IS THE PEN REALLY MIGHTIER THAN THE SWORD, THE FILMS, AND THE TELEVISION?
PRODUCT PLACEMENT IN BOOKS

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Product placement, also known as embedded marketing, involves placing promotional advertisements of real commercial products and services in various channels of the media following and as the result of a profitable monetary exchange. Product placement has been fairly common from the 1980s with actual commercial products like games, make up, food items, vehicles, computers and every variety of consumer goods featuring in films, television and print media. This paper is an effort to track the practice of product placement in books.

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INTRODUCTION

Product placement is a ploy used for brand integration by making a product seem an integral part of the advertising medium and its mention a coincidence rather than a planned advertising move. In this strategy we have advertisements that pretend to be anything but an advertisement. It is a well-known maxim of advertising that consumers ‘buy on emotion and justify with facts’. Product placement is an attempt to incorporate the product into the consumer’s environment so that it feels less intrusive, less deliberate. The following definition for product placement may be considered appropriate. Product placement, also known as embedded marketing, involves placing promotional advertisements of real commercial products and services in various channels of the media following and as the result of a profitable monetary exchange. Product placement has been fairly common from the 1980s with actual commercial products like games, make up, food items, vehicles, computers and every variety of consumer goods featuring in films, television and print media. This paper is an effort to track the practice of product placement in books.

LITERATURE REVIEW

We are inundated with advertisements of every form so much so that overkill becomes almost inevitable. There are billboards on highways and roadsides, we see people walking around wearing
advertising copy or dressed up in a particular fashion to remind us of specific products, flyers are stuck on cars and mailed to us; all this over and above the usual mediums like movies, television, radio, papers, etc. With the wide choices for entertainment available to the consumer these days, there is always a chance that he would simply switch off, stop reading, or go onto watching something else. This is where product placement is supposed to score over more traditional and conventional advertising methods. The idea is to use less obvious and aggressive means to influence people’s buying behavior and decisions by introducing the product as a part of the scene being shown or described. If this is done in a seamless manner it would give a feel of reality to the scene and be visible to the consumer without causing annoyance and breaching the boundaries of his private world. Smart advertisers are making use of this tactic widely through mediums of mass communication like movies, television serials, cartoons, computer games and most recently, books.

Product placement in various media has been happening in earnest from the 1950s, when we saw Catherine Hepburn throwing quantities of Gordon’s Gin out into the water in the movie, African Queen. The 1982 smash hit E T made Reese’s Pieces, a snack made of peanut butter, from Hershey’s Foods Corporation, extremely popular with children by cleverly insinuating it into the movie and showing the lovable and popular characters snacking on it (it is used to entice the timid alien character out of hiding). M&Ms by Mars. Inc. was the first choice for this slot but they failed to recognize the benefits the deal would bring and refused. The sales of Reese’s Pieces reportedly went up by 65% after the success of the movie. It has become a worldwide trend now with product placement being used to plug articles like clothing, accessories, jewelry, foodstuff, electronic items, music albums, automobiles, etc.

Product placement in books can happen in two ways. It might be a natural occurrence as a result of the author’s attempt to create a realistic scene or a character who sounds authentic. The products mentioned help to flesh out the character into those of a real person living in the contemporary world, enhancing the credibility and realism. In this case the makers of the products mentioned may not be even aware of the fact. The other way is arranged product placement which involves intentionally inserting products into the story line and getting financial compensation for it. Done with finesse and fine tuned properly, product placement can help authors make the lives of character’s life appear authentic and also as an advertising hook to showcase a variety of products.

THE BEGINNING

The earliest known instance of product placement, interestingly, is from as early as 1855 and in a book. Charles Dickens created an advertisement for a hotel he patronized. This was later developed into a full fledged novel and “The Pickwick Papers” was born. It is an arguable fact that Charles Dickens might have been offered some free rides by the carriage line of the same name.

