

## The Ad Mobile

by [Bianca Wright](#)

With advertising executives and marketing personnel struggling to find the right mix to direct traffic to online stores, the market was ready for something new. Enter Wheels America Advertising, a Luzerne, PA advertising company that burst onto the scene during the 1996 Atlanta Olympics with its AGFA Film campaign. The company gave a new twist to the traditional billboard with its backlit billboards mounted on the side of moving flatbed trucks.

Though no concrete statistics exist for the efficacy of mobile advertising, outdoor advertising is an extremely efficient medium that is growing daily. As a whole, the outdoor advertising industry is big business, bringing in revenues of \$4.8 billion in 1999, up 9.4 percent over 1998, and in 2000 is tracking toward \$5.2 billion in total industry revenue.

A 1999/ 2000 Perception Research Services study commissioned by the Outdoor Advertising Association of America (OAAA) revealed that 70 percent of boards within the passengers' field of vision were examined, while 63 percent were read.

It further found that 26 percent of respondents stated that outdoor advertising would influence their purchase decision. The study consisted of tests conducted in the New York and metro areas in 1999, and in the Minneapolis metro area spring 2000. The study examined a variety of outdoor vehicles in a range of product categories and several hundred people were surveyed.

### The Wheels Are Turning

"We offer targeted advertising to our clients," says Henryk Strzeletz, president of Wheels America. "Print or electronic advertising can be effective, but for the same cost, we can run an advertisement for two months, ten hours a day and buy a million more impressions for the money."

The company charges \$1,500 per day for driving and a one-time charge of \$1,475 for signage. The figures drop depending on the length of the contract. Wheels America does not design the campaigns or create the ad copy for its clients. "We go to ad agencies or they come to us," Strzeletz says.

The 8- by 14-foot billboards are built into the body of a GMC truck and illuminated from the inside out. "We use UV inks so that the boards don't fade in the sun and they are water resistant too," says Strzeletz. Extensive research determines the most effective targeted, timed and repetitive routings in advance to offer clients maximum exposure.

Wheels America Advertising is not the only agency to offer this unique form of advertising. Launched at the end of 1999, AdsOnWheels offers mobile backlit full vinyl billboards to its clients. The company is growing fast and is planning to expand into international markets in Europe, Asia and Canada in the next six months.

### All Wrapped Up

AdsOnWheels takes mobile advertising one step further with its autowrapping and buswrapping services. With autowrapping, advertisers have the ability to advertise on privately or commercially owned vehicles throughout the United States. Individuals are paid \$450 a month for the use of their vehicles.

There are a variety of options available, including a full wrap that covers the entire exterior of the vehicle including the two rear side windows and the rear window in eye-catching commercial advertising. The Federal Highway Transportation Administration estimates that drivers of personal vehicles see an average of 750,000 visual impressions per month.

Other mobile advertising agencies that offer autowrapping include AutoWraps, WrapCars Corporation and BuzzCar. Montage Moving Sound and Billboards takes mobile advertising one step further with mobile sound billboards, combining the visual with music.

Outdoor advertising, in all its forms, is one of the most effective advertising media. In fact, Ken Gronbach, president of KGA Advertising, a Connecticut firm specializing in strategic planning and interactive solutions, believes that outdoor advertising is the only form of conventional media that will survive the coming media shake-up. "Outdoor advertising is the least threatened by technology," he says.

Other traditional media like television, newspapers and radio will die or change significantly in the

coming years, according to Gronbach. Radio, for example is in serious jeopardy. "There are so many other ways to access audio without advertisements. Eventually, I believe that we will have radios in our cars that play only the music we want to hear," he says. "It will still be broadcast music, but broadcast by satellite. The commercial audience for radio is already shrinking." KGA's research reveals that high school students do not listen to radio at all.

Gronbach believes that everything is moving towards the Internet, but billboards are unaffected by it. "Instead of dying out, I think we will see improvements in this type of advertising over the next few years," he adds. "Billboards are doing well and there aren't enough to go around at the moment."

### **Building the Brand**

So where does that leave Wheels America? "Wheels America can offer its clients brand awareness and hype," says Sam Ambrose, VP of Marketing and Strategic Partnerships at RMS Networks, a Florida digital media company that delivers broadcast-quality digital programming via two-way broadband satellite networks to retail locations nationwide. "It's a great vehicle, pardon the pun, for large-scale special events and promotions. And it's mobile which makes it easy to set up. I would certainly consider using this platform of advertising to increase traffic to a tradeshow booth or product purchases at an event."

Strzeletz was inspired by his years in the fashion industry in Germany. Fashion companies often used billboards like those for trade or fashion shows and he thought that it would be a great idea to illuminate them and use them as a form of advertising in the United States.

The idea took off and the company's clients currently include InStyle Magazine, ABC and IBM. In 1999, Wheels America became the first mobile advertising company to franchise. "There was demand for more vehicles and things started going nationwide. We had a choice, we could either buy a fleet of trucks or franchise," says Strzeletz. "The best business decision for everyone was to franchise."

