



TV ads now affordable for pizzerias

By Steve Coomes Senior Editor

For most small pizza companies, TV advertising is a marketing pipedream. Even with comparably lower rates offered by cable TV companies, spreading the word through the tube is too costly for companies struggling to make themselves known in a marketplace saturated by big competitors' messages.

Until now.

Web-based technology developed by Los Angeles-based Spot Runner, a TV ad production and media buying firm, is making professionally produced TV commercials accessible to small-budget operators who could not afford them before. Its customers access spotrunner.com to find thousands of stock commercials — yes, including many for the pizza business — that can be customized to include an operator's own specific audio messages and graphics.

The site also guides users to make media buys based on specific markets — as close as targeting specific zip codes — demographics and programming that best addresses their customer base. For a fraction of the cost of using a production company and a media buyer, Spot Runner gets an operator's message on the small screen.

"What we wanted to do was automate that process and bring down the cost and complexity of it to a level that any pizza shop owner could use and afford," said Rosabel Tao, vice president of communication for Spot Runner. "By putting it on the Internet, it takes so much of the cost out of

it. ... It also allows you to see an online library of thousands of ads you can choose to best represent your business."

The service also caters to large companies by working with franchisors to establish a secure online portal contain-

ing a library of TV ad templates franchisees can select for their own marketing efforts. The ads would be approved by the franchisor, but franchisees are allowed to customize them with their own information, content and images, and create and buy media plans.

"That allows the parent company to maintain the brand and the images, and it keeps franchisees from creating ads that may not meet the corporation's standards," Tao said. "The local franchisee gets to decide who he's

going to target in his own neighborhood. It let's them pick what they think works best."

Is TV the best advertising?

David Fields, managing director of Ascendant Consulting, a management consulting firm in Ridgefield, Conn., said he never recommends TV advertising for small operators. Not only is the investment too high, he said reaching more than a few miles beyond the walls of a one-to-five unit

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— David Fields,
Managing Director,

company rarely is fruitful. “

TV ads are sexy, but that doesn't mean they're smart marketing,” Fields said. “You should base your advertising on the best way to target your audience. The truth is it's very hard to purchase targeted media efficiently. It's even more so with TV ads.”

Fields said he'd not heard of Spot Runner, but he admitted he was intrigued by the fact that it's automated and affordable.

“If there's new technology out there, why not give it a try?” he said.

Still, he advised operators of any size business to test and measure their media efforts to ensure they work. “If you can get a solid ROI on it and it's right for your market, give it a shot. But don't do it just because it's cheap. For the pizza operator, that's like saying I'm going to put canned fruit on my pizza because that's the stuff I can get cheap. It might be cheap, but it's not what people want.”

As vice president of marketing for Steak & Ale in Plano, Texas, Flynn Dekker uses Spot Runner's media buying capabilities only; its creative firm handles ad production for the 61-unit chain. By cutting out the media buyer with an automated service, Dekker said the company saves a lot of money.

Dekker also sees Spot Runner's value from the perspective of an independent operator. When he was growing up, “My family had a one-store operation. So I know that those operators don't have all the resources (bigger) players do. Spot Runner produces professional material that allows you to be on par with someone much larger than you.”

Tao said operators who aren't TV-ad savvy often don't understand how affordable TV time can be. Spot Runner ads, she said, can be customized for as little as \$500, and prime-time slots can be as inexpensive as \$100 for certain shows.

“In most markets, you'd pay more for a full-page newspaper ad than you would for a well-targeted ad campaign that our system could put together,” she said.

Make sure it works

Thomas Bridge, chief executive officer of Media Management Inc. (MMI), a TV advertising audit firm in St. Louis, said buying ads that draw customers is only part of the effort required to ensure a good purchase. The other key is to make certain an operator gets the advertising he pays for. MMI's customers typically are large chains who've invested millions in ad campaigns that are so large, tracking their many placements is overly cumbersome.

“You don't want your kids grading their own algebra, right? In the same way, don't just trust that the ads you bought were run the way you wanted,” Bridge said. “If an operator is buying what he feels is prime-time TV space, but he's really getting his ads run in the afternoon, that's an issue.”

Since smaller operators neither need nor can afford a firm like his, he suggests hiring a small ad agency to help with all TV ad purchases.

“Hire an agency in your market that subscribes to small market data,” such as Nielsen ratings. “If they go with someone who has the ratings data and the media-buying expertise, it will go a long way to ensuring their money's well spent.”