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On the Walls of Dark Subway Tunnels, Motion Pictures

By **ANDREW ZIPERN**

SUBWAY passengers in Atlanta who looked through the dark windows of their moving train yesterday saw glowing full-motion ads for Dasani, the bottled water from the Coca-Cola Company (news/quote). The start of the unusual advertising campaign, originally scheduled for Sept. 11, the day of the terrorist attacks, was a quiet event, but it may herald a new age in outdoor advertising.

City transit systems are emblazoning the dirt and graffiti-covered walls of subway tunnels with illuminated signs that, when seen from a speeding train, appear to be animated. The effect, similar to that of a flip book, is not unlike watching a 30-second television commercial.

“As you pass by at high speed, you see a full-fledged motion picture,” said Matthew Gross, president of Submedia, the outdoor advertising company based in New York, which has installed 1,000 feet of light boxes between the Dunwoody and Sandy Springs stations on the North Line in Atlanta. “We use a series of compressed images and are able to get an extremely high frame rate — about 200 to 300 frames per second.”

An offbeat and fast-growing phenomenon, “in-tunnel” systems began appearing this summer in Europe. Adidas and Coca-Cola, the first to experiment with them, bought space in the subways of Budapest and Athens through MotionPoster, a small company in Oxfordshire, England.

MotionPoster has recently announced contracts to install systems in Frankfurt and Munich and in Seoul, South Korea.

Many of the world’s mass-transit systems are considering similar proposals. Interest remains high even after the attacks on Sept. 11. “We really have not had any letup in interest from advertisers,” Mr. Gross said. “No matter what happens, companies are still looking for a way to differentiate themselves.”

In August, Submedia signed a contract with the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey to install a system on the PATH commuter rail line in Manhattan. (Mr. Gross said that in the wake of the attacks, no firm date has been set.) Sidetrack Technologies, in Winnipeg, Manitoba, is setting up tunnel ads in the subway in Kuala Lumpur and has plans to bring at least two more systems to North America next year. All three companies are meeting with transit officials.

“Advertisers are using every opportunity they can find to communicate their marketing messages, to fight the clutter of advertising that surrounds us,” Sid Holt, editor in chief of Adweek magazine, said in an e-mail interview. “And outside of prison, I can’t think of a more captive audience than subway riders.”

If in-tunnel media companies have anything in common, it is the belief that marketers must delve into previously unexplored territory to get consumers’ attention.

Mr. Gross said advertisers could expect to pay \$35,000 to \$250,000 a month for in-tunnel media, depending on location and passenger traffic. The cost

of Dasani's three-month run in Atlanta, he said, "is on the lower half of that scale."

Coca-Cola's subway ad is made up of saturated color images of cascading water. "It's a neat way to communicate in a targeted, closed environment," said Kellam Graitcer, Dasani's brand manager at Coca-Cola. Phactory Productions Inc., a New York design firm, created the ad.

"When you've got a brand new medium, people don't have anything that's been designed specifically for it," said Rob Walker, president of Sidetrack Technologies. "We can put images on both sides of the train so that the images can interact through the train."

Still, some wonder how effective such ephemeral imagery can be. Diane Cimine, executive vice president for marketing at the Outdoor Advertising Association of America, who has never seen the ads, said in-tunnel promotion sounds "wild and fun" but wonders whether "there's going to be a limitation on the communicability of these mediums."

Even if the market is relatively small, some critics say the idea will inevitably backfire, particularly given the new skittishness of subway riders. "There have been so-called breakthroughs like this for years — like ads at the bottom of golf holes or in public toilets," said Kalle Lasn, the editor of *Adbusters*, a magazine published by the Media Foundation in Vancouver, British Columbia, that satirizes consumerism.

"The real story, the way I see it," Ms. Lasn said, "is that we are at the beginning of a huge backlash against the encroachment of our mental environment."

Some point out that the technology is similar to one used by marketers in Ray Bradbury's dystopian vision "Fahrenheit 451."

MotionPoster maintains that there have been no negative comments in Europe. "None at all," said Michael Pelham, chairman of MotionPoster. "The passenger reaction is absolutely fascinating."

The ads "don't block any beautiful views of city architecture or mountains," Mr. Gross said. "This isn't a pristine environment. This is an industrial environment. It's just dark outside the window."

He also points out that advertising revenues help the cities. "This is providing revenue to the subway system. It's actually directly helping the communities where these signs will be in place."

The economics of deals vary by city, but few transit authorities have the luxury of turning a blind eye to the potential revenue. Atlanta's in-tunnel advertisements are projected to bring the city several million dollars over the next few years.

"I think people will ride the train just to see the ad," said Tony Griffin, marketing business manager of the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority. "Obviously if this thing is a success, we want to look at it as a way of expanding."