### **It's the Barbeque Sauce of the Industry**

The OAA published a case study on the efficacy of mobile and outdoor advertising. The study focused on the Lloyd's Barbeque campaign. The campaign was aimed at working women in 12 major U.S. markets. Outdoor advertising and radio were used.

It was found that sales volume of the product increased 46 percent, while total brand awareness increased 40 percent. Tellingly, in markets where the mobile "Pig Rig", a branded truck, made personal appearances, sales volume increased an average of 20 percent when the vehicle was present.

While there is proof that traditional retailers can benefit from outdoor advertising, is this an option for online retailers looking to drive traffic to their sites? According to the November 13 issue of "Red Herring", the biggest driver of traffic to a Web site is word of mouth. "If advertising on Wheels America was really that attention grabbing with a compelling message, word could spread about the online retailer and it could translate into Web site traffic and potential online sales," says Ambrose. "The most effective advertising offers an immediate, compelling and measurable call to action."

And the OAAA agrees. "Despite the wave of e-commerce today, most consumers still travel outside their homes everyday. Outdoor advertising is a compelling form of media that influences consumers where they live, shop, work and play," says Chief Marketing Officer Stephen Freitas.

"Online retailers still have a need to influence consumers when they are traveling throughout the real world. Mobile advertising can do this. Even the most ardent online surfer spends most of his or her day in the brick and mortar world," he says.

AdsOnWheels CEO and founder Christopher Dyson believes that online retailers can gain the most benefit from mobile advertising. "With the explosion of dot-coms, online retailers are facing increased costs of other media," he says. "This medium translates to all companies."

### **Content is King**

Seeing is believing, at least when it comes to mobile advertising. "[Consumers] want what they see on a regular basis. Desire for that item grows every day, without them knowing it," Gronbach says.

Ambrose adds, "It appears that the most effective means of offline advertising is advertising that is visual to the consumer. It also helps their memory recall, if they can actually see the company's name and URL."

The appeal of a billboard lies in its relative newness, as it is only now gaining widespread use. "Unlike a billboard or a radio ad, mobile advertising offers you a 3D perspective," says Dyson. "It's not something you can avoid. It's a fresh look at advertising."

The advantages of mobile advertising are numerous. "You can determine the route it takes and it can be at the right place at the right time," says Gronbach, whose company has co-ordinated various mobile campaigns for its clients including BeatleBoards where a Volkswagen Beetle was completely covered with commercial advertising.

### Keep it Simple

The impact of an advertisement that can follow your customers wherever they go is dependent on its design. "Your message should be simple. The axiom we follow for billboards is: how good are you in eleven words or less? It's no use putting a paragraph on a billboard," says Gronbach.

Ambrose agrees. "All advertisers must keep the importance of the message in mind. Indisputably, content is king. If the message isn't right for the audience, it doesn't matter where you put it," he says.

As with all media, mobile advertising is not without its disadvantages. Yet one of the drawbacks of mobile advertising, traffic congestion, can turn into a plus for advertisers savvy enough to use it to their advantage. "If, for example, you knew that an event like a large rock concert was taking place in a certain area and that traffic would be congested because of it, you could position your mobile billboard to drive in the opposite direction of the traffic jam," says Gronbach. "That would be an effective way to get your message across."

Another disadvantage is that a mobile billboard's target audience cannot be segmented; it can only be divided according to geographic region. Yet Gronbach does not see this as too much of a drawback.

"Say you are DeBeers diamonds and you have the opportunity to reach 80,000 people with your message, but you only need to sell 80 diamonds, not 80,000. If that's the case, we'll take it. The waste doesn't bother me," he says. "Mobile advertising is only effective where there is a high concentration of people. As long as you get back more than you put in--and you should be getting 50 times what you put in--that's all that counts."

For online retailers, the benefits are relative. "It depends on the goal of the online retailer. If they want to get their name out there, then yes [it would work]," says Ambrose. "[But] it would be difficult for an online retailer to directly benefit from this advertising platform unless direct access to their website was also available or an added initiative was given for the consumer to purchase from the site."

### Interactivity Activity

Not only is Wheels America offering a relatively new form of "in-your-face" advertising in its MobilBoards, it can also offer interactivity. "We can stop and do a sampling with your clients," says Strzeletz. "We recently did a campaign for ABC, promoting its daytime soaps, and we had a sampling where we gave away free water bottles and caps. ABC got double exposure this way--the signage on the truck and the branded samples. Everybody loves free things!"

AdsOnWheels also offers a certain interactivity to its clients. "For example, if a client requires a mobile billboard at a convention, we can hand out promotional items to prospective customers," says Dyson.

With Internet advertising's star waning somewhat, outdoor advertising seems to offer advertisers a high-impact, low-cost alternative. If used correctly it can translate into sales for both traditional companies and online retailers. As the medium continues to grow and progress, the stage seems set for even more innovations in this fast-growing ad mobile.



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