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Look -- Up in the Sky! Product Placement!

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SUPERHEROES LIKE SUPERMAN and Spider-Man can save mankind from natural disasters, space aliens and evil mutants. But there's one thing they are powerless to stop: Advertisers shilling products within the pages of the comic books they call home.

In July, Time Warner Inc.'s DC Comics, home to characters such as Batman and Aquaman, is launching "Rush City," a six-part miniseries that boasts visible promotional support from General Motors Corp.'s Pontiac. As part of the series, a new hero known as "The Rush" will be prominently featured driving a Pontiac Solstice in the comic book. "The car will be as essential to the character as the Aston Martin was to James Bond," says David McKillips, vice president of advertising and custom publishing for DC Comics.

Over the past few months, Marvel Entertainment Inc. has begun putting the "swoosh" logo from Nike Inc. in the scenes of some of its titles, such as "New X-Men." So far, the emblem has appeared on a car door and on a character's T-shirt. "We are always looking for new and interesting ways of connecting with our consumers," says Nate Tobecksen, a Nike spokesman. "This is certainly one of them."

Last week, DaimlerChrysler AG's Dodge finalized an ad pact that will include product placements in Marvel comics. Marvel, home of Spider-Man, Captain America and Sub-Mariner, may feature Dodge's new car, the Caliber, in the books' cityscapes, including on billboards, T-shirts or signs over the next four to eight months, Joe Maimone, Marvel's advertising director, says.

Both Pontiac and Dodge are getting the product placements deals as part of larger ad buys. The two car companies are purchasing print ads as well -- the first time either auto maker has taken out an ad in a comic book.

Product placement has become commonplace in movies and TV shows. Now it's coming to comic books -- in part because the industry's two giants, DC and Marvel, are promoting some of their titles as places to reach one of Madison Avenue's most elusive audiences: guys in their 20s. Notoriously hard to reach, young adult males are known to be wary of traditional sales pitches, especially ones that get in the way of their entertainment. "It's the kind of audience that is harder and harder and harder to get to," says Dino Bernacchi, advertising manager for Pontiac.

A casual reader might miss some of the new comic-book product placements, which are meant to be part of the artwork. "When Spider-Man flies through Times Square, you don't necessarily have to draw" the signs that are there in real life, says Marvel's Mr. Maimone. "We can pretty much put anything we want, as long as it's organic and not forced." DC's Mr. McKillips says Pontiac will not have direct editorial oversight of the comic and its main character. "We're not seeking their approval on everything, and they trust us," he says. A Pontiac spokesman says the company is not involved in the creative process.

Comic books have long carried some print ads, and they typically had a youthful bent, with ads for toy soldiers, x-ray glasses and mail-order Sea Monkeys. More recent ads hawked acne medications, videogames and chewing gum.

Lately, readers of comic books have gotten older. On Madison Avenue, "there is a large misunderstanding of who is reading these titles and what they are paying attention to," says Pontiac's Mr. Bernacchi. The genre suffered a slump beginning in the early 1990s that lasted until the first Spider-Man movie was released in 2002, says Gordon Hodge, who follows the business for Thomas Weisel Partners. In that time, fans who kept buying the books have grown older, now reaching into their 20s and 30s. A recent wave of hit films featuring comic-book heroes has gotten consumers, including older ones, interested in comic books again. Mr. Hodge estimates the comic-book market is worth about \$400 million to \$450 million, with Marvel controlling about 37% and DC capturing around 33%.

DC and Marvel are both burnishing "networks" of titles that appeal to male readers between the ages of 18 and 34. Marvel's Mr. Maimone says the comics titles are competing with "laddie" magazines such as Emap PLC's FHM or Dennis Publishing's Maxim and Stuff.

Comic books for the older set contain grittier storylines about superheroes with distinct character flaws. Batman these days exhibits paranoid tendencies, even going so far as to construct a satellite to keep tabs on his caped associates. Green Arrow, an archer in an emerald costume who once shot trick arrows with boxing gloves instead of sharp tips, recently used a real arrow to stab a villain in the eye. (To be fair, the criminal was already blind in that socket.)

DC's Mr. McKillips says he hopes to bring in other advertisers seeking an older male. "You're going to see this year a lot more health and beauty care, shaving cream, razors, alongside the automotive," he says.

Weaving products into comics is not entirely new. DC says in the 1960s it produced comic-book series based on toys such as Captain Action or Hot Wheels, in response to advertiser relationships. The new auto-maker ads will be less overt.

Nonetheless, the product placements, which still aren't widely known, have some fans seeing red. Such ads "taint the experience," says Chuck Rozanski, founder of Mile High Comics, a Denver comics retailer. "The comic environment is designed to take you away from reality for a moment," he says. "Here we are thrusting offensive marketing products from our world into this fantasy world."

The big concern among comics aficionados seems to be whether the drawings of the products will obscure the dialogue and pictures. Laverne Mann, a Ewing, N.J., librarian who has read comics for years, hopes the books won't look "like the comic is being bought by the product," with a logo or drawing of a soda can obscuring the art. Something that takes attention away from the story would be "like a pop-up ad," says Rebecca Sutherland Borah, an associate professor of English at the University of Cincinnati who has studied comics. "I want to see all the art and words I can get."

Others see the placement as the lesser of two evils, still better than having big display ads inside the comic books. "Anything they can do to put it in front of the person in the mainline of reading is going to be a good thing," says Tommy King, who sells comics at Tales Resold in Raleigh, N.C.

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