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## Industry shake-up

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Scouring the Internet for stories, the disruptive media unit in Ketchum's interactive strategies division came across an interesting eBay item.

Short on cash for her upcoming nuptials, 23-year-old Virginia Beach, VA, hairdresser Kelly Gray was auctioning a spot in her bridal party.

Chris Kooluris, disruptive media specialist at Ketchum, immediately shopped the item around to various clients, but got no serious takers. That is, until he asked Greg Artkop.

Earlier in 2008, Artkop, director of corporate communication for the Dr Pepper Snapple Group, issued a mandate to Ketchum to come up with creative ways of mining the new media landscape.

“I want to make our brands news, not just get on the news,” he says. “I want interviews on *Good Morning America*, not just standing outside the window dressed like a can of Dr Pepper. I want us in the studio.” Ketchum entered what ultimately was the winning \$5,700 bid in Gray's auction.

“When we called to tell Kelly we were giving her \$10,000, which was our budget, *Good Morning America* was in her home filming her tearful reaction,” Kooluris says. “We didn't know they'd be there.” The story was later picked up by *Today*.

“Do you know how hard it is to get *GMA* and *Today* coverage, plus 300 other broadcast hits – all for just \$10,000? That's disruptive PR,” he explains.

Coined by Kooluris and Nick Ragone, SVP and client development director at Ketchum, “disruptive PR” is literally a disruption of the traditional PR model. Instead of engineering an original campaign, pitching hundreds of outlets for a handful of hits, the firm backs the brand into an existing story.

In Internet-speak, they are mining for memes – concepts or catchphrases spread virally across the Web – hoping to staple the brand on as they bubble up.

“We live in a fractured world where you may not have millions of people following a meme, but those that do can create a sensation,” Ragone says.

This technique is not unique to Ketchum, but the firm is branding its approach, with a four-member disruptive PR unit. And in Dr Pepper, it has a very enthusiastic client.

“They call it disruptive PR; I call it punk PR,” Artkop says. “Whatever you call it, the key to success is people who understand how to identify news and how to tie it to our brands.”

Dr Pepper Snapple Group is the third-largest refreshment beverage business in North America. It produces more than 50 brands, including 7UP, A&W, Sunkist, Hawaiian Punch, Canada Dry, and Venom.

Its brand pyramid includes such attributes as personality, confidence, adventurous, music, individuality, Artkop says – an identity which lends itself to a disruptive approach.

For example, on March 26, Dr Pepper promised to give everyone in America a free soda if Axl Rose released the ridiculously long-awaited Guns N' Roses album “Chinese Democracy.” Well, everyone except estranged former GNR guitarists Slash and Buckethead.

When the album finally came out on November 23, the Web site offering online coupons was flooded with responses, crashing the server. The company had to extend what was supposed to be a one-day offer to November 24.

At the time of Dr Pepper's March announcement, Axl Rose issued a statement on Gunsroses.com, which said the band was “happy to have the support of Dr Pepper.” But when fans reportedly had trouble accessing the online coupons, his lawyer sent a letter to the company, alleging “unauthorized use and abuse of their publicity and intellectual property rights” and demanding it apologize to fans with full-page ads in major newspapers. The situation was as yet unresolved at press time.

The effort generated an avalanche of Web noise Dr Pepper measures in various ways.

“We measure content and context, not pure impressions, since they can be so subjective,” Artkop says. “We strive to help internal customers understand that all impressions aren't equal. This way we can get 250 million and 50 million impressions and still illustrate our success.”

The team also measures how these tactics impact customer requests for products.

“Earlier this year, we put out a release regarding a sponsor relationship naming Dallas Cowboy Terrell Owens the chief mayhem officer for our new energy drink, Venom,” he adds. “PR was the only communication happening at that time and we closed several distribution deals with major national retailers as a result of the coverage.”

Alas, disruptive PR isn't for everyone. “It depends on the brand and the news hook,” Artkop says. “When it doesn't work, we don't do it. Not every company has the brands or the stomach for [such] outreach. But once you gain support at all levels of a company, the sky's the limit.”