

Marketing

Written On The Subway Walls

Ian Federgreen, 08.15.02, 8:00 AM ET

Does it take a rocket scientist to turn ordinary subway tunnels into prime advertising space?

Well, yes. While Joshua Spodek was getting his Ph.D. in astrophysics from Columbia University, he was also developing an innovative advertising technique.

Submedia, cofounded by Spodek and Matthew Gross in 1999, produces 15- to 20-second animated ads that appear on subway tunnel walls. This is accomplished through a series of backlit pictures which Spodek compares to "the frames in a film reel." The pictures, printed by the U.K.'s Photobition Group on Kodak transparencies, spring to life as the train speeds by, creating a fluid film and giving passengers the effect of being inside a giant flip book.

After being introduced in Atlanta in Sept. 2001, the first motion-picture ad debuted in New York City on June 18 in the up-town PATH train tunnel between 14th St. and 23rd St. The PATH trains, which connect Manhattan to New Jersey and are operated by the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, serve an estimated 241,000 riders per day. The Submedia location is visible to an estimated 40,000 people a day.

The initial New York ad, for Minneapolis-based Target, featured various uses of Target's red and white bull's-eye logo, including a woman skateboarding around the chain's emblem. "Part of the Target brand is to constantly be looking for new ways to connect with our guests," said Target spokesman Douglas Kline. "An animated advertisement in a popular subway tunnel fit this bill perfectly."

"Target has a history of advertising with beautiful, bold, creative ads--so it was a natural choice for them," said Spodek.

It's certainly an expensive way to be bold. Although the PATH has a desirable demographic--70% are professionals and 77% are between the ages of 25 and 54--the Submedia ads cost around \$100,000 per month to run in New York, significantly more than traditional PATH advertising. A conventional subway ad--a 28" by 11" placard placed in every car--costs about \$40,000 per month. And a similar demographic could be reached online for 59% less.

But, at least until the novelty wears off, some companies are willing to pay the price. "[The ads are] creating an awareness and a buzz and an interest with our guests that is valuable to us," Kline said. "There have been many comments about the ads from many sectors, including people in the stores, news media interest, [and] talk value in Manhattan itself."

After a six-week run ending July 28, the Target ad gave way to a spot for The Discovery Channel's celebrity shark week. "What we're doing this year is very creative and unique, so we wanted to pursue a creative and unique medium," said Traci Spiegel, marketing manager for shark week. Spiegel is hoping that the PATH spot will have a "large effect" on ratings.

Less clear is the impact on the PATH's traditionally shaky finances. In 2001, the PATH lost \$151 million despite raising its fares 50%, to \$1.50, on March 25 of that year. Spokesman Steve Coleman was hesitant to say how the ads could offset taxpayer support of the PATH, calling them "just another part of the whole revenue picture" in their current test phase. The films will continue to run in the PATH for one year, after which time the ads may expand or be cut entirely.

But bored commuters seem to like the films. Burke Inc., a Cincinnati-based marketing research firm, found that out of 600 people surveyed, more than 90% liked the Submedia ad for Coca-Cola's Dasani bottled water which ran in Atlanta's transit system--and four out of five people liked it a lot. About 90% said they looked forward to future motion-picture advertisements. "It is a really good way for us to augment our more traditional advertising with something that's not only entertaining, but also has a buzz value," said a spokesman for Coca-Cola.

"Every major city in the world has a subway system, every subway system needs more revenue and every subway rider has a boring commute," Spodek says. "The potential is to go all around the world."



**to see a Submedia
ad in action.**