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CULTURE

# The inescapable sales pitch

**'It turns you from being a citizen of the community to . . . a set of captive eyeballs for marketers'**

Feb 17, 2008 04:30 AM

**ANDREW CHUNG**  
 STAFF REPORTER

Moviegoers in major cities watch the latest horror flick at their local Scotiabank Theatre.

Book enthusiasts pay attention to the Scotiabank Giller Prize.

Art lovers and night owls commingle at the Scotiabank Nuit Blanche.

Health nuts take on the Scotiabank Toronto Waterfront Marathon.

Vancouver dancers rehearse at the Scotiabank Dance Centre.

The Ottawa Senators play at Scotiabank Place. Your life, brought to you by... Scotiabank?

If that sounds far-fetched, as if you're a TV event sponsored by a bank, you might want to look again at how the world of advertising is changing around you.

Advertisers are pushing from the fringes of your conscious mind to the centre, closing in on their ultimate prize: you.

In the past, advertisers have been content to exist along the periphery of peoples' lives. Their television commercials played in short segments apart from shows, for instance. Their billboards stood at the side of the road. Their posters hovered silently on the subway above riders' sightlines.

But the central goal of advertising is to get the message out. So advertisers are searching for ways to be in direct contact with where you go, what you do, and who you are.

Some are using new devices to better capture your attention, like a machine that projects a beam of sound so focused that you might perceive it coming from inside your own head.

Others are finding those public spaces that heretofore no one thought possible to advertise on, and branding them with their logos. Hint: the lines that hem in your car in the parking lot.

Then there's the fastest-growing segment of this new advertising age. Companies are clamouring to attach their names to the various activities you do and places you visit and the ways and means with which you go about your daily life.



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View movie trailers, read our reviews and find your showtimes.

Advertisers don't say they're out to sponsor "life," explains Alan Middleton, a professor of marketing at York University's Schulich School of Business.

But sponsoring life events is what they've learned to do, he says.

"Marketers are trying to be in the world around people as they go about their lives. From being where it's convenient for the marketer, now they want to be where the people are. That's the big switch."

The strategy has been upended from simply targeting the routine parts of people's lives, on their commute to work, for example, "driving up Yonge St. there's the side of a building painted," Middleton explains. "But now, also as they go out, to the Grammys or the Gillers or to a special night with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra at Roy Thomson Hall."

Scotiabank, one of Canada's largest banks, last year spent more than \$43 million on sponsorships and donations for community initiatives. For competitive reasons, it won't reveal how much it spends on sponsorships, but says it has shifted 20 per cent of its marketing dollars from traditional advertising to sponsorships in the last four years.

"I feel confident about putting money into sponsorships... as opposed to putting as much money, say, into television," says Rick White, the bank's vice-president of brand and marketing management. "I think it's a very effective way to develop an emotional connection with Canadians."

Scotiabank is not alone in this thinking. U.S. marketing research firm PQ Media reported last week that sponsorships south of the border are up more than 12 per cent to over \$19 billion. While there are no equivalent national numbers for Canada, both countries have seen far less growth in traditional media, TV, radio, magazines and newspapers – about 3 per cent.

Advertisers say this kind of sponsorship meshes with people's experiences, which is exactly where they want to be.

Nike has garnered attention with its attempt to be all things running. Through its Nike+ system, a sensor in the shoes that tracks run progress on an iPod. The runner then links the iPod to a computer and the information is fed to a Nike website. There one can find maps, forums, even running partners.

Then there are the Nike Runner's Lounges in Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal. There, runners can join groups, get training advice, and learn new routes. Useful services for runners, to be sure. But don't forget about the other side of the lounge, where you "test drive the latest Nike gear, including Nike+."

For some companies, this shift is by necessity. They're reaching fewer people through traditional media. "It's a generation that no longer either believes or is exposed as much to in-home advertising, newspapers, magazines, direct marketing into the home," says York U's Middleton.

As for Scotiabank's snagging some of the country's top cinemas, Middleton calls it "brilliant." "You associate banks with places to go put your money. Now it's associated with the spending part of peoples' lives," he says.

