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Cablevision Unveils New Interactive Ad Format

Cable Operator Predicts 30-Second Ads Will Become a 'Gateway' to More In-depth Marketer Messages

By Brian Steinberg

NEW YORK (AdAge.com) -- In a glimpse of what TV advertising might look like in the not-too-distant future, Cablevision Systems has unveiled a new interactive commercial that allows TV viewers to click the remote control in order to request a coupon, sample or other takeaway from the marketer whose ad they are watching.

Launched the week of Oct. 5, the new ad format allows Cablevision's digital-cable subscribers to order up samples, coupons and gift cards from the likes of Unilever, Procter & Gamble's Gillette, New York retailer Century 21 and Benjamin Moore. Several cable providers, including Time Warner Cable, offer advertising that invites viewers to click a button in order to be transported to a new channel or screen where viewers can learn more and even use the remote to watch short films and videos. But Cablevision suggests its new format offers a slight tweak to the proceedings: Viewers are still able to watch the show they originally tuned in to see, even as they choose to interact with a screen that fulfills their request.

Cablevision executives suggested new interactive formats give them an edge in the battle to woo dollars from local and national advertisers that might have otherwise put their money into local broadcast stations or the web. And there is more of it to come, said David Kline, president-Rainbow Advertising Sales Corp., the ad-sales unit for Cablevision.

"Five years from now, the majority of our advertising will have some enhancement," he predicted, with more traditional 30-second ads functioning as "a gateway" to more involving on-screen experiences that take up several minutes of consumers' time.

Cablevision executives suggested that advertisers would be willing to pay what Mr. Kline called a "significant" premium over normal ad rates for commercials that allowed them to collect a viewer's address and put a sample or giveaway into their hands.

Stickiness

The theory is that marketers will find more value in ad formats that occupy consumers for greater lengths of time and even track some sense of their desire to make a purchase or just get more information about a product or service. Barry Frey, exec VP-Cablevision Advanced Platforms, called the process "double opt-in," because viewers first must choose to interact with the commercial, and then must choose to submit information to receive a freebie or coupon.

How does Cablevision's idea work? During a commercial, viewers see a blue bar at the bottom of the screen that prompts them to press the "select" button on their remotes. Should the viewer do so, the program he or she is watching is shifted to the top right corner of the screen while the new information about the advertiser fills the rest of the TV.

At present, each advertiser will be featured across 25 different cable networks. Viewers who see a Gillette ad that is part of the effort could get a bottle of 2-in-1 face and body wash from the male-grooming marketer, while a coupon for a free 2-ounce sample of paint will be available from Benjamin Moore. Cablevision then sends the sample to a subscriber's home, after prompting viewers to make any address changes they wish on-screen. Cablevision executives said the company would likely leave it to advertisers in the future to determine how to fulfill orders and interest.

The company's efforts spotlight the growing attention placed on advertising within a cable system. Typically, cable companies have oversight of approximately two minutes' worth of inventory during an hour on most channels, with more allotted for less-viewed programming options.

But as more households are served by cable companies, an emerging thought holds that these corporations are in a good position to use the set-top boxes in each home to monitor viewer behavior, distribute interactive commercials, as well as advertising targeted to specific demographics, and populations, and attach ads to programs viewed with digital video recorders or through video-on-demand.