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The Art Of "Defictionalization": Turning Fake Movie And TV Products Into A Real Business

How Omni Consumer Products used *True Blood* and *Ghostbusters* to create a thriving business selling real versions of fake stuff.



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Pete Hottlelet remembers the day he walked into the headquarters of Valve—makers of the immensely popular *Half-Life* video game—while proudly wielding a crowbar. In his mind, it was a can't-miss proposition: The game's protagonist, Gordon Freeman, used the tool to smash skulls. Gamers regarded it as iconic. As a potential licensee, Hottlelet figured a color-accurate replica would be a nice addition to man caves and adolescent bedrooms around the world.



Pete Hottlelet

As the sole proprietor of Omni Consumer Products, Hottlelet is constantly scanning the pop culture zeitgeist for imaginary items that can be "defictionalized," as he calls it, and offered to consumers as a tangible product. While prototypes like the crowbar or an audaciously morbid trash bag and knife set inspired by Showtime's *Dexter* might invite class-action mayhem and are unlikely to see the light of day, Hottlelet has nailed it in other venues. His carbonated beverage based on HBO's recently

wrapped *True Blood* was a huge hit; Sex Panther cologne, the fragrance favored by Paul Rudd's news doofus Brian Fontana in the *Anchorman* films, is the kind of gift that might prompt an eye-roll if it weren't so well-made. (The box actually growls when opened.)

"You're not actually selling cologne," Hottlelet says of the reverse product placement. "You're selling the connection people have with the film." The trick for Hottlelet is to try and anticipate which products will resonate with consumers, feeding nostalgia while avoiding tacky tie-ins. If Hottlelet has his way, at least a couple of your friends should have a bag of Stay-Puft marshmallows or *Fight Club* bar soap on display.

At 35, Hottlelet has a healthy affection for the entertainment culture that's shaped the last few decades. Until recently, he owned a DeLorean, the same model that shuttled Michael J. Fox back and forth in time; this past spring, he made viral waves for crafting an oven mitt in the shape and style of a Nintendo Power Glove; and when he got wind of a movement to try and get a massive *Robocop* statue erected in Detroit, he contributed several thousand dollars to the cause.

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It was *Robocop* that gave Omni its name when Hottlelet started the company in 2006. (In the movie it's the malevolent corporation that shoved Peter Weller into his cyber-suit.) Hottlelet had gotten an art degree from UC Berkeley and headed into advertising, which resulted in some frustration at the rigid parameters his clients laid out.

Starved for something different, he decided to act on an epiphany he had while watching *Idiocracy*, the 2006 Mike Judge film that predicts a future where society's collective IQ has plummeted. Its

consumers are so easily coerced by advertising that everyone uses a multi-purpose beverage called Brawndo, "The Thirst Mutilator." Hottlelet was struck by Brawndo's iconic presence, which is "advertised" in the film as being suitable for adults, plants, and babies. Why, he thought, is no one making this for real?

Unable to find a satisfactory answer, Hottlelet used his \$500,000 in savings to start Omni out of the San Francisco Bay Area. Having no prior experience in the licensing realm, he played phone tag with Fox for roughly a year. (A self-admitted rookie mistake: He hadn't yet gone to a major licensing show, where pitches can be made easily.) When the studio finally heard him out, they were puzzled: they had barely marketed the film and box office returns were poor. But Hottlelet knew that Judge's previous feature, *Office Space*, had earned its cult-classic status on DVD and cable before making a star out of a Swingline red stapler. Hottlelet thought Brawndo offered a similar opportunity.



Brawndo

After finalizing a deal, Hottlelet designed packaging for the drink based on glimpses in the movie. He remains Omni's sole designer and only full-time employee, farming out the manufacturing and distribution to contractors. But there was still one key element: the drink itself. Hottlelet went to industry trade shows and found beverage formulators and packagers, testing different concoctions and caffeine levels before finding the right balance. He also had to make some phone calls to Gatorade, which

Brawndo essentially satirizes, in order to convince Fox the refreshment giant wouldn't get litigious. When the actual, tangible Brawndo was finally unspooled in October 2007, Hottlelet found that the sheer ludicrousness of its existence created lots of valuable free press. "I had kind of a hard time convincing people it wasn't a joke," he says.

As Hottlelet predicted, *Idiocracy* had a shelf life beyond its initial theatrical release, and Brawndo was a success. Hottlelet now had a track record, which made it easier to work with Paramount for Sex Panther cologne the following year and with Fox again for *Fight Club* bar soap in 2010. But his biggest hit would come between those rollouts; this time, Hottlelet would be gambling on a product based on a property no one had even seen.