It's the bank as the new "facilitator of your access to joy and fun."

In the eight months the bank has operated its Scene card program – where patrons earn points for free movies and concession discounts – more than 750,000 people have signed up. Most are in the coveted 18-34 age group.

"What we're doing for people is making them see our bank in a different light," White says. "For this young audience that goes to the theatre... they're in a lot of transition in their life, going to university, getting their first job, buying their first house. For a bank to have some impact on them, this is an interesting way to do it."

Scotiabank is also entrenched in post-secondary institutions. University of Toronto students use the Internet at the Scotiabank Internet Commons. University of Waterloo students use the Scotiabank Software Engineering Labs. University of New Brunswick students go abroad with the Scotiabank International Study Award

Well-known Toronto advertising critic Rami Tabetto, who runs the website illegalsigns.ca, says that with marketing such as Scotiabank's becoming more central to our lives, "eventually you'll end up living inside a gigantic commercial. And all this sponsorship, at what point do we draw the line? It turns you from being a citizen of the community to being an entity where your primary value is to be a set of captive eyeballs for marketers."

Middleton sees a possible backlash on the horizon, especially among young people. This would either come in the form of, "I hate them. I feel like a pawn in their game. I don't want to feel controlled or managed. Or, another response would be that (the marketing) becomes like wallpaper and you start not to notice it. And there's nothing worse for an advertiser than to be wallpaper."

Sponsorships aren't the only way advertisers are more squarely centring themselves in our lives.

In the U.S. a new form of advertising is gaining prominence. It's technology that can, for all intents and purposes, beam a message directly into your head.



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It's an audio "spotlight" that advertisers, as well as institutions such as museums and galleries, are using to target possible customers and visitors with a sharply focused beam of ultrasound waves, the same waves used to capture an image of a baby in the womb.

A billboard in New York's Times Square that publicized a new cable network show on the paranormal recently used such a spotlight to project eerie messages to those walking by.

"Who's there?" the woman's voice whispered, causing spooked passers-by to check over their shoulders. "It's not your imagination."

"The whole point of it was to be creepy," says Holosonics' founder and president Joe Pompei. "It does sound like it's next to you or inside your head. But that's truly an illusion your ears create."

His technology is attractive to advertisers because of the proximity element.

Other ads want to be where you are, wherever you are. Case in point: In Tokyo, ads are appearing not only on escalators, but also on their slender handrails. You'll also find ads on subway hand straps and supermarket conveyor belts.

And if you thought the painted lines on the street were just that, perhaps it's not surprising that someone would make use of them. At least one company, San Francisco's AAP!Global, is transforming parking-lot lines into ad strips. See the message as soon as you open your car door.

Tabello points out that there are ads on parking-lot mechanical gate arms all across Toronto.

In other close encounters of the advertising kind, ads are appearing on our sidewalks, so that even someone walking silently, head down, can't escape a sales pitch.

Tabello was outraged, but says not much can be done because the city doesn't have the resources to police all of the ads in the public realm.

The Toronto Public Space Committee, which spends part of its time agitating against what it calls the "privatization" of our public spaces, says Scotiabank's sponsorship of private entities is less of a concern than doing so with a public event like Nuit Blanche.

"There used to be just a few things that were subsidized by advertising, like newspapers and TV," campaigner Jonathan Goldsbie says. "Now it's becoming so many aspects of our lives. The question is, why? Why are we letting advertisers decide what does and doesn't get funded, and what we do and don't have?"

But the bank points out that their sponsorship can greatly increase financial support for the arts, which is chronically under funded by the public-at-large.

At the same time, the bank's White says, "We're accountable to our shareholders on the basis of, 'What does it do for Scotiabank? The fact that we're enabling (Nuit Blanche) to happen – I think we want Scotiabank to get credit for that."

At least one estimate out there has it that the average consumer is exposed to up to 5,000 marketing messages each and every day.

Perhaps the question will begin to be asked, as those messages become increasingly inescapable and profitable for advertisers: When will the consumer get paid for tolerating them?

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