

By Bill Guertin

The 800-Pound Gorilla

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Human Billboards: Do We Have Your Attention?

Seen any good ads lately?

We're being advertised to more and more often each day. Some estimates say that we are exposed to up to as many as 3,000 advertising messages a day, and that number is only expected to increase. According to Direct Marketing News, an industry trade publication, each of us now sees more ads in a single year than people 50 years ago would see in a lifetime.

If you're a business owner, it's a huge challenge to find a way to break through the clutter – and do it without breaking the bank in the process.

A few enterprising local individuals are getting the job done with a technique that's as old as advertising itself: the human billboard. It's a variation of the old "Eat At Joe's" sandwich boards used generations ago, but in a new way.

Probably the most well-known of these on a local level are the waving Uncle Sam and Statue of Liberty characters from Liberty Tax Service, on the street corner at Broadway and Kennedy Drive in Bradley. Beginning in late January, just as sure as your W-2's are going to be in the mail, you're sure to see one or more of these costumed marketers on the corner, waving or dancing to passers-by.

But does that stuff really work?

Mike Marback, owner of the Liberty franchise in Bradley, says it's been the cornerstone of his business growth. His store was the #1 new office in the Midwest in terms of number of tax returns prepared this past year, and he credits the waving billboards for a big part of his office's success.

"We ask every client what brought them to us as customers, and 90 percent of them say they've come in because of the guy waving on the street corner," says Marback. "There's no doubt that it works."

John Hewitt, the founder of Liberty Tax Service, is credited for suggesting the technique to his franchisees nationwide. Known as a form of "guerrilla marketing", which is non-traditional marketing using very little money, Hewitt's franchisees use the tactic from coast to coast.

“Of course, in Virginia, it’s a lot easier to stand out on the street corner in February than it is here,” adds Marback. His costumed employees use cold-weather gear designed for hunters underneath their costumes to stay warm.

Variations of the idea seem to be catching on in the area. K’s Merchandise Mart in Bradley promoted a weekend furniture sale recently by hiring what they call “sign walkers” at 6 strategic street corners near the K’s store, including the busy North Street and Kinzie Avenue intersection. These sign walkers held 6-foot-high stakes, with large-lettered signs stapled onto the stakes promoting the sale.

Did it work? According to K’s store manager Dennis Osburn, they had a “phenomenal weekend,” but admits that several forms of advertising were also used to promote the sale, including cable TV and direct mail.

“Anytime we can get the message out and get the response that we did, we’re doing OK,” said Osburn.

The Jiffy Lube in Bourbonnais is also taking advantage of their busy intersection at Armour Road/Latham Drive and North Convent with a sign walker.

Patrick Wilder, local Jiffy Lube store manager, uses the tactic of the human billboard when his shop is empty. He sees the impact right away.

“We use it strategically to increase business when we need it,” says Wilder. “We have a bright yellow sign that our sign walkers hold in front of our shop to promote an immediate \$10.00 discount on our \$29.99 oil change, and it works very well.”

The Bourbonnais Jiffy Lube is one of 400 franchises owned by a single parent company, and Wilder says the sign walker program is used by nearly all the stores.

“We’re a volume-based business, so more cars means more money for us. I’ve been here for six months, and ever since we’ve implemented the sign walker program, we’ve been up in volume every single month.”

If you’re thinking about starting a “human billboard” or “sign walker” program of your own, here are a few things to remember:

- Not every town or village allows it, so you should check with your local village code enforcement department.
- Safety should be a major concern, since busy intersections draw traffic that speeds by at a good clip. Set up a safe zone that your sign walkers or human billboards can stay in and avoid injury.
- Hire people with tenacity and personality, and keep them motivated.

Liberty Tax Service's Marback claims that it's not just standing out on the street corner that makes the tactic effective. There's a trick to doing it just right.

"We train our people to draw attention to themselves positively. Whether it's a funny dance or a wave, we encourage them to be creative. We actually have mothers of young children call us just before they bring their kids by in their cars on the way home, asking us if our guys will do that funny dance that their kids like as they pass."

Marback also gives his employees CD players with headphones to keep them motivated while on the job.

Does anyone ever make fun of him doing a corny thing like this to attract attention?

"No, I haven't heard anything like that from anyone. Even if I had a different business than tax preparation, I'd still be doing this. It puts a smile on people's faces, people remember it, and it works. How much better does advertising get than that?"

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