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Ads keep spreading, but are consumers immune?

Advertiser encroachment on all forms of media may well wind up backfiring

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PEOPLE WHO LIVE NEAR train lines find ways to adjust to the noise outside their windows. The first time a train passes, they can't help but notice it. But by the 10th or 20th time, they've figured out how to ignore it. Consumers have begun to treat encroaching advertising just like those trains.

Ads surface on the bottom third of the TV screen while a program airs, break up the flow of articles in a newspaper or stick out of the binding of a magazine. This constant knock-knock-knock against the collective



CHRYSLER AD: Engineered to attract—or is it divide?—viewers' attention.

consumer noggin once spurred cries of protest. No longer. "The tolerance bar has gone way up," said Dorian Sweet, executive creative director at Omnicom Group's Tribal DDB.

In part, that's due to people growing accustomed to constant interruption online. Thanks to the web, "consumers are becoming more de-

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sensitized," said John Moore, senior VP-director of ideas and innovation at Interpublic Group's Mullen. "They almost expect no place to be sacrosanct anymore."

Consumers may be resigned to this constant barrage, but is it just training them to tune out ad messages? Online, publishers and advertisers can mix content and commercialism as they like because, ultimately, surfers can click elsewhere. On TV and in print, that isn't always the case, particularly as ads are laced further into the content people want to enjoy.

TV screens have long been filled with egregious promos for other shows on the same network, but new techniques take the concept further. During a recent "Heroes" episode, NBC unfurled a "banner" promotion at the bottom of the screen—in the middle of a scene—for the film "American Gangster," something that does not run on its own air. Sibling cable outlet Bravo is gearing up to test an L-shaped bar onscreen that could be used to deliver ad messages.

CW's "Gossip Girl" recently featured the Verizon Wireless logo rising up from the bottom of the screen. Time Warner's TBS has run an on-screen bar mentioning Chrysler during "House of Payne." Viacom plans to place what it calls "commercial squeezes" at the bottom of screens on some MTV Networks channels, the company revealed in a recent investor conference call.

THE NEW NORM

Print, too, is looking crowded. Magazine bindings are jammed with discs, heavy-paper displays known as "spectaculars" and fold-outs that play music. More newspapers are dressing their front pages and section fronts with advertising. Others allow characters from "Bee Movie" to show up in their arts listings. These ads "are becoming the norm," said Roger Black, a designer who has helped revamp the look of many popular magazines. Publishers once known for their buttoned-

down demeanor "will allow things they didn't use to allow." Just last week, The New Yorker ran a two-page spread for Lexus that pictured its new hybrid car scattering leaves as it drove by. The ad then continued throughout the issue in the form of a slew of fake leaves stuck over cartoons by New Yorker artists created specifically for Lexus.

A look at any Facebook home page gives an indication of where media design is headed. Ostensibly filled with individual "news feed" bulletins about how friends are passing their time, the pages also contain a banner ad and promotions in the feed itself. On some news websites, everything is sponsored—from web searches to formatting a page for printing—with promotions just inches from editorial content. Online-video sites YouTube and Hulu are making use of clickable "overlay" ads that appear briefly at the bottom of a selection.

That design is spreading to mainstream venues. TV has become more interactive, so couch potatoes are growing accustomed to onscreen menus. Magazines are embracing the notion of surrounding a main feature with tidbits tucked away in the margins.

"The way people behave in their use of media has changed. They are used to having a lot more stuff" in front of them, said Jan Leth, vice chairman of global digital creative at WPP Group's Ogilvy. More consumers are used to multitasking and seeing multiple messages or pieces of entertainment at any given moment.

But squeezing more ads into a finite space is bound to have repercussions. "It's distracting. It's frustrating, and you feel helpless," said Robert Weissman, managing director of Commercial Alert, a nonprofit that monitors advertising's ongoing creep. Stuffing irrelevant promotion into a treasured piece of entertainment can also render the content less entertaining.

One other pitfall: Consumers are bound to grow resistant to marketing's new strain. "It's like noise on the streets of Manhattan," Mr. Black said. "You just get used to it, in which case you just have to make it noisier."