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Work & Money
from the July 08, 2004 edition



SMALL SCREEN: A model at Loews Theatres on Boston Common invites onlookers to watch a movie trailer on the flat-screen TV embedded in her T-shirt.

REBECCA SWILLER

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'Billboards' that walk, talk, and even flirt a little

By [Clayton Collins](#) | Staff writer of *The Christian Science Monitor*

Just think Teletubbies - with a hint of Hooters. Eleven-inch, flat television screens adorn the fronts of T-shirts worn by winsome women deployed to be, in the words of the product's developer, "aggressively friendly."

The programming? Why, a marketing message, of course.

Last Friday night in Boston, a model worked the lobby at a Loews theater, chatting up moviegoers while displaying trailers for "I, Robot," the Will Smith movie that opens July 16.

If Adam Hollander has his way, you'll soon see TV-wearers (including some men) at the grand opening of a store, or outside a concert, or airing an antismoking public-service announcement.

T-Shirt TV, launched in Los Angeles in May and hitting 10 major US markets with its movie promotion this month, is the brainchild of Mr. Hollander, who runs The Brand Marketers in San Francisco.

The 30-year-old lifelong techno-tinkerer - he sounds a little like the former Dell dude - puts video ads on T-shirts equipped with speakers and the TV screens, which can also handle Flash animation or slides. It's the latest blast of what ad-watchers call ambient (all around you) or guerrilla (in your face) advertising. And it's meeting with mixed reviews.

In Boston, the high-tech shirt appeared bulky - and it can apparently be balky. Melissa, the screen-wearer, displayed a blank blue monitor for several uncomfortable minutes. She stood off in a corner trying to reboot.

"They were impressed - when it was working," she says. When the video loop

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finally did begin running, the audio was barely audible. Moviegoers approached tentatively.

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"I thought she was a cardboard cutout," says William Vandertouw, a Harvard University senior from California who remarked, after closer examination, that the screen's placement was "a real good move" from a marketing perspective. That, of course, is the whole idea.

"When a beautiful girl walks up to you, and she's wearing the TV commercial on her chest," says Hollander, "you just can't get away from it."

But that sort of statement makes some experts groan. "There are so few people in the world saying, 'I wish advertising were a little more intrusive,' " says David "Jelly" Helm, a longtime adman now at Wieden & Kennedy in Portland, Ore.

The notion of ads being clever and seductive, he says, is losing out to a school that advocates trying anything to get noticed.

"Advertising is obnoxious so that it gets attention. And then that doesn't work anymore, so it gets more obnoxious," says Mr. Helm. "I'd say this [campaign] perfectly demonstrates the obnoxiousness curve."

Getting noticed is Hollander's art. His other current contribution to advertising: the tricycle-mounted billboard. He calls that device a solution to a problem that comes with the use of the truck-mounted billboards that ply city streets: A temporary occupancy permit is often required to park the trucks, even briefly.

A spokesman for 20th Century Fox, distributor of "I, Robot," hailed the T-shirt campaign as a "clutter buster" in an interview with The Hollywood Reporter. And Hollander calls his approach less intrusive than that of some other ads, including big roadside signs.

"You're not going to be in your car when you look at this," he says. "It's going to be in places where people are 'recreating' - beaches, malls, sporting events."

At a Wired magazine technology convention in San Francisco in May, T-Shirt TV models could barely move because of the crush of onlookers they attracted, recalls Hollander.

"They were pretty much pushed into a corner," he says. "We actually had to get people away."

That reaction is predictable - and hard to beat, say some experts.

"As humans we all respond to things that are interesting and fun and a little bit different," says Karen Post, a self-described "branding diva" in Tampa, Fla., and author of "Brain Tattoos," a forthcoming book about branding.

"I'm a strong proponent of doing out-there things," says Ms. Post. Hollander's high-tech presentations suit the video and electronics fields he plans to target.

"It seems like a good tactical solution," says Post, "especially if it

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