

Exploiting the network: synergy, product placement

[Business](#)



The media industries have a suggestive and coercive power on society, embodied within the artifacts, images, and brands we consume. As these industries diversify, so do the products and the avenues in which they are offered. Synergy allows corporations the power to maximize advertising through a variety of cross-market promotional mechanisms, proliferating their products or logos exponentially. Initially, this essay requires an explanation of the use of synergy and cross-market advertising.

Subsequently, I will illustrate how television shows such as Nickelodeon's SpongeBob SquarePants and MTV's The Osbournes and Total Live Request (TRL), use the vast internal synergistic network of their parent company Viacom. Such programming appears to exploit its viewer-ship through commodification - product placement, branding, and celebrity endorsements. Synergy: The True Meaning of Cross-Market Advertising " We are reaching a position where the challenge for the 1990s should be to seek a greater understanding of the best ways, creatively, to exploit the potential for media synergy"(Confer, 10)

The concept of synergy is not new, however evidence suggests it has only been fully realized and exploited over the last decade. Synergy is created through the integration or combination of different but complimentary business interests, each feeding off the other. Ultimately, large corporations or conglomerates are diversifying their market interests rather than specializing. This diversification benefits the company by offering a new strata of opportunities thereby complimenting its existing functionality.

An example of this is a movie production company allying or buying out a major video game provider. The synergy created from such a merger allows for a film and a video game to use the same characters, story line or premise. Synergy works for two reasons. Primarily, synergy is an engine that provides cross-marketing and cross-selling opportunities, which would allow for greater sales, exceeding what would be possible from each division separately. (Hesmondhalgh, 141). Secondly, corporations also “ plan and design texts, in order to encourage subsidiary spin-off texts” (Hesmondhalgh, 239).

Even if these texts or preplanned products are not of great quality or a commercial success, they will still sell thus generating profit. This is because there is a pre-existing, underlying product network that has already been established through the fan base. If synergy can be classified as the “ the ability to keep cash flows inside a corporatefamily” (Klein, 148), through its internal use of cross-market production, promotion, and sales; Sumner Redstone’s Viacom is a perfect example of synergy at work. The Viacom Empire has tapped into many markets throughout the entertainment and media industry.

Viacom’s major subsidiaries include: Nickelodeon – children’s cartoon network; MTV –musicnetwork; NBC – television network; and Paramount – movie production company, which also runs numerous theme parks all over North America. Klein, 2000, comments on this phenomenon as “ synergy nirvana” (160). According to Klein, ‘ synergy nirvana’ is attained when a conglomerate works internally to “ successfully...churn out related versions of the same product, like molded Play-Doh, into different shapes: toys,
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books, theme parks, magazines, television specials, movies, candies, CDs, CD-ROMs, superstores, comics, and mega-musicals” (161).

Basically, ‘ synergy nirvana’ is the proliferation of standardized products in different packaging, through a preexisting framework of cross-market advertising; which is done on a vast scale through the exploitation of many different mediums and industries in the name of profit. ‘ Synergy’ is Viacom’s number one marketing tool for it allows them to link the vastness of their empire together, into a culmination, dissemination and consumption of products, images, ideals, and brands.

Furthermore, ‘ synergy’ in programming, such as SpongeBob SquarePants and The Osbournes, has evident implications for the viewer-ship. SpongeBob SquarePants: The Future of Product Placement “ Nickelodeon has more children between the ages of two to eleven watching than the four major networks combined... This is significant in the competition for the children’s advertising market, which averages about \$500 million a year” (Roman, 223). SpongeBob SquarePants is a lovable, animated sea sponge that manages to find himself in undersea trouble during every episode.

The “ cartoon” (Mittell, 18) runs every “ Saturday morning” (Mittell, 18) on Nickelodeon and is syndicated to most major television networks due to its incredible popularity among children viewers. What started out in 1999, as a comical concept for a children’s television program, has grown seemingly overnight into a ‘ juggernaut’. Nickelodeon cannot only boast that it is “ the number one rated program among children 2-11”, but according to Nielson

ratings, “ 53. 7 million viewers tune into the show each month...including 22. 1 million kids 2-11, [and] 12. 7 million between 9-14” (Olson, blogcritics. rg).

