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Selling in a dark tunnel

MARTA riders to ride by lit ads



Submedia

A long line of lighted images -- first of their kind in the nation -- will promote Coke's bottled water, Dasani.

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Advertising is reaching a new low in Atlanta.

The setting is an underground MARTA line in Sandy Springs. Next week, MARTA will flip the switch on a first-in-the-nation tryout of an ad inside a train tunnel.

The advertisement -- for Coke's water brand, Dasani -- will be a moving commercial, sort of like a TV spot without sound. The concept is simple, using a long line of lighted images that will seem to be in motion as the train speeds past.

The concept is reminiscent of a flip book, except that it's the viewers who move, not the artwork.

"It's an experiment, but it's also something we're very optimistic about," said Kellam Graitcer, senior brand manager for Dasani.

Coke is keeping the content of the Dasani subway ad under wraps for now, but the spot will resemble a wave. Because of the unusual medium, Coke hired a specialized New York agency, Phactory Productions, to handle the project.

Graitcer said Coke has done market research at MARTA stations to determine whether riders are familiar with Dasani.

The company will repeat the test later, after the ad has been up awhile, to see if the spot helps increase brand awareness.

The company behind the new ad is Submedia of New York.

If it works, Submedia could breach yet another boundary in advertising. Ads already show up throughout most transit systems, from station platforms to the interiors of train cars.

Tunnels, however, have remained vacant and dark. "It's a completely new medium," said Submedia President Matthew Gross.

MARTA stands to gain revenue from the project. Spokeswoman Steen Miles said a six-month run of one tunnel ad will garner \$90,000. Coke plans to run its Dasani ad for three months.

MARTA officials have 15 more locations in mind, and the revenue potential is about \$15 million over five years, Miles said.

Tony Griffin, MARTA marketing business manager, said the transit service currently earns about \$5 million per year from advertising. While installing more ads might turn off some riders, MARTA officials believe people would be even more upset about fare increases.

"We have to look at things like this," Griffin said.

A Canadian firm, Side Track Technologies of Winnipeg, Manitoba, installed a similar system this summer in a subway in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

A different company has a test program in Athens, Greece, while another is working on one for Budapest, Hungary.

Workers at the Sandy Springs MARTA station have been installing the equipment for weeks, during the wee hours when tracks are idle.

Until next Tuesday, the equipment will remain unlit, making it virtually unnoticeable.

The end of the 900-foot installation is visible only from the northbound platform at MARTA's Sandy Springs station.

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