



ARTS

**Film & Television**

## Girls (and bags) on film

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The *Sex and the City* juggernaut has rolled into town. The e-mails began piling up more than a month ago: “Introducing Mandarin Oriental’s *Sex and the City* celebration package”; “Put the Sex back into the City with Modern Courtesan’s luxurious lingerie line”; “May’s must-have accessory for every *Sex and the City* fan is an iconic ‘your name in diamonds’ pendant from icecool.co.uk”.

The promotional hype surrounds the release this month of the *SATC* film, which is based on the hit TV series. Starring Sarah Jessica Parker, Kristin Davis, Cynthia Nixon and Kim Cattrall, the HBO show ran from 1998-2004 and was derived from Candace Bushnell’s bestselling book of the same name.

Not one of those promotional, beat-the-drum, event-of-the-summer e-mails had been sent by the film’s makers New Line. Rather, they came from different brands, attempting to piggy-back on the movie to sell stuff: shoes, necklaces, hotel rooms, mobile phones. Never has there been a big-screen product placement moment like this.

New Line has dubbed the film as “the Super Bowl for women”. The meaning is clear: a product shot in the film will be the equivalent of the commercials screened during the biggest sporting event of the year on US TV. Generally viewed as the most valuable spots on TV because of the exposure, they are also the most expensive: \$2.7m for 30 seconds. Still, everyone wants in – as, indeed, they did with the *SATC* film.

“I was in the wardrobe trailer,” says Andrea Hansen, international communications director of jeweller H Stern, which loaned more than 300 pieces to the film. “It was like being in [NY department stores] Bergdorf Goodman and Saks combined. There was an overwhelming amount of branded product.”

This is possible because, as Kate Sayre, a partner in The Boston Consulting Group’s consumer practice, says: “The characters were defined via their wardrobes and the products they used: Carrie [Sarah Jessica Parker], for example, was a creative, fashion-obsessed writer type, so she used an Apple Mac because of its design value and wore all these crazy clothes.” She also

changed them a lot with her moods, as did her confrères – alpha female Samantha (power-shoulders and slit skirts), homemaker Charlotte (blouses and purses) and lawyer Miranda (briefcases and suits).

Sarah Jessica Parker, one of the film's producers as well as playing the lead character Carrie Bradshaw, says: "As a producer, I am very aware of product placements, how we make them and why we make them but we are actually pretty prudent and mindful and selective about it. It seems authentic to the story we are telling."

But that was then: the consumer-happy *fin de siècle*; the era of the It-bag and the disposable wardrobe; the era when, as Mary Egan, one of Sayre's partners at BCG, says: "There was so much stuff, you needed help weeding through it, and the characters did double duty as your personal navigator".

Four years later, however, and the New York of *Sex and the City* is reeling as Citigroup announces 9,000 lay-offs and Merrill Lynch 4,000; Bear Stearns almost declares bankruptcy and gets sold to JP Morgan; and recession no longer looms, but arrives. In this world, it may be that the definition of "character" has less to do with what goes on the outside than what happens on the inside. And that puts the *SATC* brands, such as Mercedes-Benz, Prada, Oscar de la Renta, Fendi, YSL, Marni, Dior, Ferragamo – the list goes on and on – in an unexpected and possibly dangerous position. Apparently even fashion companies sometimes have to be careful what they wish for.

"Attitudes towards product placement are changing, and you can see this in the current feeling about stars who have financial deals to wear a certain brand," says James Grant, chief executive of Starworks, a brand communication company that uses the entertainment world to reach consumers. "Increasingly, it seems as though the risks – questioning their integrity – are not worth the benefits, which is a relatively small amount of money. It's better to link up a brand and a celebrity who have a common ground in interests or values, and let that be the connection."

Tamara Mellon, president of Jimmy Choo, a company transformed by the *SATC* series from a young, niche brand into a household name, says: "The world unquestionably is a different place. The problem is, with a television series you can stay very current because you are filming and airing pretty close to the same time. With film, that isn't the case." Television can react in relatively real time to current events. Movies, even movies done as quickly as *SATC*, which will be released less than a year from the start of filming, cannot.

Last autumn, for example, when the cameras started rolling in Manhattan, the subprime crisis was just beginning to hit Wall Street and luxury goods brands everywhere were still talking up the "wealth bubble" and women's willingness to go over the \$1,000 mark for a handbag. Now, after a month of grim economic news, retailers are braced for a slowdown in consumer spending. And though most luxury brands, including Jimmy Choo, say sales have not been markedly hit by the general downturn, Sayre of BCG says: "In a recession, even if people keep spending, they often want to be more understated, and become more concerned with authenticity." They spend differently.

In short, it is about not advertising your superficial investments; about not carrying a bag or wearing a dress/coat/shoe that is instantly recognisable as costing the equivalent of some people's severance.

