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Spurlock Shills for Pomegranate Juice, Shoes in New Film

By Rick Warren - Apr 19, 2011

Filmmaker Morgan Spurlock walked into the interview room wearing a navy sports jacket plastered with 21 corporate logos.

“This is my Nascar prom jacket,” he joked, referring to stock-car racers whose uniforms are covered with sponsor names.

Spurlock was promoting his new film, “[POM Wonderful Presents: The Greatest Movie Ever Sold](#),” whose \$1.5 million budget was funded entirely by companies whose products are prominently displayed in the documentary. POM Wonderful, which makes pomegranate juice packaged in distinctive bulb-shaped bottles, is paying \$1 million to be the title sponsor.

Another sponsor, the Sheetz convenience-store chain, is based in Altoona, [Pennsylvania](#), which is changing its name to the movie’s title for 60 days in exchange for a \$25,000 donation from Spurlock’s production company.

The documentary explores the burgeoning world of product placements, whereby companies pay to have their brands used in movies and TV shows. With more and more viewers fast-forwarding past commercials on TV and ignoring them when they’re squeezed between trailers at the movie theater, companies are resorting to more direct advertising.

“I didn’t sell out, I bought in,” Spurlock explained. “I wanted to look at the way Hollywood makes movies these days. If you really wanted to reach a wide audience, you need that cross-promotion. You need the hat. You need the T-shirt. You need the collector cup.”

Horse Shampoo

Like Spurlock’s other films, including “Super Size Me” and “Where in the World Is Osama [Bin Laden?](#),” “The Greatest Movie” examines a serious subject with liberal doses of humor. I spoke to the 40-year-old director in a conference room at a [New York](#) publicity firm.

Warner: So what do your sponsors think of the film?

Spurlock: They all love it. They realize it's a great way to promote their products. Mane 'n Tail (which makes a shampoo that works on horses and humans) even invited me to the Kentucky Derby next month.

Warner: Why did you make this film?

Spurlock: I wanted to pull back the curtain and show how the process works. I take you inside these pitch meetings and negotiations, which most people have never seen.

Warner: Product placements have been around for a long time, but they're more noticeable these days. How come?

Spurlock: It's expensive to make movies and TV shows, so producers are looking for new sources of money. Also, no place is really safe from commercials anymore. They're even talking about selling advertising space in the Grand Canyon.

No Guns, Cigarettes

Warner: Did any of your sponsors try to influence the content of your movie?

Spurlock: They had creative input on how we promoted their products, but they didn't have any say over the final cut.

Warner: Did you turn down any companies that wanted to be in the film?

Spurlock: No. In fact, we tried to get some offensive sponsors like cigarette companies and gun manufacturers but they said no. We even asked BP if they were interested. Who needs good publicity more than BP right now?

Warner: You visited Sao Paulo, Brazil, which has banned all outdoor advertising. That must have been a strange sight.

Spurlock: It was weird. As you're driving into town, you see all these billboards. Then suddenly, as you hit the city limits, there's nothing -- no advertising at all. It's like you've landed on another planet.

Nader's Shoes

Warner: You interviewed Ralph Nader, who's a harsh critic of commercialization. As a gag, you then gave him a pair of Merrell shoes, which is one of your sponsors. Do you know if he's wearing them?

Spurlock: We gave him a pair of slip-ons, but he wanted one with laces. So we sent him another pair.

“The Greatest Movie Ever Sold,” from Sony Pictures Classics, opens April 22 in New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Washington, Chicago, Phoenix, San Diego, San Francisco, Los Angeles and Austin, Texas.

(Rick Warner is the movie critic for Muse, the arts and leisure section of Bloomberg News. Opinions expressed are his own. This interview was adapted from a longer conversation.)

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