In 1873 the renowned French author Jules Verne announced the publication of his book ‘Around the world in 80 days’, in serial form. The book which went on to become a classic is the story of the adventures of a staid, rich Englishman named Phileas Fogg. He enters into a wager with his friends that he can travel around the world and return to London in 80 days. He sets out with
his French valet passé partout and after a series of adventures and using all kinds of transport including an elephant (which he purchases for 2000 pounds!) in India, manages to reach back on time to win the wager. He also manages to find the love of his life in the meanwhile. A lot many transportation companies, mainly shipping ones, lobbied hard to be mentioned in the novel, believing that they will be able to piggy back on the popularity of the author, who was already considered a literary giant. In the 19th century when advertisements could not be reached to the masses easily, this was thought to be an excellent way of promoting products.

The well known jewelry firm Bulgari, commissioned the equally well known British writer Fay Weldon to create a work of fiction which would feature Bulgari products prominently and essentially function as a showcase for the celebrated brand. The book was meant as a limited number edition to be presented to a selected, privileged group of Bulgari clients. The result of the deal was the novel called ‘The Bulgari Connection’. Eventually Fay Weldon published it to receive mixed reactions. There were bouquets and brickbats and quite a few people including fellow authors expressed skepticism over the whole idea of commissioned writing and subjecting creativity to the more mercenary considerations of profit involved in such a deal. In 1989, Beth Ann Herman inserted references to a Maserati (exclusive luxury sports car) dealership situated in Beverly Hills scattered throughout her novel ‘Power City’. Her compensation was an elegant, expensive book party to the tune of $15,000. All the reactions to this venture were not positive. The Advertising Age magazine dubbed this attempt “time bomb ticking away in the heart of marketing” and cautioned against such practices.

**PRODUCT PLACEMENT IN CHILDREN’S BOOKS**

Product placement in children’s books is much more common. Skittles Riddles Math by Barbara Barbieri McGrath and Roger Glass, the Hershey’s Kisses Addition Book by Jerry Pallotta and Rob Bolster, The M&M’s Brand Counting Book by Barbara Barbieri McGrath, Twizzlers Percentages Book by Jerry Pallotta and Rob Bolster and The Cheerios Christmas Play Book by Lee Wade are a few examples which prove the point. The title of the books carries the company or product names (Hershey’s, cheerios, M&M, etc.) and the products are also featured prominently in the contents.

**PRODUCT PLACEMENT IN TEEN BOOKS**

Product placement is being tried out in books meant for preteens and teenagers as well, overtly and covertly. Tina Wells, the chief executive and founder who founded Buzz Marketing at 16 years of age, signed a deal with HarperCollins Children’s books to write a new series aimed at preteens or ‘tweens’ called “Mackenzie Blue”. Mackenzie or Zee as she is fondly called is a bright, intelligent, down to earth and socially responsible middle school student at the celebrated Brookdale Academy. With an assorted bunch of friends she is navigating the turbulent waters of middle school while getting involved in various social issues. HarperCollins is negotiating with different corporate for placing prominent references to brands throughout the book. Ms. Wells has made it clear that all the references
to products in her book would not be the result of business deals. She plans to use certain products to add authenticity to the character of Mackenzie, irrespective of the fact whether the company wants a marketing partnership or not. "Mackenzie loves Converse," she says, talking about the heroine’s favorite sneakers. "Does Converse want to work with us? I have no clue. But that doesn’t negate the fact that Mackenzie loves Converse." Still, she has another option up her sleeve in case another footwear firm like Nike wants a product placement deal. "Maybe another character could become a Nike girl", she says.

Yet another innovative marketing idea Ms. Wells has outlined is to incorporate references to social initiatives by companies like fighting global warming into the storyline in exchange for sponsorships. She also plans to add resource pages at the end of the book about projects sponsored by companies willing to enter into a partnership with her.

