

Buildings becoming stars in Web stories

Trying to appeal to savvy, technology-oriented young consumers, real estate developers turning to edgy online films to create a buzz

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When we last saw Anya, she was taking a break from her afraid-of-commitment boyfriend by chilling, for a few weeks, in her gay buddy Dougal's condo.

But it's not just any condo--it's, like, such a fabulous condo. Really.

"It's amazing, it's perfect," the twentysomething, wide-eyed blonde tells Dougal as she surveys the living room's decorated-to-perfection splendor.

Dougal and Anya are fictional characters. Their onscreen story is "Sex and the City" meets "Will & Grace." But there's another character in the mix, and it is the building.

The building is the Donovan, a soon-to-be-real high-rise in the hip Yaletown neighborhood in Vancouver. It's a major player in "Donovan Life," a professionally produced sitcom introduced online Wednesday.

The video story line, released in five brief Webisodes every few days and culminating Feb. 16, was created at the request of Cressey Developers, a major builder in Vancouver that was looking for a new way to generate buzz. The firm decided to gamble on "advertainment," an emerging medium that kicks product placement to another level.

The best-known example of advertainment is the BMW Hire series, nine online, award-winning videos produced by such established moviemakers as Ang Lee and John Frankenheimer several years ago at the behest of the car company. The constant in their plot lines was a BMW.

"We do a lot of elegant high-rise buildings, and [the marketing] becomes quite formulaic," said Cressey Vice President Hani Lammam. "How do you capture the audience's attention when it is constantly being bombarded by so much media?"

The episodic peek into the travails of young, single professionals is designed to entice potential buyers to the developer's Internet site at www.donovanlife.com. But its director-writer aims to reverse the traditional route and take his series from the Internet to television or the big screen.

"This is not a commercial. It is not an industrial-film sales pitch," said Roger Larry, a Vancouver moviemaker who wrote the "Donovan Life" script with his wife, Sandra Tomc.

The advertainment technique is starting to gain traction, said Ann Handley, chief content officer for MarketingProfs.com, a California-based online trade publication. She said that last year, for example, the Dove soap brand capitalized on the popularity of "Desperate Housewives" actress Felicity Huffman in creating three Webisodes in which Huffman, as directed by Penny Marshall, is transported back into classic sitcoms.

Handley said that after initial resistance the real estate industry is figuring out what to do on the Web.

"Today I spend as much [money] on my Web site as I do on my brochures," said Garry Benson, chief executive of Garrison Partners, a national real estate marketing company based in Chicago.

"Historically, a third of our traffic is going to come from traditional media such as newspapers, a third from signage and a third is from other forms of outreach, such as the Internet.

"But that has started to shift. The Web-based marketing is starting to rival the print media."

Benson said a large-scale development usually budgets 2 percent to 3 percent of the gross sales price of the project for marketing.

Lammam declined to specify how much the firm invested in sponsoring the "Donovan Life" series, though he said its cost was lessened by piggybacking production with "Crossing," a movie Larry was working on in December, when most of "Donovan Life" was shot with the same actors.

The promotion has been noticed. Hits on "Donovan Life" site had been averaging 672 a day after a traditional post card and print ad campaign for the building began Jan. 8, said Cressey spokeswoman Marcella Munro. On Wednesday, when the video series began, they leapt to nearly 21,000.

"Those numbers don't surprise me," said Dominic Adducci, managing director of Mesirow Financial Real Estate in Chicago, which used its own online video series to promote R+D659, a West Loop high-rise.

The Mesirow videos, however, are less like TV programming and more like light-hearted commercials extolling the building and its neighborhood. They are premised on a character named Artie, a butcher, who emerges from a 99-year sleep in the freezer of his old shop (don't ask) and sets out to catch up with modern life. Visitors to the site, ArtiesAdventures.com, can register for free admission to the building's launch party Feb. 15.

Adducci presumes that most attendees will be of a demographic comparable with the one Cressey is seeking at "Donovan Life": ages 25 to 45, single or couples with above-average salaries.

"This group is very technology-oriented and very sophisticated in terms of the very hard direct sell," Adducci said. "The young professional responds more to image and lifestyle than to a traditional sale."

He said about 8,000 visitors have viewed the Artie videos since they premiered in late January.

Where Artie is a genial, aw-shucks character, Anya and Dougal and neighbor Jack, the object of their mutual interest, are more on the randy side. The Web site for the Donovan, whose marketing tagline is "Get Intimate," urges parental discretion for viewers of "Donovan Life" and warns that it may not be suitable for some.

Lammam doesn't expect that to be a problem.

"From our perspective, it needs to get a reaction. Whether it's good or bad, whether you love it or hate it, it causes you to sit up and take notice," he said.

Talk is key, agreed Charles Falls, president of Demi & Cooper advertising in Elgin, which develops marketing strategies for builders.

"This younger demographic is very heavy on buzz," he said. "If there's talk about it, people will check it out."

Handley, the marketing publisher, said there were unlikely to be negatives in such a campaign, even with sexual content.

"As an approach for this particular product, the Donovan building, it's not bad. In fact, it's rather good," Handley said. "The show clearly defines the demographic--people who will want to live there--and the reasons for it. It's hip, it's cool, it's fun.

"Plus, a really cute guy might live next door. What isn't appealing about that?"

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