

TV advertising: Coming soon to a shirt near you

The American Conservatory Theater can finally afford to advertise on TV. Sort of.

The San Francisco theater is using flat-screens embedded in shirts -- yes, shirts -- to create buzz around its new "musical fable" "Black Rider."

The screens are 11-inches wide, about six inches deep, and are mounted at chest level -- usually on women who are paid to stroll through crowded urban areas. The shirts weigh between two and five pounds. Adam Hollander, creative director of alternative San Francisco ad agency Brand Marketers, invented what he calls "adver-wear."

The screens aren't cheap, costing up to \$2,000 each, but Hollander has found no shortage of takers among advertisers who see the appeal of electronic human billboards. They were seen promoting Def Jam Records artist LL Cool J at the MTV Video Music Awards in Miami last weekend. Hollander himself wore one to promote cable network CNBC at the Republican National Convention in New York .

The never-ending supply of unemployed actors and aspiring models provides his work force, as needed.

"I hire people to wear the shirts who mirror the target demographic," Hollander said on his cell phone as he dashed around the convention. The San Francisco campaign, he said, is among the first to use men.

Scott Walton, director of marketing at ACT, said he tried the concept of portable screens years ago in his previous job, except things were slightly different then.

"They were 40 pound packs, so you had to get guys who were six foot three, who could only work for 20 minutes at a time," Walton said. As Walton and ACT marketer Brett Conner were brainstorming ways to convey what they see as the arresting hipness of "Black Rider" -- written by the late William S. Burroughs and musical renaissance man Tom Waits, starring 1960s rocker Marianne Faithful -- they came across an article about adver-wear and were instantly hooked.

Actors wearing the shirts paraded around downtown San Francisco last week showing passers-by 30-second scenes from "Black Rider." While some people may bridle at marketing coming from all directions -- let alone someone's chest -- Walton said they can't help but look. "It's just something that's bizarre," Walton said. "Heads turn."