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- Business
- Advertising
- Money & Investing
- Technology
- Video Games
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- Business Tools
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- Money Library
- Money Q & A
- Bank Rates
- Press Releases

- NEWS
- California | Local
- National
- World
- Entertainment News
- Business
- Sports
- Politics
- Opinion
- Columnists
- Print Edition
- RSS What is RSS?

- Calendarlive
- Travel
- West Magazine
- House & Garden
- Health
- Food
- Car Culture
- Obituaries
- Crossword, Sudoku
- All Sections
- Corrections

- BUY, SELL & MORE
- Jobs
- Cars
- Real Estate
- Apartments
- Personals
- Deals at Local
- Stores
- Coupons
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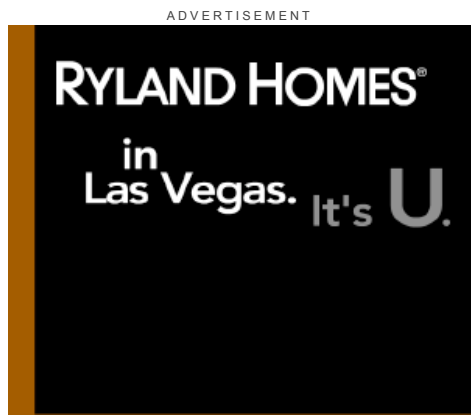
Web Ads Show Just How Sexy These Clothes Make You Feel

French porn stars doff the duds and go at it in spots that highlight a trend of making ads more radical for the Net.

By Claire Hoffman and Chris Gaither, Times Staff Writers
August 13, 2006

The Internet is rapidly changing the rules of advertising — but using naked people to sell clothes?

A French clothier is testing the limits of the maxim that sex sells with online commercials that use hard-core pornography to hawk \$100 T-shirts.



The campaign by Shai clothing depicts French porn stars frolicking on a circular bed, clothed, at least initially, in the brand's latest styles.

Shai's effort also foreshadows a trend in interactive marketing: giving viewers the ability to click on moving images in a commercial to buy clothing, movie tickets and other goods on screen. Rolling the mouse pointer over a piece of apparel in the Shai clip stops the video and pulls up a chart with price and size information.

The interactive stag film as fashion catalog is an extreme example of advertisers adapting their messages

to the Internet, by making spots more compelling with storytelling or radical content and hoping people will forward the clips to friends.

And because the Internet can bypass traditional gatekeepers like publishers and TV networks, advertisers like Shai can create highly targeted niche campaigns that would be taboo in mainstream media.

"One of the things that is kind of intriguing about it is that ... on the Web, you don't have to worry about standards boards. You are getting rid of all your lines of censorship," said Tom Reichert, who teaches advertising at the University of Georgia at Athens and wrote "The Erotic History of Advertising."

Jeff Lanctot, the Seattle-based vice president of ad agency Avenue A/Razorfish, said future-looking marketers once dreamt that shows like "Friends" could prompt an instant buying frenzy.

"Years ago there were predictions that you'd be able to click to buy Jennifer Aniston's sweater," Lanctot said. "That time has come, but Jennifer Aniston has been replaced by a porn star. It's another sign where pornography is right on the front lines of a lot of new trends."

The technology of layering commerce onto Web video is known in advertising circles as hotspotting. It hasn't hit the Web in force, in part because such ads are expensive and time-consuming to create. Video is a small, fast-growing part of the \$17-billion market for online ads, but for the most part marketers are simply shortening standard TV commercials for the Web.

PointRoll, a unit of publisher Gannett Co. that develops ad-delivery technology, is working with movie studios to produce trailers that link to the Fandango online ticketing service.

"It's all about leveraging the medium for what it's built for: interactivity," PointRoll Chief

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Executive Chris Saridakis said. "We look at porn and gambling and areas that most people don't want to touch but have interesting technologies that we try to push out to [Procter & Gamble] and Chrysler."

Ian Schafer, CEO of Deep Focus, an interactive ad agency with offices in Brooklyn and Los Angeles, said a colleague forwarded him the link to Shai's ads. The publicity may have helped Shai get noticed, he said, but he doubted that it could serve as a model for others.

"Is it going to sell more clothes? Probably not," he said. "At the end of the day, it's probably more entertaining to watch the porn than to think, 'Wow, those clothes look good!' It almost takes attention away from what they're trying to get you to pay attention to. It's distracting, and some would say reeks of desperation."

Damon Crepin, the creative director of Paris-based Agence 7, the shop responsible for the spots, said the Internet allows people to decide for themselves whether they want to watch something. TV and print ads are harder to bypass.

"What is important is that this is not a 'push' campaign," Crepin said, referring to advertising that is imposed on the audience. "Every person seeing this is willing to see it. We would never have done this on TV, because on TV you push the message to people."

Many people have decided to take a look. More than 2 million visitors from 117 countries have come to the site in the last four months. "A lot of people accept it," said Shai founder Alexandre Maisetti. "They are surprised — but not shocked. "

But the company has yet to sell many shirts, pants, skirts or blazers.

"The first goal wasn't to sell directly, it was to develop notoriety," Maisetti said. "We will see next season if people like the brand. People are looking at us, but it takes time for people to come in and buy some stuff."

Yet despite the graphic acts on the screen, at least some viewers are indeed looking at the clothes. Among the comments posted on an online forum, one visitor observed: "There doesn't seem to be any info on the belt, otherwise well done."

Although Shai's online campaign hasn't provoked a discernible backlash in France or on the Web, nudity in advertising remains hotly contested in the U.S. With Abercrombie & Fitch and American Apparel pushing limits with provocative ads, critics in the U.S. find the online move to hard core frustrating but not surprising.

"It has nothing to do with clothes," said Phil Burress, president of Cincinnati-based Citizens for Community Values, which bought full-page newspaper ads two years ago to protest nudity in an Abercrombie & Fitch catalog. "It's nothing new to use sex to sell product. But when you start talking about nudity and sexual activity, that is way beyond what is acceptable in our popular culture."

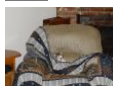
Shai's foray into triple-X has also caught the eye of those U.S. retailers that embrace the erotic in their brands. Alexandra Spunt, who oversees advertising for Los Angeles-based American Apparel, said she's intrigued by Shai's campaign, but it goes further than her brand would probably be willing to go.

"It wouldn't go over very well in the States," Spunt said. "I don't disagree with combining the mediums of porn and advertising and the Internet. I just like keeping a little bit of mystery. Often that's a little bit sexier."

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