



Insights and thoughts from our Brand Strategy Associate Tofiq Husein-Zadeh on core branding principles with broad applicability for any marketer, communications professional or business leader. Views are subjective and our own. February 20th, 2018. © Brand Affairs AG.

Brand Placement Sub Rosa

Brand Placement Sub Rosa is a sophisticated combination of strategic narrative and reference systems. The upcoming challenge in the branded content industry will be based on mastering the art and science of brand casting to be able to integrate the brand to the narrative in a subtle way that doesn't interfere with the *mise en scène*, the character (as the influencer) and the plot. This is holds true across channels; from digital native content to traditional movies.



A Win-Win Technique

Studies show that the average consumer is exposed to up to 10,000 brand messages a day.¹ More and more audiences are skipping and switching when they see advertising. Consequently, more brand managers than ever began realizing that brand placement or integration to storytelling is one of the most subtle and efficient ways of creating desire and raising awareness about a brand and in data cluttered world. It is a more meaningful way of communicating associations about a brand. Unlike conventional product placements, *brand placement sub rosa* is more artistic than commercial in nature, adding value to the work rather than advertising it in the eyes of consumers.



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Brand placement sub rosa is not possible without the process of accurate brand casting. A process requiring the ability to psychographically profile brands. Certain products are easier to place than others because they fit naturally and in harmony with the narrative. For example, Stolichnaya Vodka in *Mad Men* was so harmoniously integrated to the plot that the scene is almost unthinkable without it.

Brand placement sub rosa technique is not reserved to large global brands exclusively. Take Clos du Val wine for instance, a small producer of high quality Cabernet Sauvignon in Napa Valley. Despite the absence of large financial budgets, the brand’s bottle was placed for the dinner scene played by Tom Hanks and Catherine Zeta Jones in *The Terminal* and in such timeless classics as *21 Grams* and *The Sopranos*.²

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Brand placement sub rosa, in a way, transforms native advertising into a more meaningful version of the latter. It is the art and science of placing the brand (or the product of that brand) precisely in accordance with the mise-en-scene within various genres including film, poetry, documentary, novels, series, non-fiction etc. It does not relate to the way conventional product placement is done on TV programs or contests, video games, cooking or reality shows and so forth. When it is done right, it is unquestionably a win-win for all sides: the creator behind the work, the brand and the audience.

Long-term Effects

Brand placement sub rosa is timeless. It transcends the ups and downs of time and therefore outweighs economical fluctuations.

For instance, in his play *The Importance of Being Earnest* Oscar Wilde places Perrier-Jouet brut, vintage 1889. In the case of Eugene Onegin, there was no commercial agreement for brand placement, however Alexander Pushkin was selective with casting a brand for his novel in verse. There probably were other luxury horology brands among his favorites but he still chose Breguet. What led him to go with Breguet was an implicit agreement on brand placement. Note this makes for 185 years of ‘contract’ duration - speaking of a long-term brand placement agreement. And how long will it continue heightening the brand awareness and adding cultural value to the brand among the key circles worldwide? There is no question that decades and centuries ahead, a cultured segment of consumers will still be reading the novel in verse with the brand placed in it.

“Thus the effect of this channel is long-term, outlasting most others.”



For example, Apple's *brand placement sub rosa* in the classic *Forrest Gump* was very sincere. The protagonist played by Tom Hanks doesn't even name the brand properly saying "some kind of fruit company". Another classic is Quentin Tarantino's magnum opus *Reservoir Dogs*, which has Ray Ban glasses in it worn by almost all the main characters but without the brand's logos on them. There may have been commercial agreements behind these placements and yet they still preserved their subtlety.

Understatement by Brands

"We are workers of the shadows. Our finest work is when people don't even know what we did." - said Swiss entrepreneur Ruben Igielko-Herrlich with a smile who founded Propaganda GEM who specialize in brand placement.³ *Brand placement sub rosa* is different in that it avoids over-exposure and reduces commercial noise. It is there to create desire and influence positive purchase behavior. In other words, the creator behind the work has to stay independent. It is *sub rosa* because it has to have stealth, subtle and implicit aspects. How many viewers actually noticed Giorgio Armani in Julian Kaye's (played by Richard Gere) wardrobe in *American Gigolo*?

It is *sub rosa* when the audience doesn't feel the commercialisation of the integration. When asked if brand placements were official and paid in *Mad Men*, the president and general manager of AMC Charlie Collier replied saying: "We absolutely have product integration on the show, but you shouldn't know which ones are paid and which ones aren't."⁴

Steinway & Sons, for example, can be seen during the documentary on the life of the eminent pianist Michel Petrucciani.⁵ It's *sub rosa* as it doesn't disturb the viewers in any way and it is as relevant as it can be to the narrative. In one scene Petrucciani was actually choosing which piano is his favorite and he explained that he makes the decision even before playing on it or trying it. "I knew it when I saw it. I came into the room and I said this is the one. ... Pianos talk to me." – said Petrucciani. The question then is: can your brand implicitly talk to your target audience to make agreements *sub rosa*?



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Photo courtesy: FRANK OCKENFELS / AMC

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