Emphasizing a character’s favorite brand of cosmetics (especially lipstick), shoes, bags or clothing has become a very lucrative and effective way to add an aura of authenticity in books meant for young audience. But, like most extremely efficient tools, it can cut both ways if it is not handled with good judgment and caution, as authors of another popular teenage series found to their cost. The book in question is "Cathy’s Book: If Found Call (650) 266-8233", a mystery for young readers published by Running Press in 2006. Cathy, a 17 year old artist, is trying to find out the reasons behind the uncharacteristic behavior of her boy friend Victor in dumping her. Cathy and her best friend, a spirited girl named Emma comes across a set of unsettling clues which hints at different possibilities like Victor suffering from a fatal disease, being a member of the underworld or a link in a biotechnology conspiracy. The authors Sean Stewart and Jordan Weisman had entered into a deal with the cosmetic line Cover Girl which had characters using specific makeup articles made by the firm in exchange for sponsorship and promotions in the teenage website beinggirl.com run by Proctor&Gamble, the parent company of Cover Girl. This caused a perfect storm of protests and Commercial Alert, an advocacy group run by consumer and civil right activist Ralph Nader, urged editors and reviewers to boycott the book. Exceptionally critical articles and editorials appeared in The Los Angeles Times and The New York Times. The whole concept of consumer products being inserted into books for young and impressionable readers without any other concern than a profit motive was extremely unsettling to a lot of people, including authors like Jane Smiley. "Novelists who sell their characters to financial sponsors are like teacher’s pets. Instinctively we know that their allegiance is divided. They say they want only to please us, the readers, but really...it’s pretty clear that we aren’t first on the list at all", she said in an editorial. The furor caused the authors to expunge all references to Cover Girl cosmetic line in the paperback edition which came out later. As Mr. Stewart, one of the authors rather ruefully admitted in an interview, “We did a whole bunch of pretty innovative things with that book, but, the main topic of conversation, instead of being about the other 18,” was the product placement. In a never say die spirit, Proctor&Gamble is engaged in talks with the authors about possible future marketing tie ups. Meanwhile the sequel to “Cathy’s Book” called “Cathy’s Key” mentions brands like Blackberry strictly to add realism to the plot and has no sponsorship deals worked out.
PRODUCT PLACEMENT IN COMICS

Superheroes are all powerful beings who rule the world from the pages of comic books but there is one thing they can not prevent - products making a subtle entry into the world through their adventures. Product placement now uses comic books as an effective vehicle. Time Warner Inc.’s DC Comics brought out ‘Rush City’ a six part mini series in July 2006. The hero of the series ‘The Rush’ drives a Pontiac Solstice GXP. The car is an essential part of the character’s persona just as the Aston Martin was a part of the Bond persona. This is in exchange of promotional support from the parent company of Pontiac, General Motors. Marvel Entertainment Inc. used the ‘swoosh’ logo from Nike on a car door and a T-shirt in their comic ‘New X-Men’. “We are always looking for new and interesting ways of connecting with our consumers,” Nike says. “This is certainly one of them.” Another big name of the automobile world, DaimlerChrysler AG’s Dodge has a deal with Marvel comics too. Marvel, the publishers of all time favorites like Superman, Captain America and Sub-Mariner, now features Dodge’s Caliber in various scenes in the books, in their cityscapes and such. The target group for this kind of placement are the traditionally difficult to impress young adult male population, who react with suspicion and skepticism to more conventional advertisements. Comic books were considered fit fare for preteens and teens only, and they usually carried print ads hawking toys, chewing gum and acne medication. But a sea change has occurred in the way comics are perceived by young people lately, with the phenomenal success of the Spiderman movies and others of the same genre like X-Men. Comic book fans now include those in their 20s and even 30s, in sufficient numbers to catch advertisement agency’s interest and attention. Comics featuring all powerful, romantic male figures as protagonists are making sure that young males get added to their reader list. In short many comics are starting to offer stiff competition to the ‘laddie’ magazines. Since this is the same demographic that the advertisers are most anxious to woo a partnership seems profitable and almost inevitable. This is beginning to look like a perfect pitch to insert products like beauty care, men’s accessories, automotives, etc. Using comics as vehicles for promotion is not exactly a new concept. It was tried quite successfully by DC comics as early as the 60s when they brought out titles like Captain Action and Hot Wheels based on popular toys. More than 30 years ago the well-liked Green Lantern was fond of Hostess fruit pies. Captain Marvel and the Incredible Hulk plugged Twinkies, and Wonder Woman was all for Hostess Cup Cakes. MD Patrick Courrielche, of the marketing firm Inform Ventures says, “If you have someone experience something rather than just being told something, it’s much more impactful”. But when targeting older readers the placement will be much more subtle and restrained, through cleverly designed plotlines and settings.

