

Article

Guerilla Pharma Marketing

Generates Buzz, But What About Sales?

By John Mack

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According to an entry in Wikipedia—which I often go to first for definitions—"Guerrilla Marketing was coined by Jay Conrad Levinson in his popular 1984 book *Guerrilla Marketing*, as an unconventional system of promotions on a very low budget, by relying on time, energy and imagination instead of big marketing budgets. The term has since entered the popular vocabulary to also describe aggressive, unconventional marketing methods generically."

Perhaps the most notorious guerilla marketing campaign was the one in which small devices with LEDs were placed under overpasses and other locations in Boston. On January 31, 2007, several of these displays were mistaken for possible explosive devices. "Several subway stations, bridges, and a portion of Interstate 93 were closed as police examined, removed, and in some cases, destroyed the devices. The suspicious objects were revealed to be ads depicting the Mooninites, Ignignokt and Err, characters from the Cartoon Network's latenight Adult Swim animated television series *Aqua Teen Hunger Force*" (see "[2007 Boston bomb scare](#)").

McNeil Steps Up

Apparently, the drug industry (ie, McNeil) is now experimenting with a gentler, less aggressive form of guerilla marketing.

Once again, the Boston market was the target or at least that's where the first sighting of these ads occurred according to the online buzz-machine AdRants:

Can A Sharpie Poster Push More Sales Than A Glossy Ad?



Today, my classmate Zach noticed this Zyrtec ad on telephone poles all over Boylston and Tremont street in Boston.

The flyer reads:

"Missing 2 Hours. Last Seen: While waiting for Claritin to start working. If found please call: 1-800-4-Zyrtec"

Not that this is any sort of scientifically-vetted research but considering Zach took the time to take it off a dirty Boston telephone pole and pass it around and show his friends, it definitely seems to have made an impact... and it achieved that effect without shutting the city down like other Boston-based guerilla

efforts. It was cool to see how simple copy scribbled with Sharpie on plain white paper taped to telephone poles around the city had the ability to cut through the clutter of its competitors' glossy ads."

When you call the 1-800 number on the flyer you get a recorded audio ad that directs you to the Web site, which directs you to sites where you can buy Zyrtec online! You can hear the recording by [clicking here](#).

Is It Legal?

The first thought from the [Pharma Blogosphere](#)™ on this Zyrtec guerilla marketing campaign was simply stated by "Insider" over at [PharmaGossip](#): "Is This Legal?"

Before I get to that, let me mention that simultaneous with this guerilla ad appearing on some "dirty telephone poles" in Boston, a version of it also appeared in the non-guerilla April 21, 2008 issue of *TIME Magazine* (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: Zyrtec Full-page Print Ad in *TIME*

So now we have two versions of the ad to think about: the telephone flyer and the full-page print ad. Both are forms of direct-to-consumer (DTC) ad-

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vertising. FDA is the agency that regulates DTC advertising for prescription drugs, whereas the FTC regulates advertising for over-the-counter (OTC) drugs. Zyrtec is now an OTC drug and therefore not subject to the strict requirements of fair balance required by the FDA for Rx drugs.

If Zyrtec were a prescription drug, both the guerilla ad and the print ad would violate FDA regulations. Here's an analysis of that scenario by Bruce Grant, who submitted a comment to my **Pharma Marketing Blog** post:

"This ad contains (1) the brand name, as part of the phone number; and (2) a representation about the product (works faster than Claritin).

"Thus it's not a reminder ad. It's a 'full product ad' which requires (1) a 'major statement' of risks, including major adverse events, warnings, and contraindications; and (2) inclusion of the 'brief summary' (which is brief only in comparison to the full prescribing information, or PI).

"Or at least it would if Zyrtec were a prescription drug. What lets it off the hook is that it's an OTC drug, whose advertising is not held to the same standards of disclosure...

"Were this an Rx drug, however, arguing that the claim is only implied would cut zero ice. FDA claims full authority to treat implied claims as if they were made explicitly—as they did in the now-notorious 'Wild Thing' TV spots, where it found that the line, 'Remember the guy who wanted to spend his whole honeymoon in bed? He's back.' constituted a claim for Viagra (which anyone not raised in a monastery knew all along)."

In other words: Rx drug marketers should not emulate this Zyrtec campaign. To be legal, an Rx version of the flyer would have to contain all the fair balance information, which would render the whole thing unworkable as a guerilla marketing ploy.

So, from a regulatory point of view, this particular guerilla ad campaign is legal, but only because Zyrtec is an OTC product. It would not be legal if Zyrtec were still an Rx product.

