

Thursday, April 12, 2001

OUT OF HOME

Here's a trip: Subway tunnel ads in animation

Clack, clack, clack--frames that tell a rolling story

By Gabriel Spitzer

Maybe media executives ought to take the subway to work more often.

If they did they might realize that all around them, in the tunnels that vein the earth beneath America's cities, awaits a completely untapped resource for out-of-home advertising.

Better, they could meet up with Joshua Spodek and Matthew Gross for an eye-opening tour.

Spodek and Gross are the founders of Submedia, a young company that has developed an innovative advertising concept for subway tunnels.

The ads are actually long rows of lighted boxes displaying frame-by-frame motion-picture clips. As the train passes by, the pictures seem to move, as in a child's flipbook.

Each frame is the size of a subway window, effectively transforming it into a movie screen for the captive audience of commuters aboard the train.

"We've found great interest from all sides. Everyone finds something different in it. We're working in an entirely new medium that no one has used before," says Spodek, co-founder and chief executive officer of Submedia.

"Advertisers like the fact that it's animated and lasts for an extended length of time, and that we have a captive audience. It's also animated in a different way than anything else. The pictures can be live action, computer generated, a cartoon-anything you see on television, a movie screen or on the web."

Submedia got its first taker when Coca-Cola agreed to buy a 950-foot stretch of space in an Atlanta subway tunnel.

The ad, which features Coke's bottled water brand Dasani, will appear to riders as a 20-second clip.

Now watch the bouncing ball



A rider

Construction has already begun, and Submedia hopes to have the ad in place by July.

The idea of making movies in subway tunnels occurred to Spodek when he was in graduate school, studying physics.

"In physics, you tend to think of relative motions. You tend to look at something and change the geometry slightly, and ask, what would happen if I did that?" says Spodek.

"If you're in a movie theater, you're sitting watching images on a screen, which is actually pictures moving past the projector. My original idea was, why don't we have the film sit still and have you move past it."

Spodek, who actually worked on a satellite for a time, put his knowledge of optics to work developing the technology that would go into Submedia's advertisements.

The company is getting plenty of attention now that Coke is onboard, but it wasn't always so easy.

"I guess there's a stereotype now of inventors working in garages. We worked for a long time in Matt's grandfather's garage on Long Island. It was just us putting things together, and we definitely took a few wrong turns. Luckily, Matt had a teammate who had a hardware store," says Spodek.

The ads will cost advertisers between \$35,000 and \$250,000 per month, depending on the tunnel's traffic. Much of the profit will go to the transit authorities.

The Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority plans to place 16 to 20 ads throughout its 47.6 miles of track, from which it hopes to generate \$15 million in revenues over the next five years.

Submedia has a deal to place two test ads in the tunnels of the New York-New Jersey Port Authority System, and it is in talks with transit authorities in other major U.S. cities, including San Francisco, Boston, Washington, D.C., New York and Chicago.

The company cannot divulge which advertisers have expressed interest, but the phones at Submedia have definitely been ringing.

"It's all kinds of categories, mostly blue-chip advertisers. We're not picking up the traditional subway-car ads where you have a local advertiser with a local phone number, with a market in that given city. So far it's the ones that do cutting-edge advertising, and Coke is a prime example of that," says Spodek.

As with many out-of-home innovations, advertisers may risk a backlash from people who view the previously untouched medium as sacred space.

But as Spodek points out, this is, after all, a subway tunnel we're talking about.

"There are billboards that go up on highways that might

looking out the window of the subway car sees panel after panel passing by, and the effect is to create a moving picture.

cut off a beautiful view, or in residential neighborhoods where people might not want them. We're in subway tunnels. We're not cutting off a beautiful view. The tunnel itself is an industrial environment. So these things mitigate those concerns."

Moreover, riders benefit from lower fares when the transit authorities take in additional revenue from advertising.

"You have to have good relations with the transit authorities; if they don't want it, it's not going to work. They're very protective of their tunnels," says Spodek.

"The transit authorities have a real need for revenue, so they're open to new ideas. And this is a very public way to let people know that the transit system is controlling costs without raising rider fares."

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