Even before HBO vampire series *True Blood* premiered in September 2008, creator Alan Ball knew there was marketing potential in Tru Blood, the faux-plasma drink that in the show has allowed vampires to stop feeding on humans. With Ball's endorsement, Hottlelet got pre-premiere approval from HBO to produce an actual Tru Blood beverage: blood-orange soda sold in packs of four. It would have been easy and cost-efficient to consider the tie-in a novelty and use plastic bottles. Instead, Hottlelet used heavy-duty glass to match what viewers see on-screen. Each pack weighed eight pounds, adding to shipping costs. But Hottlelet figured consumers didn't want a tacky approximation. "The value," he says, "is in a perfect 1:1 replica bottle."

True Blood wound up being a hit for HBO, lasting seven seasons—which amounted to 80 hour-long commercials for Hottlelet's bottles. Priced at \$4 each, the four-packs sold in the hundreds of thousands and became the biggest hit of his six-product inventory. Though Hottlelet usually targets online venues, the cultural impact of the series allowed him to jump the beverage queue at major retailers, including 7-11. "The big drink companies basically own shelf space," he says. "Creating a brand from scratch, the chances of getting into stores were almost nothing. It took Red Bull years to do it."

Unfortunately, a new *Ghostbusters* has not as yet gotten off the ground. "We did Stay-Puft with the expectation the sequel would be a thing," he sighs. "It's still not a thing."

The Tru Blood gambit was based on the collective track record of both Ball (who had created *Six Feet Under*) and HBO. His selection process is part intuition and part practicality. "Think about how many movies come out every year," he says. "There are all kinds of tie-in products, but the ones you want to make are the ones you can do well." Producing a snack for an Adam Sandler movie, as he was once offered, didn't make any sense. "It's just the name of the movie on a box of candy."

In 2010, Hottlelet thought he had a product that was both a nostalgic opportunity and one with future earnings potential. He released packages of Stay-Puft marshmallows from 1984's *Ghostbusters*; the Stay-Puft mascot winds up being a building-sized terror in the film's climax. Taking on a 30-year-old property with no current media support seems odd, but part of Hottlelet's strategy is "skating where you think the puck is going to be." In the case of Stay-Puft, it was the persistence of Paramount Pictures to mount a second sequel or reboot of the franchise. Unfortunately, a new *Ghostbusters* has not as yet gotten off the ground. "We did Stay-Puft with the expectation the sequel would be a thing," he sighs. "It's still not a thing."

But it wasn't a huge gamble: Marshmallows, after all, are mostly air. Omni traditionally avoids nostalgia triggers that come with an expensive price tag, as in Parker Brothers Chopper's beautiful (but insanely-priced) replica light bike from *Tron*. "It's amazing," Hottlelet says. "But realistically, who's buying them? For \$55,000, I don't know the answer to that."



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Hottlelet, who typically releases a product a year, doesn't want to discuss what he has planned next. He has good reason for secrecy. Adhering to his organic merchandising philosophy, he once struggled to somehow make the Los Pollos Hermanos chicken-and-meth franchise from *Breaking Bad* into a tangible product. The problem? "You can't sell fried chicken on Amazon or in Hot Topic." A

designer friend had an idea: What if Omni marketed chicken seasoning with the Los Pollos Hermanos logo? The solution seemed perfect, and AMC was on board, but Hottlelet opened his inbox one day and found a link to a rogue merchandiser who had the same idea and no compunction about selling it without permission.



Los Pollos Hermanos logo

"That's the biggest problem with licensing right now," Hottlelet says. "We could've done well with that, but anyone can open up a shop and start selling something with whatever branding on it without having a license." If the operation is small enough—say, an Etsy storefront—it's unlikely the licensor will bother to take action. In the future, Hottlelet believes these micro-sellers will be able to license material by paying out small royalties to IP owners.

To offset that concern, Hottlelet is diversifying Omni into a new category: real brands without a fictional equivalent that retain pop culture resonance. Late last year, he launched Eau My, a fragrance inspired by *Star Trek*'s George Takei and a play on the actor's "Oh, my" catchphrase from his appearances on Howard Stern. "Takei was very involved," he says. "It speaks to who he is and how he views the world." (It smells a bit like freshly cut lawn grass, in case you're wondering.)

Eau My is another e-venture where Hottlelet believes he can reach the biggest number of consumers who have a wry sense of humor and a desire to integrate their favorite media touchstones into their living space. "Online marketing is amazing for niche products," he says. "They want something different that speaks to them, something they can't just go to the store and buy."

Hottlelet won't disclose Omni's revenue from that demographic, save to say "he has a roof over his head" and enough disposable income to travel across multiple continents (he once drank snake blood in Vietnam before eating the heart). His next project may be a set of bone-carved chopsticks paying homage to *American Psycho*. Like the Power Glove oven mitt, it won't be available to the public; the market is likely too narrow for mass production. He's just doing it because it's fun, because Hottlelet derives as much pleasure from playing in the pop culture sandbox as his customers do. "Being emotionally invested," he says, "is how you're successful at anything."

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