

March Madness marketers run the ambush route

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Savvy marketers are finding low-budget ways to digitally link their brands with the upcoming college basketball championship, but without paying huge ad or sponsorship fees.



(Photo: Hormel Foods)

In basketball, they call it the trick shot.

In marketing, they call it the ambush.

Even with March Madness — the National Collegiate Athletic Association Men's Basketball Championship — just getting under way, several savvy marketers already are trying to get a digital piece of it without the huge expense of sponsorship or in-game advertising.

Such familiar brands as Pizza Hut, Hormel's Spam and even the Hooters chain are trying to link with the social and cultural buzz of the tournament — but are carefully stepping around any legal issues by avoiding the use of trademarked terms such as "March Madness" or "Final Four" in their marketing.

As the price of sponsorship and advertising grows, it creates incentives to ambush market, says Jon Swallen, chief research officer at Kantar Media. "I call that smart marketing."

While the NCAA won't comment on specific marketers it believes infringe on its trademark, the amount of ambush marketing "has been steady" in the past few years, says Jay Rossello, director of legal affairs.

The costs of sponsorship and of championship game advertising are enormous. One top-tier marketer spent upwards of \$35 million for its NCAA sponsorship, according to an *Adweek* estimate, and 30-second ad slots during the men's basketball championship game on CBS could reach a record \$1.4 million.

No wonder the ambushers are out in force. They are:

- **Giving away pizzas.** Pizza Hut is offering college basketball fans, who sign up in advance, the chance to win a coupon for a free medium pizza with one topping (\$8 value) if all four No. 1 seeds in the tournament advance to the semi-finals in Atlanta.

Never mind that Pizza Hut is not a sponsor or in-game advertiser. "We are not trying to pull the wool over anyone's eyes," says Caroline Masullo, director of digital marketing. "We consider this to be smart marketing."

- **Trying to go viral.** Spam has posted on YouTube a video of a goofy character, "Sir Can A Lot," who runs around screaming that he can't get over "the madness of March." It's using the video to target fans on social media.

"The 'madness of march' video was created because we looked at March and figured that would be trending," says Nicole Behne, senior brand manager.

- **Creating buzz.** Hooter's is offering downloadable deals during the tournament that it's dubbed Hooters Hooky basketball coupons. Among the offerings: free fried pickles. "We decided to be the official sponsor," says marketing chief Dave Henninger, "for the passion of watching college basketball tournaments."