

HBO Invites Vampire Fans to Savor 'True Blood'

Bizarre Beverage Ads Just One of Many Ploys to Lure Viewers

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By Brian Steinberg

NEW YORK (AdAge.com) — When it comes to marketing HBO's new fall series about vampires in modern society, there will be blood.



Tru Blood beverage samples have been part of HBO's marketing effort.

A carefully planned weeks-long effort to drive buzz for a new series from "Six Feet Under" creator Alan Ball by reaching out to aficionados of vampire lore and sci-fi.

Vampire liberation

Launched quietly May 21, HBO's campaign for "True Blood" aims to tantalize fans with details about the fall drama's strange new world, where the development of a synthetic blood product in Japan has allowed vampires to "come out" of their coffins, as it were, with all kinds of cultural ramifications. The effort has so far involved sending mailers to vampire hobbyists and bloggers; the website BloodCopy.com, which features discussions and a blog; viral videos; and Tru Blood beverage samples along with ads for the drink published online and in alternative weeklies.

New York agency Campfire helped devise some of the launch materials and seed them among fans.

The hope is that hard-core fans who get wrapped up in the various stories and promotions then start to talk about it to others. "It's clearly going to appeal to the core audience, but there's an opportunity to hook in a broader audience," said Zach Enterlin, VP-advertising and promotion at HBO. "We try to start small and build a core audience and then grow that audience as we get broader and broader in terms of the tactics and media used to reach them," said Gregg Hale, partner and creative director at Campfire.

Hoping to hook viewers

The complex and multifaceted ad campaign illustrates the challenges TV networks face as they start to roll out dramas with long, overarching storylines set in strange new milieus that require a lot of explanation. ABC's success with "Lost," which brings in a devoted and loyal fan base to each new episode, has spawned a number of imitations on other networks. Put simply, with use of digital video recorders on the

rise, advertisers and networks want to put on programs that fans simply won't miss and will tune in to as scheduled.

The trouble, of course, is that these programs often require advance study. Easing a viewer into a futuristic world takes some doing.

HBO is offering a "prequel" of sorts through its advance promotions, said Mr. Enterlin. The BloodCopy.com website, which launched May 26, essentially serves as the campaign's central hub, with multiple postings per day and opportunities for viewers to interact and comment.

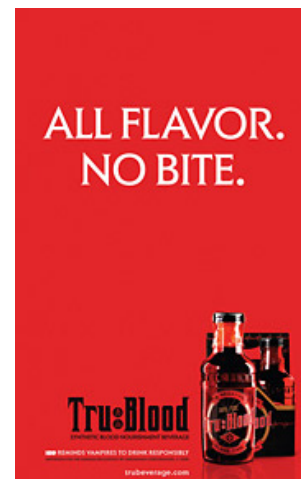
Things went broader June 29, when HBO-branded ads for the Tru Blood beverage began running in print, online and on TV, driving traffic to TruBeverage.com. The ads used slogans such as "All Flavor. No Bite" and "Suck on This." In addition to the commercials, beverage-delivery trucks featuring signs about the product were spotted in New York and Los Angeles, while selected vending machines and delis featured signs telling would-be users that the dispensers and shelves were "sold out" of Tru Blood.

In July, HBO has begun running some of the BloodCopy.com reports on HBO on Demand, HBO.com, YouTube and other venues.

Vampires are people, too

Coming next: a mock public-service campaign supporting both sides of a "Vampire Rights Amendment" debate, with microsites for two different advocacy groups involved in the fray: the American Vampire League and the Fellowship of the Sun. A faux newsmagazine, "In Focus," covering the vampire story, will run on HBO and HBO on Demand. At the annual Comic-Con in San Diego, a large gathering of fans of comics and sci-fi, HBO will be distributing comic books that recap story elements, have Tru Blood sponsor a masquerade costume ball and seek signatures for both the Vampire League and the Fellowship.

The effort grows less subtle as the summer wears on: Traditional tune-in spots start to run July 27, as well as a "True Blood" website with episode guides and more. An online comic book debuts July 30, and will have two pages debut per week for eight weeks. Finally, when the series premieres Sept. 7, HBO.com will offer such things as a "True Blood" wiki, where fans and vampire enthusiasts can update and edit the bloodsuckers' mythology.



One of the HBO-branded ads for the Tru Blood beverage.