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**Product placement is nothing new – but a new film set in Google’s headquarters takes it to new heights. Tom Brook looks at how movies can be vehicles for marketing messages.**



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**By Tom Brook**

21 October 2014

When I go to see a movie, I expect to see actors and visuals brought together to tell a good story; if I'm lucky that story will be profound and compelling. I also expect, in more commercial films, to see the odd product or two placed in the frame from time to time. But the new buddy comedy, *The Internship*, opening in cinemas around the world, has taken product placement to a startling new extreme: it's one huge advertisement for Google.

The film stars Owen Wilson and Vince Vaughn as two washed up watch salesmen who hope to reinvent themselves by entering Google's internship programme. Most of the action takes place at the search engine's headquarters. Google signage abounds, there are shots of Google products in the film and the whole movie makes the company look like the most wondrous place to work – which it may well be.

But when you hear one of the film's characters, a Google employee, utter the line: "I actually believe, that what we do here helps make people's lives a little bit better," you begin to ask: What is it that I'm watching? Is it a film where the dialogue has been freely crafted according to artistic imperatives – or has it been shaped by advertising copywriters?

Writing in the Huffington Post, US entertainment writer Mike Ryan noted that *The Internship* **should be a free movie** because it's a two-hour commercial for Google.

### **Out of place**

Individuals at many different levels in the movie business think product placement can go too far. Hollywood star Stanley Tucci, who's appeared in several blockbusters where products have been placed, has noted a change: "I think it is becoming more brazen, if it really doesn't fit in to the film then it's inappropriate but in certain films I think it's completely appropriate. Ultimately it's up to the filmmaker to decide."

The exact details of the arrangement between Google and the *The Internship*'s producers aren't clear but Vince Vaughn has said that the company didn't put up any money for the movie. It's been reported that Google worked with the producers and read the script. But according to *The Internship*'s director, Shawn Levy, the company didn't have final editorial control.

From Google's point of view the film provided it with an excellent opportunity to promote its brand – and perhaps have a positive impact on the way its work is perceived. In a recent speech, Google's chief executive, Larry Page explained: "The reason we got involved is that computer science has a marketing problem. We're the nerdy curmudgeons — I don't know about you — but that's what I am."

It may have caught some media commentators as a new phenomenon but in the realm of product placement *The Internship* does have predecessors. The 2008 British film *Somers Town* was entirely funded by the high-speed train company Eurostar. The coming-of-age comedy-drama from director Shane Meadows was set in the neighbourhood around London's Eurostar terminal. Then there are movies so excessively saturated with products they play like extended commercials. The 2002 Bond movie *Die Another Day* was dubbed 'Buy Another Day' because so many companies paid to have their products in the film.

But *The Internship* is definitely being seen as more extreme than anything that's ever come before. "It's tent-poling an entire film around one company and one workplace," says Wheeler Winston Dixon, Professor of Film Studies at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. "The thing was just a massive piece of product placement and an attempt by Google to make themselves all warm and cuddly and fuzzy and not a huge corporation."

### **'Cleverer and cleverer'**

Not everyone takes the view that extreme product placement corrupts the integrity of a film's storytelling. Paul Levinson, author of the book *New New Media*, acknowledges that *The Internship* brings product placement to a new level but thinks the picture did a good job nonetheless. "I'm not sure every single person who works at Google is so happy and cool, but nonetheless I think the movie captured the essential reality of Google which Google's entitled to be proud of and to publicise."

Google could do with some good publicity. As media sociologist Alexandre Frenette notes: "People are starting to feel

a bit distrustful when it comes to certain big technology firms and privacy issues.” Several tech companies may be seen as ‘cool’ places to work but recent reports alleging co-operation with the US government’s surveillance apparatus has tarnished their image in some quarters.

But any public-relations windfall from *The Internship* has probably been slight because the film hasn’t performed strongly at the US box office. By the end of last month it had taken in around \$40m dollars – given that it has an estimated budget of \$58m that’s not great news. However its poor showing may be due more to some bad reviews than anything to do with Google’s involvement in the film.

*The Internship*’s weak performance, in the US at least, probably won’t stop other copycat corporate entities from becoming the focus of an entire film in the future. “They may want to consider doing something a bit more subtle than what Google did,” says Alexandre Frenette, “but I do see that this certainly sets a precedent that more companies may want to consider.”

There are of course purists sickened by product placement who would like to excise any kind of commercial imagery from cinema – but the reality is that most films are money-making undertakings. “They’re a bottom line business,” says Professor Wheeler Winston Dixon, “There’s nothing wrong with that. Some of my favourite films have got massive product placements.”

Saturating our universe with advertising – bringing it into every aspect of life, whether browsing online or going to the movies – reflects a much wider development where marketers have become more inventive and more aggressive.

“With the decline of broadcast television ratings,” says Toby Miller, author of *Global Hollywood* ,2, “with the rise of cable stations that have little advertising, and with the capacity of viewers who click away from commercials when they see them, marketers have to get cleverer and cleverer. What they do therefore is try to bring advertising into daily life, and make it part of daily life so it’s no longer seen as an interruption.”

Such is the case with *The Internship* because throughout the movie you’re locked into the world of Google – the routine visit to the cinema has become an uninterrupted commercial experience. It is a sobering reminder of the extent to which Hollywood’s strategy relies on making films that promote brands, goods and services, in addition to providing entertainment. It’s a point worth bearing in mind next time you go to the movies.

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