PRODUCT PLACEMENT IN ADULT LITERATURE

Well known authors like Stephen King, John Grisham, Nora Roberts and Amy Tan have had their characters’ names bidden for and apparently set aside the profits for charity. A more obvious way of placing products within the covers of books, especially novels, is to have the traditional full page displays. The popular romance series Mills & Boon uses this tactic a lot. This is actually
old wine in a new bottle as the ploy is a rehashed version of stitching cigarette ads to the binds of paperbacks, used around 30 years back. This method has the drawback of being too blatant and might cause animosity in readers as it did then. Another version of the same approach is to stick sample sachets of the products like shampoos, creams or soaps to the covers of the books. This is useful in countering any protests by the reader as they feel they also benefit.

Literature meant for adult young women are full of references to specific brands. While most of this is only an attempt to make the character more real and contemporary for the reader and not the result of a lucrative business deal, this is an avenue which will certainly be explored more and more by marketers in the future. ‘For Matrimonial Purposes’ by Kavita Daswani, the spirited and elegant take on the educated and smart young Indian woman caught in the ancient challenge of finding a ‘good’ match, is replete with references to Charlie perfume, Godrej cupboards, Dole and Gabbana mules, Prada, Martin Margiela T-shirts, Scoop footwear, Jimmy Choo shoes, Manolo Blahnik, BCBG dresses, Ralph Lauren shirts, Kate Spade bags and much more. But these products are mentioned as a natural part of the life a young educated working woman leads in America. They are basically scenery painting. Erma Bombeck, the celebrated humorist who wrote prolifically about suburban American family life threw in mentions of 7-Up, Jell-O, Kaopectate, Perrier and the Pillsbury Dough Boy liberally while describing her family’s escapades and adventures. Certain novels which are full of references to popular brands actually earned rather acerbic criticism from Ruth Marcus of Washington Post. “The curry-scented slapstick that follows is more product placement (Moschino miniskirt, Jimmy Choo stilettos, Habitual jeans) than literature—though not much worse than the usual formulaic teen novel”, she said. But none of these seems to have been a marketing move. Rather they are an attempt make the reader to identify with the character’s lifestyle.

‘The Southern Vampire Mysteries’ a series which had had 8 books published so far and the ninth one slated for May 2009 is authored by New York Times bestselling author Charlaine Harris and was first published in 2001. The story is about a telepath Sookie Stackhouse who is working as a barmaid in a fictional town in Louisiana. Because of her special abilities she meets many interesting people including vampires, shape shifters and were wolves. Sookie’s vampire boyfriend is shown to love Henley shirts and is very partial to his 2008 BMW 5351. Many characters in the series prefer to go to Shreveport to shop at Dillard’s. Los Angeles writer Mark Haskell Smith Planned and penned the serial novel ‘Black Sapphire Pearl’ entirely as a promotional vehicle for the Japanese auto giant Lexus. It is meant for publication in three installments in the quarterly magazine brought out by Lexus, which is meant for circulation among the owners and will appear on their website as well with interactive features. He was paid an undisclosed sum of money and allowed the use of the luxury car ‘GS Hybrid’ for his services. Lexus decided to choose this medium to reach their product to a younger trendier set of clients after conducting a focus group. Mr. Smith who writes film and television scripts as well says that his novel is a disguised version of traditional advertisement copy at all. His novel is fashioned “to be really cool and different and literary.”

Smart marketers and companies know that if
the book is overloaded with too many mentions of the product it will leave off being a book and become a commercial. This can be extremely annoying to the consumer which will in turn have disastrous consequences. Electrolux, the global leader in home appliances, had commissioned the comic novel ‘Men in Aprons’ in 2007. It was sold on their website and offered for downloads. In this ‘billboard novel’ the name of the brand is never heard mentioned, but the hero can be seen to do some house cleaning, especially vacuuming.

