

THE Sponsorship REPORT

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Theatre production of Aladdin incorporates sponsors' messages

PRODUCT PLACEMENT IN FILM and television has come under increasing fire from audiences unwilling to be subjected to subliminal marketing techniques. When theatre producer Ross Petty does the same for Citibank and Pizza Pizza – sponsors of his recent family-oriented stage production of *Aladdin* – audiences love it.

Ross Petty Productions is well known for its annual holiday shows, which feature tongue-in-cheek Canadian takes on children's classics: Jack and the Beanstalk; Cinderella; Robin Hood; even Snow White and the Group of

Seven. The 2006 production of *Aladdin* featured World Wrestling Entertainment star Bret "the Hitman" Hart as the genie and Petty himself as villainous Abanzeer.

"The way I stand apart from other sponsored entertainment ventures is that I integrate sponsors into the actual story line of the performance itself," says Petty. "This isn't the simplistic bottle of Coke left on a table in an episode of *American Idol*. If you start a movie with a barrage of commercials that delay the film, the audience boos. If you integrate the sponsorship into a theatrical performance like this one in a humorous and clever way, the audience applauds."

In *Aladdin*, for example, the hapless hero is convinced by Abanzeer to take a perilous journey across the mountains:

Aladdin: That's at least a day's travel . . . how are we going to pay for it?

Abanzeer: My Citi MasterCard will take care of everything!

Aladdin: But what if some evil person

stole your card?

Abanzeer: Evil . . . steal from me? . . . my Citi photo card has my picture on it, so no one but me could ever use it!

Citibank was the first Canadian company to offer a credit card sporting a photo ID, and the reference dovetailed with a corporate promotion of that feature.

Oversized credit cards featuring the production's cast were displayed in theatre lobbies.

"The process of getting the message into the play was collaborative," says Bridget Sun, Vice President of Brand and

Communications with Citi Cards Canada. "We briefed our creative team on the message we were trying to get out about the photo card's security feature and they worked with Ross Petty directly to incorporate that message in a simple and entertaining way."

In a multi-media sequence, the characters embark on a global magic carpet tour. But who wants to begin a round-the-world adventure on an empty stomach when Pizza Pizza offers a light lunch at hundreds of locations across Canada? The first few images depict a trip to a local Pizza Pizza outlet.

"We delivered a lot of eyeballs in our restaurants with point-of-purchase poster boxes and provided discount vouchers to the play," says Pat Finelli, Pizza Pizza's Vice-President of Marketing. "We said, 'we'll do that for you Ross, so what can you do for us?' He came up with that idea and we thought it was brilliant, especially tied in with a Canadian theatre company. It's not like a rink board logo at a hockey

game where people occasionally notice you. In the theatre, every eye is on the stage for every performance over 30 days. When Pizza Pizza is mentioned everyone – kids and adults – yells 'yay.'"

Through the rest of the brief world tour sequence, Abanzeer slaps down his Citi MasterCard at exotic locations around the world ("Camel ride in Egypt: forty five dollars. Travelling across the world on a flying carpet board with your favourite uncle that you never knew you had: priceless.")

Beyond observing audience reaction at the theatre, Sun says that it's difficult to gauge the benefits of such a non-traditional product placement. "We'd love to get a read on the return on investment but that's not always possible. Given the nature of this event – families enjoying a holiday play – we don't want to inundate them with questions or introduce tabling.

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The sequence with the card got a big laugh at the performance I attended and that's a good response."

Relying heavily on pop cultural references for trans-generational laughs, the production features a soundtrack that includes Shania Twain and the Barenaked Ladies, and trades on references to Avril Lavigne and local landmarks (the show toured seven cities including Vancouver, Edmonton, Calgary, Saskatoon, Regina, Ottawa and Toronto). Part of the acceptability to audiences relies on context. The family-centric audience knows Pizza Pizza – or at the very least pizza – and some of the applause stems from simple recognition.

"We've been doing sponsor references for five or six years," says Petty. "In the earlier days we'd drop a sponsor's name into the script but not to this extent, though we did once try to get an orange Volkswagen bug into the Elgin Theatre to substitute for Cinderella's pumpkin carriage." Failure to execute wasn't for lack of sponsor interest; the stage doors couldn't accommodate the vehicle.

Family audiences are also much more attuned to the importance of sponsorship in helping to keep productions affordable, says Petty. "The show is a long-standing tradition with families and, compared to other expensive holiday entertainment, the

top ticket price in my show was \$49 for kids and \$69 for adults. You don't need to go on stage and say 'your ticket is affordable because of sponsors like...' They're quite savvy to the reason behind the affordable ticket."

Even before Aladdin's final performance, Petty begins work on next year's offering, wooing potential sponsors by having them view the current play. A 2007 production of Peter Pan has signed figure skater Kurt Browning as the lead. "Unless you impress on them what you have to offer, they're not going to beat a path to your door," says Petty. "It shows them how we integrate sponsors into the show and gives them a taste of what they can expect the following year. My shows don't have investors or partners. I raise all of my pre-production budget through sponsorship dollars." Sponsors also help the production by buying out entire performances or blocks of tickets.

"Sponsorship integration will continue to be part of the performance," says Petty. "We're not doing the Shaw Festival or desecrating a straightforward production of a Shakespeare play. The type of show we're known for is flexible and full of ad libs, so we can easily integrate a variety of messages."

For images from the multi-media sequence incorporating Citi MasterCard and Pizza Pizza, see www.sponsorship.ca/aladdin.html.