

## HBO TEMPTS CONSUMERS WITH 'TRU BLOOD'

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By T.L. Stanley

It's an election year, so it's to be expected for people with petitions in hand to stop you on the street – that is, until they start asking if you're "pro" or "anti" vampire. Also not so ordinary is a delivery truck carrying what's billed as "synthetic blood nourishment beverage," as well as vending machines for the crimson-colored drink that are completely sold out.



The creepy effort is part of HBO's multilayered advertising and promotional campaign for its upcoming drama, True Blood, launching Sept. 7. The show, based on a book series by Charlaine Harris, is set in a world where vampires have gone beyond the crucifix-hating coffin-dwellers of pop culture myth. They walk among regular folks, though they still don't like sunlight, and they're treated like outcasts.

Executives at the pay cable network said the show's content directly influenced the way it would be marketed.

"From the start, we knew this was just so much bigger than print ads and 30-second spots," said Zach Enterlin, HBO's vp-advertising and promotions. "We wanted a campaign that's as rich as the series."

By the time the show hits the air, the effort will have included alternate reality games; layers of viral outreach to horror, sci-fi and other genre fans; an original comic book; a mockumentary disguised as a news show; a full-blown fake ad campaign for the Tru Blood "beverage," more than a half-dozen dedicated sites and blogs; YouTube videos; petition-wielding street teams; and "Fangbanger" girls showing up in bars. That's in addition to traditional media like print, TV, outdoor and radio.

HBO, which scored 85 Emmy nominations Thursday—the most of any network—has been searching for new hits to replace past mainstays like The Sopranos and Sex and the City. Recent entries like John from Cincinnati failed to catch on with audiences.

The campaign for True Blood is extensive, though executives wouldn't put a dollar figure on it. They specifically decided to percolate it with

a core group of gamers and fantasy fans before broadening it to a more mainstream audience.

Early promotion for the show, which wasn't branded with the HBO name, had some people wondering if Tru Blood existed as a real-world product. (If it did, it wouldn't be the first time that a fictional piece of entertainment spawned a real product. See: upcoming movie Tropic Thunder and the Booty Sweat drink it inspired, or a special beer called Pawtucket Pale Ale that comes from Family Guy.)

Slick print ads and billboards made Tru Blood look like a new drink launch that could've come from a major beverage marketer. Some cheeky taglines like, "Suck on this," and "All flavor. No bite," were clues that aimed to send potential fans looking for more information.

In fact, the synthetic blood beverage is an integral part of the series that gained a backstory via the efforts of Campfire, a small independent marketing shop with some serious guerrilla credibility. Its founders produced The Blair Witch Project, the most financially successful indie movie ever made.

The firm jumpstarted the under-the-radar campaign by reaching out to genre fans with fake blogs, sample vials of Tru Blood, letters written in dead languages and other mysteries that required time and attention to solve.

"We built this on solid storytelling and the idea of immersing people in this world," said Gregg Hale, a partner at Campfire. "We never tried to fool anybody; we wanted to give them an entertaining experience and a way down the rabbit hole."

Videos that were spread virally explained not only that Tru Blood allows vampires to stop feeding on people, but also announced their "coming out" into regular society. TV spots for faux vampire-skewing products—a dating service, motels, lawyers—started showing up on cable and some network late-night shows.

Within the coming week, the mockumentary will launch on HBO, with bits of it distributed online. PSA-style spots will premiere to tout the American Vampire League and Fellowship of the Sun, and the mega convention Comic-Con will be awash in True Blood. Penguin Books plans tie-in books that revolve around Sookie Stackhouse, the main character, who's played by Anna Paquin in the drama.

"The whole campaign has been about popping through in a really crowded environment," Enterlin said, "and using promotional content to tell a story."

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