I suspect, however, that pasting unauthorized ads on scaffolds and nailing them to telephone poles is definitely NOT legal in most US cities! "I'm on the case on behalf of my block association," said a commenter to Pharma Marketing Blog, "and I won't rest until the proper enforcement authorities have swung into action."

Is It Effective?

Zach's friend thought it was "cool" that "simple copy scribbled with Sharpie on plain white paper taped to telephone poles... had the ability to cut through the clutter of its competitors' glossy ads." Could it be that this guy was paid by Zyrtec marketers to make this point?

How effective can a marketing campaign be that depended solely on posting flyers to telephone poles?

There are two things I'd like to know about such "clever guerilla marketing campaigns":

1. Who's the audience? Most people who can afford OTC Zyrtec are not cruising the streets taking phone numbers off flyers!
2. How much is McNeil paying ruffraff to plaster our cities with this debris?

At first, I thought there were no real flyers posted anywhere, but just fake photos posted to online buzz sites and blogs. However, Fard Johnmar, risked walking through the East Village in NYC to see if he could find one and actually caught a glimpse of a flyer taped to scaffolding near his office.

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“McNeil,” said Fard, “has instituted a clever guerilla marketing campaign once reserved for consumer packaged goods companies and underground musical acts. I took a moment to scan in the flyer. As you can see, someone was curious enough to respond to the marketing campaign by ripping off a section of the flyer with the Zyrtec 800 number.”

Are ads tacked to scaffolds and telephone poles effective for a major drug brand? I don't know about you, but I walk on the other side of the street from construction sites when I pedest in the Big Apple! You never know when the errant construction crane or bucket of cement is going to come tumbling down on you!

There ARE plenty of telephone poles out here in the suburbs, but I NEVER see anything posted on them. Except for teenagers crashing their cars into them, we suburbanites and country folk never get close and personal with telephone poles.

What's the Role of PR?

In my view, the Zyrtec guerilla campaign reminds me of the Zen question about the sound of one hand clapping. If hundreds of these flyers were nailed to telephone poles and no-one in the blogosphere wrote about it, would it make a sound? If hundreds of flyers were nailed to telephone poles and NOT ALSO seen in full-page magazine ads and on TV, would it make a sound?

Answer: *Nope!*

I have no idea if any of the bloggers who had favorable things to say about this campaign was paid to write blog posts and spread the image around the blogosphere. I do know, however, that without these blog posts:

- you and I may not have heard of this "guerilla marketing" campaign, and
- the media, which is sure to pick up on this soon, will not have heard of it nor thought it justified a story.

To my knowledge, there has not yet been a story about this written in the major media. What I expect is that the PR people will continue to work the blogosphere, use that "buzz" as leverage to point out how new and different this is so they can convince a reporter to write about it!

Fard Johnmar thinks PR is unnecessary for guerilla campaigns to be effective. “What you're seeing,” says Fard, “is ‘word of mouth’ at work. Sometimes people are simply surprised or fascinated by something and decide to write about it. No PR intervention necessary.”

If that's the case, why did McNeil also place full-page ads in a major magazine? Not very guerilla.

I have no doubt that we will soon see it also on TV. Here's how it might play on TV:

We see a young woman walking through her neighborhood tacking flyers on poles and trees. A guy walking his dog notices her and wanders over to a flyer after she leaves. You hear nothing but ambient sounds—no music, no voiceover. The camera zooms in to the ad as the guy plucks a tab off the flyer.

Since TV ads cost a fortune, I cannot envision that the advertisers will not take the opportunity to present the 30-second message you get when you call the number on the tab. So, in my TV version of this ad, the guy uses his cell phone to call the 1-800 number and we hear the message. End of ad.

Role of the Blogosphere in Guerilla Marketing

The blogosphere is a crucial new "buzz building" component of any PR campaign, which these days lays the foundation of a true DTC campaign (see, for example, "[PR Marketing: Mystery Wrapped in a Riddle](#)").

Could you have an effective guerilla marketing campaign that depended solely on the added buzz provided by the bBlogosphere? I doubt it. I contend that major drug brands need the usual suspects—traditional media, print, TV—to truly be effective. But then, it no longer is "guerilla marketing" is it?

Pharma Marketing News



Experts Consulted

The following experts were consulted or cited in this article.

- **Bruce Grant**, Senior VP Business Strategy, Digitas Health, bgrant@digitashealth.com, 215-399-3223
- **Fard Johnmar**, Founder, Envision Solutions, L.L.C., fjohnmar@envisionsolutionsnow.com, 646.723.2341

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