

Pfizer's New Prescription

What if Ray Romano cracked a few jokes while asking his doctor for a Viagra prescription? What if in his next movie, a middle-aged James Bond needed a dose of Lipitor to reduce cholesterol? Those fairytale plotlines just might be real one day, now that Pfizer is teaming up with a Hollywood heavyweight to seek out new sorts of advertising opportunities.

Pfizer, the world's largest drug maker, has retained William Morris Agency to come up with entertainment-marketing ideas that could include embedding Pfizer goods in movies and television programs, developing movie tie-ins or setting up TV-show sponsorships.

Pfizer's effort is likely to raise eyebrows. Many experts say drug makers should tread lightly when dabbling in this sector, so as not to anger the FDA, which strictly regulates pharmaceutical advertising. Any paid media that mentions a drug by name and by what it does is required by U.S. law to disclose potential side effects as well.

Like many other marketers, Pfizer has been looking to be more creative with its advertising and become less reliant on advertising on network TV. "There are still millions of people who aren't treating their diseases because of emotional or societal barriers, so we need to find creative ways to make it OK for them to talk to their doctor," says Pfizer spokeswoman Michal Fishman.

Talent firms like William Morris are eager to work with the big-spending pharmaceutical industry. Ad spending on prescription drugs soared 24% last year to \$3.2 billion. —Suzanne Vranica

'Oprah' Drives Pontiac Promotion

When Oprah Winfrey kicked off her new season by giving away 276 new Pontiac G6 cars—one to each member of a screaming studio audience—representatives from General Motors were in the show's green room celebrating a product-placement coup.

The brand new G6 was at the center of GM's high hopes for turning around its sputtering sales of mainstream passenger cars. "We needed to make a really big splash," says Mary Kubitskey, advertising manager for Pontiac.

GM officials would not say how much they spent on the giveaway, but the retail value of the cars alone is about \$7.5 million. A 30-second advertisement on the show costs about \$70,000, according to media buyers. "For the amount of media time, it would have been about a wash," says Mark-Hans Richer, advertising director for Pontiac.

That day, Ms. Winfrey devoted a half hour of her show to the Pontiac G6. Her exhortations were better than any ad script. "This car is so cool!" Ms. Winfrey declared. "It has one of most powerful engines on the road. And XM Satellite Radio!" Ms. Winfrey also gushed over the car's unusual three-section sunroof during a taped tour of the Michigan factory that builds the G6.

"It's dynamite deal for Pontiac because Oprah has tons of credibility with consumers," says Jonathan Asher, president of Dragon Rouge, a New York branding firm. "To consumers, this seems like a personal endorsement from Oprah."

The publicity surrounding the giveaway helped spike consumer interest in the G6, but it's not clear whether it can translate into longer-term sales success for the car, which is in a highly competitive market segment dominated by Japanese auto makers. —Sholnn Freeman

More Advertisers Hired on 'The Apprentice'

The second season of "The Apprentice" may not be as big a ratings success as the first, but it has been a much bigger product-placement bonanza.

In the new installment of the Donald Trump reality show, almost every episode's features a major U.S. company in the contestants' assigned task—from designing a boy's toy for Mattel, to helping market Levi Strauss jeans, to launching a new Crest tooth-paste product for Procter & Gamble. Other featured marketers include PepsiCo, Toys "R" Us, Mars candy and Lamborghini.

Brand experts say never before have so many major companies inked such overt product-placement deals in such a high-profile show. The willingness of so many major companies to participate in the second season is a testament to the success of the first season of the series, which struggled to draw in promotional partners. An average of 20 million people tuned in to each episode, with 40 million watching the finale.

Even so, P&G and the other partner companies are taking a big risk, marketing experts say. For starters, each company relinquished control of

its tightly controlled public image and brand—the show's producers had final say over how footage was edited. Among the other potential pitfalls: Such extreme product placement might turn off sophisticated viewers.

Robert Hanson, Levi's brand president, says the format of "The Apprentice" makes that less of a risk. Placements can seem "tacky and stick out like sore thumbs" in most TV series, he says. But because products are woven into the action on "The Apprentice," the branding effort appears more natural, he says.

—Brooks Barnes