Timed out
With technology threatening the TV ad, marketers scramble for new ways to make their pitches
By Sam McManis -- Bee Staff Writer

Reports of the death of the 30-second television commercial - which, frankly, probably wouldn't be lamented by too many viewers - turn out to be greatly exaggerated.

Or, at least, way premature.

All you need to do is tune in to prime-time programming or catch any weekend sporting event. Ads are everywhere. Trucks fording streams and scaling heights. Men with beer behaving badly. Housewives - desperate and otherwise - wielding miracle cleaning products.

"I don't think you'll ever kill off the 30-second spot," says Jamie King, vice president at Publicis & Hal Riney, a San Francisco advertising firm. "It's been around forever. It's very resilient."

Then again, if you're one of the growing number of Americans with a digital video recorder, chances are you've already zapped TV ads off your screen. Close to 10 percent of U.S. households have DVRs, according to Nielsen Media Research, which predicts that figure will climb to 18 percent by year's end.

Someday, sooner rather than later, the DVR will become as standard as the remote control. Skipping ads will be as easy as pushing a button.

And that has advertisers - not to mention network TV executives, who reap the bounty of ad revenue - waxing pessimistic. Forrester Research recently polled 133 national advertisers and found that 78 percent believe TV ads are less effective than they were two years ago, and 60 percent say they will spend less on "conventional" advertising.

So, where does that leave marketers?

On the Internet, of course.

ABC recently announced it will make shows such as "Lost" and "Desperate
Housewives available free online. The catch: Viewers must view online advertising from major companies, such as Procter & Gamble and Cingular Wireless.

No zapping through the commercials - unless industrious hackers can find a way to do it.

Advertising on the Web has been growing more sophisticated, and this is the latest permutation. Full-service interactive Web sites now offer entertainment videos, advice, recipes, blogs, contests and other bells and whistles.

And in the past year, the pitches have morphed into so-called viral marketing - those stealthily placed videos circulating among users that often barely mention the product but command attention because of their entertainment value.

Such approaches appear here to stay. Spending on alternative ad campaigns is up 30 percent over last year, according to the Interactive Advertising Bureau. Forrester Research reports that 80 percent of marketers will spend more on Web advertising this year.

"Greater than 70 percent of Americans have (Internet) access," says Greg Stewart, president of the IAB. "It's a mass medium now."

So just what are we seeing online?

In many cases, it closely resembles the hard sell that consumers get from a 30-second TV spot.

But the most-talked-about Internet ads are virals, which give the appearance of growing organically from the users themselves. Others invite consumers to take part in shaping content. These ads are often mercurial, lasting as little as a day or as long as a month before making way for the next new thing.

In March, for example, an entire Web community sprung up around the movie "Snakes on a Plane," which is scheduled for release in August. New Line Cinema, long experienced in Web marketing, released an online trailer for the film and "encouraged" a blog to discuss the silliness of the film's name. The studio also made it possible for users to make their own humorous trailers playing off the absurd title.

Video-sharing sites such as YouTube.com and GoogleVideos make the dissemination of virals much easier, according to Cary Savas, who specializes in Internet advertising for EVB in San Francisco.

One of EVB's clients, Wrigley's Winterfresh chewing gum, has set up an interactive site called "Cool Breath Power," in which users can navigate cutting-edge animation and follow a story.
"We've also put unbranded spots on YouTube, and we've got a MySpace page for it," Savas says. "We get responses from kids on MySpace saying, 'Hey, isn't this the same stuff I saw on YouTube and TV?' This is proving the idea of connecting consumers through a variety of ways."

So-called full-service Web sites that really are fronts for ad pitches have multiplied lately. One of the most successful, industry analysts say, is Bacardi.com.

The site offers everything from videos featuring two comically "suave" Bacardi drinkers and IQ-challenged women to dance-step lessons for the salsa. It also provides recipes for mixing Mojitos and other drinks, and information on what accessories and music to play at a disco-theme party.

"We've got an average interaction time of 12 minutes among users on that site," says Richard Lent, the CEO of Florida-based AgencyNet, which produced the campaign. "We give (users) the feeling that they've gotten something of value for free while the marketers get consistent, streamlined brand opportunities.

"The (Internet) medium lends itself beautifully for viral distribution," Lent says. "I really think TV spots are passé."

But not so fast, say others in the industry.

"People get stuck on buzzwords like viral," says Dorian Sweet, creative director at Tribel DDB's San Francisco office. "I get calls every day from them saying, 'I want something viral.' You've got to temper their expectations."

Sweet recently wrote a column for an industry Web site trying to do just that.

"Has viral come of age?" he wrote. "I don't think so. It's a content grab. Cheap laughs are just that: cheap. ... It doesn't seem like very deep content for the long term."

But never underestimate the power of cheap laughs, others counter. They point to the success of Burger King's 2004 viral called "Subservient Chicken." A grainy shot from a live Web cam in a dank living room shows a man in a chicken costume. He responds to whatever commands users type, such as "dance," "bow down" or "sing." By late 2005, the site had received 442 million visits, according to the Los Angeles Times.

"That's the key," says Internet advertising expert Savas. "Virals have to pass the test: Will you want to send this to your friend? What you're talking about is digestible media. You experience for one or two minutes and it's disposable. But you feel compelled to share it."

If that sounds manipulative, that's because it is. All advertising is, of course, but virals have the advantage of not being upfront about it. Another
advantage over TV spots? No censorship from the Federal Communications Commission.

"You can take the gloves off a bit and get really creative," Savas says.

One example of the racy virals making the rounds on the Internet is a video for the cleaner Xtra-Pine (www.cleaninghunk.com), which features a pool-boy type getting a suburban mom all hot and bothered by cleaning her floors while flashing his abs.

"It's getting a lot of (Web) traffic," Sweet says.

Another successful - though much less suggestive - viral campaign targeted at women was launched by Dove soap. It features video "Webisodes" starring "Desperate Housewives" star Felicity Huffman being morphed into "TV classics" such as "The Brady Bunch." Dove's campaign also has a TV component, but it directs consumers to the Web site for the complete videos.

The problem with Internet ads, according to many in the industry, is short shelf life.

"It used to be that a marketer would produce three TV spots a year and just run the hell out of them," King says. "That model, in an interactive world where you're competing with so much content, just doesn't work anymore.

"That, and the use of DVRs, is making it really tough."

A few marketers have tried to find a way to lure DVR owners to watch ads. During the Winter Olympics, for instance, KFC ran an ad that allowed viewers to access a hidden message if they played it back slowly on a digital recorder. The prize: a free Buffalo Snacker chicken sandwich.

"That's what you'll see more of in the 30-second commercial - more targeted, smarter, interactive," King says. "You're already seeing that some in digital cable ads, where at the end of a 30-second spot, it will say to go to Channel 232 or whatever to see a three-minute informercial on the product."

Then again, that's assuming the viewer is even watching the 30-second spot. That's why Lent, whose firm has done the Bacardi ads and a recent Web campaign for Howard Stern, is pessimistic about TV as an advertising vehicle.

"(The TV ad) may not be dead, but it's definitely on its way to purgatory now," Lent says. "It's seen its day. Eyeballs are on the Web."

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The adzapping capability of digital video recorders such as these stockpiled by Comcast is changing the face of advertising. *Sacramento Bee file, 2004 / Anne Chadwick Williams*

This online ad for Xtra-Pine household cleaner -- unencumbered by FCC regulations -- is one example of the growing use of "viral" campaigns. [www.cleaninghunk.com](http://www.cleaninghunk.com)