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Is That 'House Hunters,' or an Ad From Chevy?

Why More Commercials Are Going to Start Resembling Your Favorite Shows

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Published: December 01, 2010

NEW YORK (AdAge.com) -- Fans of HGTV's flagship "House Hunters" program may have been surprised in recent weeks to see Chevrolet commercials that look a lot like the show itself. In three 60-second spots that spanned the commercial breaks during "House Hunters," the ads depict consumers making a choice among three different vehicles -- one of them, of course, a Chevrolet.

Chevrolet calls the commercials -- which form a miniature program all by themselves -- "Car Hunters."

Commercials have occasionally aped their host programs before, like ads for Target that ran during the series finale of ABC's "Lost" that referenced life on the island. Advertisers are eager to devise ads that make reference to the programs they support, just as General Motors did when its Cadillac vehicles appeared in runs of FX's "Damages." What's more, more actors have started to appear in commercials specifically created to run during their own shows, including Honda spots that appeared alongside episodes of "Chuck" featuring characters from



Chevrolet 'Car Hunters' promo

the show behind the wheel of Honda vehicles.

But marketers' growing thirst for spots that can thwart fast forwarding, not to mention their rising emphasis on Nielsen ratings for commercials themselves, are driving new dollars to these tactics. Recent "sneak previews" of "Grey's Anatomy" on ABC have been popping up in the middle of the show -- sponsored by Microsoft. The sneak peeks undoubtedly grab the show's biggest fans more than most typical commercials, even if many viewers might rather finish the current episode before getting glimpses of the next one.

Networks have to be careful, as a matter of fact, not to let marketers run roughshod over their franchise shows and risk alienating fans.

The strategy, however, has obvious and growing appeal. "People who watch 'House Hunters' were used to the format of this show," said Matt Scarlett, advertising manager at Chevrolet. "When they watch the 'Car Hunters' show, it's just an extension of what they were already seeing, so they'll stick around and watch the commercial."



The 'Decoded' team: Christine McKinley, Buddy Levy and Scott Rolle.

Porsche's take on 'Brad Meltzer's Decoded'

Starting Thursday, Porsche Cars North America will run ads during "Brad Meltzer's Decoded," a [new series on History Channel](#), that echo the theme of the new program. Just as "Decoded" features its host, author Brad Meltzer, striving to uncover secret symbols and codes tucked away in famous places, 60-second Porsche commercials during the show will explore the origins of the Porsche crest and the reasoning behind the cars' design features. It won't hurt, of course, that "Decoded" cast members will drive Porsche's new 2011 Cayenne S in all 10 episodes of the series.

Aligning ads with specific programs shouldn't be done lightly, suggested Scott Baker, manager of marketing communications for Porsche. Marketers will just be spending extra money and time without extra gains if the programs and their themes don't align pretty closely with the ad

messages. "You're probably not helping your [media] partner when you're integrating something into an environment where it doesn't make a lot of sense," Mr. Baker said.

If marketers have to choose wisely, though, so do networks. "They have brands that are important to protect, as do we," said John Dailey, VP-Eastern regional ad sales for HGTV.

Protecting network brands

"We think of 'House Hunters' as an institution," said Jon Steinlauf, senior VP for ad sales at Scripps Networks, which owns HGTV. "'House Hunters' is to HGTV what '60 Minutes' is to CBS. These shows run forever and you have to make sure we are careful not to be overly commercial with it."

As a result, HGTV is likely not to allow another car advertiser to put a subsequent version of "Car Hunters" into place, the pair said. GM, for its part, had some clout with the network. The automaker and Scripps have had a long partnership and have put other nontraditional projects into place in the past.

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