

e-Edition Plus

A current events feature for teaching with electronic editions.

By Emilia Pastina

Look for green messages on television for Earth Day

Television is a powerful way to reach millions of viewers.

For years, advertisers have promoted their products with ads on popular programs, and more recently they have worked to get products mentioned in the programs themselves.

Now the power of television is being used in a new way: to promote messages designed to educate or change people's behavior.

This week, as the nation celebrates the 40th anniversary of Earth Day, wide-ranging examples can be seen in the programming of NBC Universal.

During the week of April 22, NBC Universal's networks are featuring around 100 hours of programming with green story lines in their prime-time and daytime shows.

NBC Universal has been doing this since 2007 and now plans to do so each year in April.

In the past, network executives have had detectives on "Law and Order" investigate a cash-for-clunkers scam and a character on "The Office" wear a superhero cape and take up the cause of recycling.

"People don't want to be hit over the head with [a message]," said NBC Universal Chief Executive Jeff Zucker in a Wall Street Journal article. "Putting it in programming is what makes it resonate with viewers."

Behavior placement

Product placement can be traced back to the early days of soap operas, when the Procter & Gamble Co. sponsored the daytime dramas so its products would be seen by women.

But "behavior placement," as the new approach is called by NBC Universal, is different. When a television character is shown putting a plastic bottle into a recycling bin or switching to energy-saving light bulbs, it's an action that's being marketed rather than a product.

However, behavior placement can help sell ads, too. When PepsiCo Inc. wanted to market its Sun Chips compostable bag, it turned to the show "30 Rock," which is largely watched by young, socially aware consumers. But rather than placing its product in an episode, the company chose to create a skit starring one of the show's characters to run during a commercial break.

"This audience has a tendency to be a little more cynical about blatant product placement," said Gannon Jones, vice president of marketing for PepsiCo's Frito-Lay unit.

Changing behaviors

Behavior placement is about changing behaviors.

Seventh Generation Inc., which manufactures environmentally-friendly cleaning products, chose the Oxygen network reality show "Tori and Dean: Home Sweet Hollywood" to encourage organic gardening, for example. A "message" scene featuring the show's stars will run as an ad during a commercial break of an episode this month. The episode itself will also be eco-friendly, showing the couple gardening and composting.

More and more, networks are thinking about how such behaviors can be "placed."

"The last thing you want to do is not reach the audience in the right way and make them mad at you," said Lauren Zalaznick, president of NBCU Women & Lifestyle Entertainment Networks.

But, she said, viewers don't mind if "you do a little good in the world, and you're still making your show."

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In honor of Earth Day, NBC Universal's TV shows will feature story lines involving green topics, such as recycling.

Talk About the News

- When using behavior placement to get eco-friendly messages across, network executives and advertisers hope viewers will notice and respond well. As a class, discuss any shows you have seen that used behavior placement. Talk about whether you would be likely to copy the actions of favorite television characters. Discuss which television shows would be most appropriate for reaching your age group.

Learning Standard: Engaging peers in constructive conversation about matters of public concern by clarifying issues, considering opposing views, applying democratic values, anticipating consequences and working toward making decisions.

Explore Your e-Edition

- Read today's national or local section of the newspaper to find an environmental issue that interests you. Next, read the TV listings in the e-Edition and choose a show to tell about this issue or show ways the community could help with this issue. Write a scene for the show that uses behavior placement. Be sure to include dialogue. Share your television episode with the class.

Learning Standards: Responding to a variety of written, visual, oral and electronic texts; reading and writing fluently, speaking confidently, listening and interacting appropriately, viewing critically and representing creatively.

- Behavior placement on television usually involves actions that are made up. But real life behaviors can be seen all around us every day. For Earth Day, read today's e-Edition to find ways people in your community, state or nation are helping the environment. Choose one person or group to focus on. Based on the article, write a letter to a television executive about why TV should create a show or documentary about this person or group.

Learning Standards: Acquiring information from multiple sources; identifying and explaining how individuals in history demonstrate good character and personal virtue; writing fluently for multiple purposes.

- Effective advertising is about reaching the right audience in the right way. Read today's business section to find a person or company that has a product or service for sale. From the article, determine who is most likely to buy this product or service. On paper or with a computer, create an e-Edition ad that effectively markets this product or service to the right type of people.

Learning Standards: Responding to a variety of texts by making connections to students' personal lives and the lives of others; representing creatively.

How Well Did You Read?

Understanding what you read is a skill that will help you all through life. Review the story about Earth Day by answering the questions below.

1. According to the story, Earth Day has been celebrated for:
 - A. 20 years
 - B. 40 years
 - C. 100 years
 - D. This is the first Earth Day
2. In the fifth paragraph, the word "green" means:
 - A. A color
 - B. Something outdoors
 - C. Environmentally friendly
 - D. Freer
3. According to the story, "product placement" refers to when a product is placed in a:
 - A. Store
 - B. TV commercial
 - C. Newspaper ad
 - D. Television program or movie
4. According to the story, "behavior placement" refers to:
 - A. A product being marketed
 - B. An action being marketed
 - C. Disciplinary actions
 - D. An environmentally friendly act
5. According to the story, NBC Universal has been doing "behavior placement"
 - A. For 40 years
 - B. For 20 years
 - C. Since 2004
 - D. Since 2007

