

MARKETPLACE

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

July 31st, 2002

That Guy Showing Off His Hot New Phone May Be a Shill --- New Campaign for Sony Ericsson Puts Actors in Real-Life Settings; Women Play Battleship at the Bar

By Suzanne Vranica

In a campaign set to start tomorrow, the U.S. arm of Sony Ericsson Mobile Communications Ltd. will take "guerrilla" marketing to a new level. Its goal: to get consumers to pay attention to the new T68i, a mobile phone that can double as a digital camera.

In one initiative, dubbed Fake Tourist, 60 trained actors and actresses will haunt tourist attractions such as the Empire State Building in New York and the Space Needle in Seattle. Working in teams of two or three and behaving like tourists, the actors and actresses will ask unsuspecting passersby to take their pictures.

Presto: instant product demonstrations.

A second stunt will involve the use of "leaners"—60 actresses and female models with extensive training in the phone's features who will frequent trendy lounges and bars without telling the establishments what they're up to. The women are getting scripted scenarios designed to help them engage strangers in conversation. One involves having an actress's phone ring while she's in the bar—and having the caller's picture pop up on the screen. In another scenario, two women sit at opposite ends of the bar playing an interactive version of the Battleship game on their phones.

So far, so good. But do the actors then identify themselves as working on behalf of Sony Ericsson? Not if they can help it. The idea is to have onlookers think they've stumbled onto a hot new product. Sony Ericsson, which plans to spend \$5 million on the 60-day marketing campaign, says it's all in good fun and just an effort to get people talking.

Consumer activists, though, aren't amused. "It's deceptive," says Gary Ruskin, executive director of Commercial Alert, a nonprofit organization founded by consumer activist Ralph Nader, when told about the campaign. "People will be fooled into thinking this is honest buzz."

Even marketing executives disapprove. "It is reprehensible and desperate," says Paul MacFarlane, co-owner of the Experiment, a small ad firm in St. Louis, that has done work for Southwestern Bell and Anheuser-Busch. "They are trying to fabricate something that should be natural."

Sony Ericsson responds that most consumers won't be offended. "How many times do people that you don't know come up to you and talk to you?" asks Jon Maron, director of marketing communications at Sony Ericsson, a joint venture of Telefon AB L.M. Ericsson of Sweden and Sony Corp. of Japan. "It's very natural, especially in a club or restaurant." He adds that the actors will confess that they work for the company if they are asked directly.

Peter Groome, president of Omnicom Group Inc.'s Fathom Communications, the marketing firm that created the plan, also defends the tactics. He insists that the campaign isn't "undercover" selling because the actors will simply demonstrate the product, not give a sales pitch.

Still, the company has gone to great lengths to train its actors to avoid detection. "If you put them in a Sony Ericsson shirt, then people are going to be less likely to listen to them in a bar," Mr. Groome says.

Other components of the promotional campaign are more commonly used buzz initiatives. One involves "Phone Finds," in which the company will place dummy phones around cities so that consumers can accidentally stumble on them. The screen on the phone will direct the finders to a special Web site, where they will be able to enter a contest to win a free phone. The new phone with camera attachment, priced between \$300 and \$400, will hit stores next week.

Less covert buzz marketing strategies have been around for years, but their use surged during the dot-com boom. Many companies that couldn't afford expensive TV ads hired young marketing firms to convey their messages in attention-getting ways.

As concepts became more elaborate and intrusive, they began to be referred to as guerrilla marketing or stealth marketing. Among the companies that have used buzz marketing: Cadbury Schweppes PLC, Jim Beam Brands Worldwide Inc. and Bayerische Motoren Werke AG, for its Mini car.

Faced with the ad recession, some traditional agencies have also embraced the concept. For instance, Young & Rubicam, a unit of London's WPP Group PLC, opened a U.S. division called Brand Buzz and is rolling out the unit to its European offices.

But there are limits. Veteran marketers warn that advertisers that try to generate positive word-of-mouth about a brand or new product will do better in the long run if they're honest with consumers. David Lubars, president and executive creative director at Publicis Groupe SA's Fallon Worldwide, says promotional campaigns that are perceived as dishonest could backfire. "If the consumer finds out after the encounter, they are going to be mad," he says.