

Look out! Burger King is watching!



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CONSUMER WATCH

Advertising has been around in some form practically since the dawn of civilization. As long as there have been people with something to sell, they've tried to figure out ways to get people to buy it. With each wave of technological innovation, advertisers have sought to use them to create demand for products.

But never before in human history has it been possible to reach so many people so easily. Technology has given advertisers an unprecedented level of reach into our daily lives in ways never thought possible. But at what point does advertising cross the line from being ultra-smart to just being plain creepy?

Imagine this scenario, which has already happened: You're relaxing comfortably on your couch, watching your favorite TV show after a long day at work. Nearby, your new Google Home device sits patiently on a table. As the show cuts to commercial, you hear a Burger King commercial. But this ad's different.

"You're watching a 15-second Burger King ad, which is unfortunately not enough time to explain all the fresh ingredients in the Whopper sandwich," notes the Burger King employee as he urges the camera closer. "But I got an idea. OK Google, what is the Whopper burger?" Immediately, your Google Home device awakens, and starts reading the "Whopper" Wikipedia entry (which has reportedly been edited to be more descriptive).

Burger King is being praised and panned at the same time for exploiting the very features that make search-assistant devices such as Google Home, Amazon Echo and a host of smartphone apps so convenient: they respond to certain voice commands. For several months, people have been reporting that these devices have been inadvertently triggered by ads and TV shows, prompting "idea" light bulbs to pop up in the minds of ad agency copywriters. Why not use that expensive TV ad time to cross the proverbial "fourth wall" which separates the actor from the audience? Perhaps it was just a matter of time.

Madison Avenue and the online world in general seem to be having trouble coming up with a consensus on the ad. The Verge (a tech news website owned by Vox Media) called the ad "... horrible, genius, infuriating, hilarious, and maybe very poorly thought-out."

The Verge also pointed out the project's Achilles' heel: Relying on Wikipedia is fraught with danger. As every eighth-grader knows, Wikipedia is sub-

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ject to editing by pretty much anybody and is generally forbidden for use as a primary source for school research reports. Since it's crowdsourced, people with nefarious intentions towards the establishment (or Burger King in particular) could edit the entry so it says anything they want it to say (including the gross and ridiculous). In fact, that has already occurred numerous times since the ad first started running on April 12 — before Wikipedia locked the site for further editing. Since then, Google and Burger King have been engaged in a sort of geeky arms race, with Google initially blocking the device from reading the ad, and Burger King trying to get around it.

We've also seen a lot of news in recent

months regarding Google Home and other devices; one Amazon Echo device was listed in a search warrant during an Arkansas murder investigation. Potentially, privacy advocates worry, these and similar devices could record a lot of things.

Regardless of whether this ad is successful, it's generated a lot of coverage for Burger King, Google Home, Wikipedia and others involved, along with a lot of questions to be answered. Just how far can (or should) advertisers be allowed to invade our homes? What is the responsibility of tech companies to ensure customers' privacy and rights?

Perhaps we've crossed an invisible barrier, inconceivable just a generation ago; the future of advertiser-customer interaction may have changed in ways we can't imagine.

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