The fine art of making a point

‘Human directional’ -- those guys spinning advertising arrows -- can cost $60 an hour. Some of their best moves are filed in the patent office.

By Alana Semuels, Times Staff Writer
May 1, 2007

JEREMY White was holding a sign advertising $5 pizza deals at Little Caesars in North Hollywood when two young men stopped their white pickup truck.

After noticing his strong arms and athletic frame, they made him an instant offer. "We can pay you $10 an hour. Give us a call," White recalled the men saying.

A few days later, the 20-year-old met them at a North Hollywood park where coaches with clipboards barked at dozens of teenagers doing push-ups, part of a regimen preparing them to spin arrow-shaped signs for tanning salons and new homes. Four days later, White quit his Little Caesars gig to join the men's company, Aarrow Advertising of San Diego.

The payoff was immediate: $10 an hour, almost double his previous wages. During his second day on the job, a passerby was so impressed with his spinning that she gave him a $250 Croton watch. Within a month, he got a raise to $15 an hour. "I don't like to toot my own horn, but I'm one of the best out there," White said.

White is part of the competitive world of "human directionals," an industry term for people who twirl signs outside restaurants, barbershops and new real estate subdivisions.

Street corner advertising on human billboards has existed for centuries, but Southern California — where the weather allows sign spinners to work year-round — has endowed the job with style.

Local spinners have cooked up hundreds of moves. There's the Helicopter, in which a spinner does a backbend on one hand while spinning a sign above his head. In the Blender, a spinner twists the sign behind his back. Spanking the Horse gets the most attention. The spinner puts the sign between his legs, slaps his own behind and giddy-ups.

Thanks to growing demand, the business has turned cutthroat. There's a frenzy of talent poaching. Spinners battle one another for plum assignments and the promise of wage hikes. Some of the more prominent compete for bragging rights by posting videos on YouTube and Google Video, complete with trash talking. One YouTube comment reads, "I don't know if you stole my tricks or i just do them better."

SPECIAL spinning moves are guarded fiercely.

Aarrow keeps dozens of moves in a "trick-tionary," which only a handful of people have seen, said co-founder Mike Kenny. The company records spinners' movements and sends them in batches to the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. "We have to take our intellectual property pretty seriously," he said.

Aarrow requires its 400 employees to attend monthly boot camps, where their skills are judged and physical fitness tested over three hours.

"It's competitive," said Randy Jenks, 20, an Aarrow "spin-structor." Afterward, he ran up a tree and bounded off with a back flip to pump up his students.
Aarrow charges clients $60 an hour — double the industry standard — for the services of its most skillful employees.

But Jenks, a kingpin in the industry, commands up to $70 an hour. Rapper Snoop Dogg flew him to Atlanta to spin a sign advertising his new album at the American Music Awards. Two years ago, Jenks won Aarrow's annual nationwide competition pitting the best spinners against one another. His protege, who happens to be his brother-in-law, won last year. Jenks was barred from entering because of his status as a spinning god.

The outdoor advertising industry still does not recognize sign spinning as a bona fide way of reaching consumers, much less an art form. It regards spinning as a form of guerrilla marketing that commercializes public space. Some municipalities are even beginning to make sign spinners into outlaws. Riverside, Poway and El Cajon are among the cities that recently banned the practice.

"They can distract people and cause accidents," said Jim Griffin, director of community development in El Cajon. Some sidewalk sign holders try to spin when no one is looking, so Griffin hired weekend staff to catch and ticket them.

It takes a discerning eye to know when to lay down the law, he said. "If a sign is moving, they're spinning. If their leg goes to sleep and they're jumping up and down, they're not."

But one person's crime is another's livelihood. Almost anyone can qualify for the job with most of the firms. Although some bring along an iPod or a cooler with drinks, the basic requirement is patience, lots of it. "If you're able to stand in a closet for six hours, you can do this job," said Jeff Triesch, a supervisor with MJAD Directionals, a San Diego company.

It's not easy money. Sign holders sometimes swelter in 110-degree weather and must master the physical challenges of throwing and catching a 6-pound plastic arrow. Some recount being pelted with pennies, eggs and insults from car windows.