Monty Python and the Holy Grail (Book) were brought out by Mandarin Paperbacks, London, in 1993. It contains the screenplay of the hugely successful film by the same name and the whole text including those scenes which were cut from the film. The story is set in King Arthur’s time and involves the uproariously funny quest undertaken by Arthur and his Knights as ordered by God. They are searching for the Holy Grail-Jesus is said to have drunk from it at the last supper-and come across side-splitting adventures. In this unlikely context very contemporary references to present-day brands are blithely made by the characters. Tylenol, Lipton Tea, Armani, Bed, Bath & Beyond, Green Giant, etc., are some of the products mentioned. Some of the quotes from the book include

“Must be a king”

“How do you know that?”

“He’s Zestfully clean.”

“I arrange, design and sell shrubberies, just like the bountiful plant department at Home Depot.”

“She turned me into a Fig Newton”

“Come and see the violence inherent in the system. Visit China”.

“Your mother was a hamster, and your father smelt of Glade pine-fresh scented candles.” The only function these brands have is to juxtapose the ultra modern 20th century to King Arthur’s times which results in a highly amusing mixture. Product placement is used for comical effect here and succeeds in giving the book a humorous and droll flavor. Advantages and disadvantages Like any other marketing initiative product placement also has its flip side. Many critics feel that it is rather unfair to the reader because one can neither switch off nor change channels till it is over like TV advertisements; nor can we walk out for a breath of fresh air like in a movie theater. When they are woven into the text we cannot skip them either. The function of fiction is to create an alternate world for the reader where he can get away from the often stressful real one. Advertisement which is part of the text can be a jarring reminder of the very place one is trying to escape from. Insertion of a real world product into a make-believe world seems rather an unkind joke at the reader’s expense. According to Chuck Rozanki who owns Mile High Comics product placement in books “taints the experience”. The fantasy world of comics gets defiles by the rude introduction of real world products. Quite a few people feel manipulated and insulted by the product company by having subtle sales pitches incorporated into their leisure reading and this makes them feel angry and upset. There is also the fear that the feel, quality and texture of the story and also the quality of writing will be compromised if the writer is constrained by a business agreement to incorporate certain products into the narrative. The fact that HarperCollins commissioned a marketing executive, not an author to write the Mackenzie series is very significant in this context. The
implicit trust that a reader has in a writer’s integrity might be destroyed if he feels that considerations other than artistic is deciding the content. In the case of children or young adults vulnerability is increased and efforts have to be made to make sure that no harmful products get mentioned. On the other hand if frequent mentions to products with which they are familiar create an atmosphere of comfort and familiarity for the young reader it might induce them to read more and more. Around 46% of young people in the age group of 15-17 are very low frequency readers, according to a survey published by Scholastic. The reason they cite for this poor number is that they are unable to find reading material which is able to sustain their interest. Though very careful and balanced planning will have to precede the selection of brands which will be relevant to the young audience and consummate mastery of the genre will be needed to save the book from becoming too blatantly oriented to selling, if this would help even a little in luring youngsters to books and reading it will be worthwhile. Finally it might fetch the author, if he or she is not a celebrated writer already some necessary and sorely needed additional income. The advertising industry today is a multimillion dollar leviathan where new initiatives, innovative schemes and strategies of marketing are being thought up and tried out all the time. Product placement in one form or other is certainly here to stay. This $2 bn enterprise (as PQ Media, a media research firm says) is progressively making in roads into traditional and conventional forms of advertising. With the consumer being inundated with choice and media options his power of decision making and control over channels of entertainment is also increasing. This means that the chances of a consumer electing to not allow any pesky sales pitch to interfere with his enjoyment is also increasing. Subtlety and delicacy should be the key words. Art should not be compromised for the sake of advertisement. If marketers are willing to pay attention to the writing on the wall and make sure that product placements are done with taste and grace, with the products themselves visible in their chosen environment but not the focal point, this marketing approach can pay rich dividends and create a win-win situation for everyone concerned.

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