

Mr Hottelet used to work in advertising but, he says “this is now what I spend 90 per cent of my time doing. We watch movies and TV shows and if we see a product we like, we make enquiries.” The result is a strange and decidedly 21st-century phenomenon: “We call it defictionalisation – it’s like product placement in reverse.”

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