Standing at the corner of West Alameda and North Pass avenues in Burbank, MJAD spinner Elliott Forte waved a sign advertising new apartments in Burbank. He cringed as a Vons truck made a tight right turn, inching perilously close. "Someone could lose control and run right into me," he said.

Forte, who sports square cubic zirconium earrings and a yellow MJAD cap and T-shirt, composes hip-hop lyrics in his head while he stands on the corner.

He says he recorded 136 songs last year under the stage name Razzaq.

Forte hopes this job down the street from movie studios and record labels leads to stardom. "You never know who's in the car driving by," he said, keeping his eye peeled for any erratic drivers. "Anything could happen."

He boasts that Jay Leno once stopped to compliment him on his spinning.

"If I ever make it big in the music industry, just remember where I met you," Forte recalled telling the late-night host.

Many companies say spinners make a difference in attracting customers.

Jody Piccinino, community manager for Lofts at NoHo Commons in North Hollywood, said that the day after she switched from a sign holding company to Aarrow's spinners, the number of prospective buyers doubled to 18.

"We wanted something that was eye catching," she said. "And we've seen direct results."

DEMAND from people like Piccinino is forcing sign companies to recruit aggressively or steal workers from competitors to bolster their labor supply — often by just driving up and offering the spinners $5 or $10 more an hour.

"We've had workers that have dropped their arrows on site to go and work for another company," said Mike McCullough, vice president of sales and marketing at Eventz Extraordinaire. The Lake Forest company says it invented sign spinning two decades ago, after noticing that cardboard arrows were effective in getting people to check out businesses.

L.A.-based Sign Sale Promotion Inc., which bills itself as the largest sign promotion...
company in the United States, says its subcontractors hire day laborers, high school
cheerleader teams, inmates from women's prisons and homeless people at shelters.

Pastor Jeff Mahle, of the Yucaipa-based Set Free ministry, said the sign company had
hired countless people in his rehab program, from battered women to homeless people.

"It has given people an opportunity to support themselves as they go through rehab," he
said. "People see that they're hard workers."

Others are more cautious about who represents their clients.

Derek Masar, MJAD's co-founder, said he started hiring his own spinners after he
became frustrated with spinners who showed up late, smoked cigarettes and didn't take
the job seriously.

"They would send us someone who literally looked like they woke up from behind the
building they were spinning in front of," he said. "We need people that are image
conscious, clean cut."

At the Aarrow Advertising boot camp, young spinners dress in uniform, with red Aarrow
shirts, and do push-ups and running exercises without complaint.

A pudgy boy in plastic glasses crab-walks backward in one drill while a thin teen
wearing batting gloves grunts as he throws a sign into the air.

To the crowd that has gathered to watch, the practice seems thankless and grueling.
But Bryan Penate, a 21-year-old rookie, said it beats his previous job as a fry cook at
McDonald's.

"There's less pressure," he said.

alana.semuels@latimes.com

MORE NEWS
- 5 Britons sentenced to life for terror plots
- Toxic chemical a pet food additive in China
- Jamestown to celebrate 400th anniversary
- Trapeze artist falls to death in Montebello

"Venice" is more than just
Muscle Beach! View our readers'
photos and share your own at
Your Scene.
Submit your photo now >>

Ads by Google

Online Forex Trading
Trade 300+ Futures Markets Globally Web-Based Broker, Not Software!
www.xtf.com

2007 Best Stocks To Buy
10 Low-Priced Stocks You Must Own Get This Free Report - Profit Today
www.cabotwealth.com

World's Top Penny Stock?
Learn How A Small Exploration Co. Will Be the Top Stock of 2007
www.DailyWealth.com/Penny_Report

TD AMERITRADE: Brokerage
Commission free trades for 45 days. No maintenance fees. Sign up now.
TDAMERITRADE.com

Buy Stocks Online for $0
Trade Stocks for Free on Zecco.com With Zecco's Zero Commission Trades
www.Zecco.com

http://www.latimes.com/business/la-fi-spinners1may01,0,7358645,full.story