One thing that has not changed is the ability of films and TV shows to create instant, broad recognition. As Mellon says: "You reach so many more people. In a glossy [magazine], you are talking to a specific audience but in a film you talk to all sorts of people who might never buy Vogue, for example."

When a Tibi scarf-print halter dress was worn by Carrie in the TV series, the company sold 2,000 of the exact same dresses, says creative director and founder Amy Smilovic. "We would have sold more if I had made them – people were still calling me from Japan two and three years later." To put this in perspective, at the time her average sale for a single dress style was about 500. As for Manolo Blahnik, whom Sayre calls "practically another character in the show", when the designer created a Mary Jane that Carrie favoured, "our shops and website [were] inundated with requests for them every day" – and still are, according to a spokesperson.

*SATC* the movie, opening on millions of screens worldwide this month, will be able to catapult the brands involved from the relatively small world of luxury consumers into the much broader realm of the mass market. But will that kind of mass recognition have a positive result or will it backfire?

"I think sometimes we lose perspective," says H Stern's Hansen. "It's one thing if you've got your logo all over your product; then it's recognisable, so overexposure could be an issue. But if you're unbranded – how many people will know we made some character's earrings? It's a more subtle association. Five minutes on screen does not a sale make."

That depends. According to Sayre, there are two distinct kinds of product placement in films, which fulfil two different purposes, and *SATC* has made use of both. On the one hand is placement that is paid for. "You can often tell this because they're obviously flashing the logo, like when Bond waves all his Sony gear about in *Casino Royale*," says Sayre. This is a direct investment-for-exposure-and-promotion deal and is contractual: see the use of Skyy vodka in *SATC*. Though Skyy will not disclose financial details of the agreement, chief executive Gerry Ruvo says: "We engaged in a very competitive pitch with Absolut [the vodka of the TV series], involving a marketing plan with advertising promotions, sweepstakes, charity screenings etc – and we won."

As a result, says Ruvo: "We are in a pivotal scene in a bar, and have back-of-the-bar exposure." In return, the spirits company has been organising promotions for months, including one at Houlihan's bars around the US involving character cocktails on their Wednesday "girls' nights out". Houlihan's, though, is the American equivalent of All Bar One and a far cry from the Carlyle and Raoul's in SoHo where Carrie and co hang out on the big screen – but a good example of the reality of the film's target audience. If it's all about the opening weekend, the bigger the better.

“Luxury and Houlihan’s just do not work,” laughs Starworks’ Grant. “It goes against the whole grain of what luxury is supposed to be about. But that’s the problem with working with this kind of feature film: the audience is huge, and that necessarily means the product can’t be targeted, and you get further and further away from your core market.”

Sayre warns: “You risk becoming a commodity instead of a luxury.”

For a spirits or car company this trade-off makes a certain amount of sense, as they are necessarily “premium” products with a broader and more obvious remit than, say, a handbag or costume jewellery brand – they want the recognition, even in difficult times. Ruvo of Skyy says: “We now have 10 per cent of the premium vodka market, and we want to experience double-digit growth in the next year.” *SATC* is clearly part of that strategy.

Mercedes-Benz, a sponsor of New York fashion week, has contributed S-class cars and the new GLK class to the film. It sees the relationship as “being a great way to kick off our awareness for the GLK, which was just recently revealed ... and build an emotional connection to consumers”. In return for the use of its product, it is “the presenting sponsor” for the film’s premieres in Berlin and New York; has created a film-related micro-site with special interviews; and is organising special screenings for customers as well as creating special TV advertising. It’s a big investment.

Distinct from this sort of cut-and-dried product placement, however, is a more nebulous deal that involves the use of items selected by the costume designer, which may or may not make it into the film’s final cut. The brands don’t have to pitch to be in the movie but if they do end up on screen, they can use the film in ad campaigns. But they also don’t entirely control the use of their product. Such participation is a gamble.

“The risk of product placement is when it doesn’t feel natural,” says BCG’s Sayre. “Were the movie to be too overt about the products, that could make the audience turn off.”

Grant says: “One of the issues with being in a film where you don’t have a cut-and-dried, paid-for deal is that you don’t control the script or the context. You don’t know which character is going to wear/use your product, or in what context, and it may not end up being one you want.”

Still, and not surprisingly, Mellon and Co are upbeat about their expectations for the film and its repercussions for their products. “I don’t see any downside in being associated with the film,” says Mellon. “Even if it gets bad reviews, the handbag isn’t getting reviewed. People are going for light entertainment. It’s fun.” Smilovic says: “No one remembers the critics but they remember Sarah Jessica Parker”. “To us, it’s a home-run as a partner,” says Ruvo.

Nevertheless, says Grant, “this film will probably be a turning point for the business. After its release, I think they will all start to reassess the whole approach to product placement. In a way, it marks the end of the first entertainment-meets-fashion cycle. There will certainly be another one but my guess is it won’t look the same.”

*‘Sex and the City’ opens on May 28*