

Erin Copple Smith
Media & Cultural Studies
University of Wisconsin—Madison

The current season of *Project Runway*, the series' last on its originating network Bravo, has made great use of several promotional techniques. In the August 6, 2008 episode, the designers were asked to create outfits Olympic athletes could wear during the Opening Ceremonies. The episode that aired on August 13, 2008 featured *Lipstick Jungle* star Brooke Shields, and the designers constructed an outfit for Shields to wear in an episode of the NBC series. In the August 27, 2008 episode, designers used Saturn car parts to craft "wearable" ensembles, which were then judged by Hollywood stylist Rachel Zoe. Anyone familiar with the NBC-Universal conglomerate and its various current holdings will recognize the promotional strategies of sponsorship, integrated advertising and cross-promotion in these examples. Two days after the Olympics challenge, NBC (and its various affiliated cable networks, including Bravo) would begin airing seventeen days of Olympics coverage. *Lipstick Jungle's* home network, NBC, is a sister to Bravo. As for Saturn and Rachel Zoe, the former is a longtime sponsor of *Project Runway*, and the latter was set to premiere a new reality series on Bravo on September 8.

These examples from *Project Runway* are only a few in a large body of evidence that networks are increasingly interested in maximizing the cross-promotional potential of their products. In an era characterized by a proliferation of viewing options for audiences, as well as increased consumer control over the media they encounter, cross-promotion seems like a logical approach to ensuring that your products stay fresh in the minds of viewers. As viewers have the ability to skip traditional advertising spots during commercial breaks, and use their remotes to traverse upwards of 500 channels, the old models simply don't work as well as they used to...or do they? Indeed, although the traditional thirty-second ad spot does seem somewhat imperiled, broadcasting's oldest promotional tactics (sponsorship and integrated advertising) are thriving.

The *Project Runway* examples underscore the continued success of these strategies. The series has long made excellent use of corporate sponsors who, in exchange for offering their products and services for participants' use (or as prizes), receive advertising time audiences simply cannot avoid without turning the episode off. Sponsors over *Project Runway's* five seasons have included Banana Republic, *Elle* magazine, Bluefly.com, Mood Fabrics, Tresemme hair products, L'Oreal Paris, and Saturn, among others. The fact that, as a fan, I was able to compile that list without thinking too hard about it demonstrates the success of these sponsorship agreements. Although audiences might use their DVRs to fast forward through the breaks, or their remote controls to channel surf over the traditional ad spots, the promotional

opportunities granted through sponsorship are incredibly valuable. After all, viewers simply cannot miss the fact that each week the designers' models visit the Tresemme hair salon and the L'Oreal Paris make-up room before hitting the runway. Indeed, any fan of the series would be able to rattle off that very line (used in every episode) without trouble. That close aligning between product and popular series provides sponsors with not only a greater amount of exposure, but a greater guarantee of remaining in the minds of audiences by being inextricably linked with the series itself.

Remembering that in the post-network era we must consider not networks but conglomerates when investigating business decisions, the strategy of cross-promotion seems a likely extension of the logics of product integration. In a television universe featuring an immense number of programming options for viewers, conglomerates wishing to keep their own products at the forefront have their work cut out for them. By promoting programming within other programming, conglomerates are able to maximize exposure while minimizing expense. Sending Rachel Zoe to appear on *Project Runway* does not cost anyone money, but it gives Zoe—and her upcoming series—a great deal of exposure to an audience already interested in fashion, that which celebrity stylist Zoe herself is peddling. Likewise, including the Olympics or NBC's *Lipstick Jungle* as part of a challenge is essentially free to both network and conglomerate, but promises immense benefits in terms of publicity for these family products.

Interestingly, the promotional strategies most utilized in the post-network era strongly resemble the strategies from broadcasting's earliest years—albeit with a slightly different bent. Sponsorship and integrated advertising (the logics of which form the basis of cross-promotional strategies) are not new, but their particular uses within the contemporary television industry reveal not only the characteristics of the era, but also the tactics of media conglomerates.