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Advertising
In Latest Shock, Howard Stern Seeks Staid Advertisers

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THE PEOPLE behind outrageous radio host Howard Stern want to transform him from a crass shock jock to a crass shock jock carrying messages from America's leading, and most respected, advertisers.

Viacom Inc.'s Infinity Broadcasting Corp., the radio chain that airs and syndicates Mr. Stern's popular and controversial morning show, is now cuddling up to Madison Avenue with a pitch that portrays Mr. Stern as just the right promotional choice for some of the country's most famous -- and least flamboyant -- companies.

In a new print ad making the rounds in trade publications and the New York Times, the radio broadcaster boasts: "Most of Howard's listeners are affluent, well-educated professionals. It's an incredibly loyal following that has attracted a host of major blue-chip advertisers."

True to Mr. Stern's radio persona, the ad depicts a female face, half covered by a leather mask, the other half swathed in a mud pack and cucumber eye-wrap. "We very much are going after females," says John Partilla, founder and chief executive of Brand Buzz, the agency overseeing the campaign. "The data point out lots of women listen to Howard."

It's unclear, though, whether major corporations and staid institutions will be eager to be associated with a man who routinely interviews porn stars and dazzles his audience with tales of visits to strip clubs. Mr. Stern has thrived by ridiculing conservative sexual and social tastes. Now, amid a difficult ad climate, he would like many of those he has mocked to support his show.

"It almost doesn't matter what the demographics are," says Natalie Swed Stone, director of national radio for OMD, the media-services unit owned by Omnicom Group Inc. "The content is so objectionable to most clients that they don't go a step further."

If this were Mr. Stern's morning program, the next sound you might hear would probably be too rude to describe. Instead, David Goodman, Infinity's executive vice president of marketing, offers the radio chain's spin on what the new advertising is trying to achieve. "This really is an ongoing campaign that is, day in and day out, intended to drive awareness of how powerful Howard is," he says. Mr. Stern's listeners are well-heeled, he adds, and they make family-oriented purchases. "These are people who send their kids to school. People who invest in 401(k)s, people who use credit cards," he says.

Infinity is telling media buyers that Mr. Stern's program reaches 3.9 million listeners each day -- more people than read Gannett Co.'s USA Today or The Wall Street Journal, which is owned by Dow Jones & Co. The show also reaches more adults than either Vanity Fair, which is owned by Advance Publications Inc.'s Conde Nast Publications, or Wenner Media Inc.'s US Weekly. A presentation available on a Web site, www.sternwarning.com, tells potential sponsors that Mr. Stern's listeners have a higher median income than people who watch "World News Tonight With Peter Jennings," which is broadcast on Walt Disney Co.'s ABC network, or General Electric Co.'s "NBC Nightly News With Tom Brokaw."

The question is whether Madison Avenue -- and its clients -- will be able to put aside its preconceptions. "They kind of think of him in 1988 -- 'Oh, my God, he's so edgy, and he is a little provocative, and almost a little bit scary,'" says Mr. Partilla, whose agency is owned by Young & Rubicam, a unit of England's WPP Group PLC.

The cultural landscape, though, has changed. With violent programs such as HBO's "The Sopranos" and the FX network's "The Shield" drawing big audiences, Mr. Stern may not be as much of a rebel as he once was. Advises Mr. Partilla: "Howard is something of an American icon."

If Mr. Stern is an icon, he is an edgy one. During his program Monday morning, he discussed the drinking he intended to do on a coming trip to Las Vegas. Visits to strip clubs were contemplated. Between segments were ads for such products as DaimlerChrysler AG's Jeep and Anheuser-Busch Cos.' Bud Light, along with promotions for Viacom-associated entities such as cable-channel TNN's World Wrestling Entertainment programs.

Being linked with risque antics has proved troublesome for marketers. Boston Beer Co., the maker of Sam Adams brew, found itself having to navigate through some backlash when WNEW-FM, a New York radio station also owned by Infinity, sponsored a promotion that urged listeners to have sex in public. A duo doing just that prompted public outrage and ultimately led to the demise of the radio personalities who engineered the stunt.

Nevertheless, Infinity believes the sheer number of Mr. Stern's listeners should alleviate such fears. Entertainment companies already use the program to develop buzz for new movies, Infinity's Mr. Goodman says, and makers of computer software and hardware, as well as backers of broadband services, might also want to join in.

On Monday, AOL Time Warner Inc.'s new America Online broadband service was heard promoting a concert for rock band Foo Fighters in conjunction with WXRK-FM, the New York City station that airs Mr. Stern's show.

Madison Avenue will certainly get a lot of Mr. Stern in the near future. According to Mr. Partilla, readers of trade publications such as Adweek and Mediaweek, owned by Holland's VNU NV, will find those magazines wrapped in a Stern-touting "belly band," or narrow packaging strip that must be torn or removed in order to read the pages. A comic strip featuring characters talking about the possibilities of Mr. Stern's show may also appear in the days ahead, he says.

Like Mr. Stern, the campaign is daring and ignores convention. Some believe it might just do the trick. "What you want is for advertisers to at least keep him in the considered set," says John V. Allen, a senior partner at New York brand-strategy consulting firm Lippincott Mercer, a unit of Mercer Management Consulting.

The print ad with the different sides of a woman's face may tell all, he says. "The picture says people who are intrigued by S&M on one side may also go to the Canyon Ranch, and that's beaucoup bucks."

Infinity hopes so, but at least one blue-chip company isn't buying its line. Yesterday, a spokeswoman for Procter & Gamble Co. indicated the consumer-products giant would be placing its advertising elsewhere. "Howard Stern is clearly outside of our content guidelines," she said.

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