With such commercial success and an immense viewer ship, Nickelodeon’s SpongeBob SquarePants uses synergistic principals of massive product placement to have free rein and ‘ seep into every pore’ of consumerculture. SpongeBob employs Viacom’s cross platform synergies to network and gain access to most children’s homes. Themotivationis a given when children between the ages of 2 – 11 are not only watching between 24 – 28 hours of television a week (Roman, 74), but are “ responsible for either spending or influencing the spending of \$100 billion annually” (Roman, 74).

This is clearly an influential and lucrative market. SpongeBob SquarePants should be the archetype for synergistic corporate product placement. With SpongeBob’s insurgence into popular culture, there have been similar synergistic trends of product placement. Support for this notion is found through looking back to 2004, days before the premier of the SpongeBob SquarePants movie in New York. Paramount, another Viacom subsidiary, launched a brand new SpongeBob SquarePants amusement park theme ride to coincide with the movie launch.

Additionally, Burger King (also owned by Viacom), released a SpongeBob SquarePants value meal that comes with SpongeBob SquarePants plastic figurines from the movie – ‘ collect all 42. ’ Nickelodeon, the Viacom subsidiary that operates SpongeBob must not be ignored. Nickelodeon aired a 24-hour SpongeBob SquarePants Marathon that hyped up kids for the movie and forced unsuspecting parents to shell out \$12 a ticket.

Furthermore, during the Marathon's commercial breaks, SpongeBob advised the viewers to eat SpongeBob value meals, collect all 67 figurines, and go to Paramount Theme Parks to try his new ride.

SpongeBob has saturated the market with his yellow sponginess, which must be overpowering to any parent; he can be found everywhere, in every nuance of daily life. Since the movie, product placements and cross-promotional marketing have skyrocketed. SpongeBob now has a line of clothing, DVD box sets, bed linens, and bowling balls with a real tenpin set. Of course a 5 year old needs a bowling ball and set of bowling pins with SpongeBob SquarePants on them - SpongeBob said so! MTV: Branding a Nation " MTV is associated with the forces of freedom and democracy around the world.

When the Berlin Wall came down, there were East German guards holding MTV umbrellas" - Sumner Redstone, CEO of Viacom MTV is known for hosting different music video programs 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. In 1998, MTV was watched in " 273. 5 million household worldwide" (Klein, 120), where it was reported, " 85% of them watched everyday" (Klein, 120). The station offers a host television shows, including TRL and The Osbournes, that entrance its youthful audience through flashy music videos and the celebrities portrayed.

MTV's popularity, since its inception in the early 1980s, is as a self-perpetuating " fully branded media integration" (Klein, 44). Klein, 2000, writes: From the beginning, MTV has not been just a marketing machine for products it advertises around the clock; it has also been a twenty-four-

hour advertisement for MTV itself...[where] viewers didn't watch individual shows, they simply watched MTV...Advertisers didn't want to just advertise on MTV, they wanted to co-brand with the station (44). Today, advertiser branding can be seen throughout MTV.

As MTV endeavors to diversify in a changing market place, video shows like TRL are coupled with reality-based television shows intimately linked to 'celebrity' including The Anna Nichol Smith Show or The Osbournes'. Beyond these shows lack of merit, their entire function is product branding and celebrity endorsements. Even though The Osbournes' are a revival to the "original early 1950s format of the American sitcom" (Gillan, 55), I cannot fathom that product branding, product placement, and celebrity endorsements were as prevalent on national television in the 1950s as they are in modern programming.

Within the first ten minutes of the show, the audience can blatantly see a mansion full of expensive electronics, furniture, and cars - at a closer look, the brand names facing the camera and are a part of the Viacom conglomerate in a myriad of ways. All The Osbournes offer the predominately teen audience (other than a few less brain cells) is copious amounts of product branding though celebrity endorsement. Product branding on MTV is a big issue.

Much like the red carpet on Oscar night, where the predominant question on everyone's lips is 'who are you wearing?' MTV offers its audience the same intellectual stimulation, especially when all that its audience sees are 'hella-cool' rock stars and all the 'bling' they wear throughout their music videos,

interviews, and award ceremonies. No wonder the Y generation is all about over consumption and bad taste. As we have entered the 21st Century, multi-media conglomerates have risen to great power in our society. They offer the consumer the media and entertainment that they desire.

However through internal synergistic networks, these companies, such as Viacom, can link the lucrative children's market or the 24-hour advertising nature of MTV, to all other aspects of their company. As consumers, we neglect what these companies are telling us to do - to consume - in order to watch our favourite programs. We refuse to witness how the realities of consumerism, and sickening nature that these corporations control the very artifacts and images that we relate to and enjoy for their own personal profit.