

MOVIES & TV

The Strange World of Product Placement and Its Effects on Filmmakers



By Alyssa Miller June 27, 2022

Viewers have a strange relationship with product placement—but how does this affect filmmakers, too?

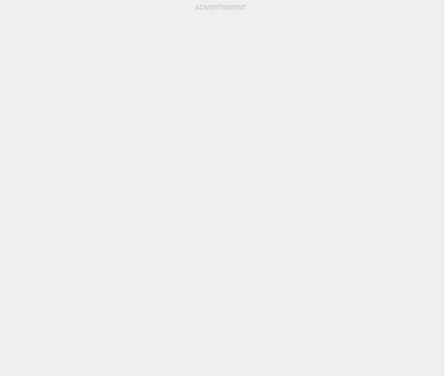
I first became aware of ads in films when I sat down to watch *Wayne's World* for the first time. Wayne (Mike Myers) and Garth (Dana Carvey) obnoxiously staring down the camera while advertizing products will always make me laugh, but I have come to realize that product placement has always been and will continue to be a feature of Hollywood filmmaking.

Product placement in films is either integrated seamlessly into the story or is blatantly obvious, but it still can boost a brand's recognition and association with cool characters. There is a fine line between showing off the product and fading seamlessly into the background. So how does the product find its way into films and TV today, and how does it affect the filmmaking process?



The Birth of Product Placement

The first instance of product placement can be found in Jules Verne's 1873 literary masterpiece, *Around the World in 80 Days*. This book was going to fly off the shelves, and everyone knew this before Verne had even finished writing. Knowing the potential eyes that would read the novel, shipping companies had an idea: Instead of Verne using any shipping company, what if he used a specific one?



No one knows if Verne was paid for the inclusion of the specific shipping company's name in his novel, but it is the first documented example of product placement.

It didn't take long for companies to integrate their products into film. In 1896, the Lumière brothers, often credited as the earliest filmmakers, agreed to feature soap in their film *Washing Day in Switzerland*. Since then, brands have found new and creative ways to offset costs, making product placement a now \$23 billion industry in 2022.



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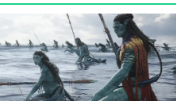
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Who Is in Charge of Product Placement?

Independent product placement agencies like Hollywood Branded connect the brands they represent with screenwriters, producers, set decorators, and prop-masters.

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"Products are part of our lives, they just are," says Stacy Jones, Hollywood Branded chief executive, in an interview with the [New York Times](#).

Items can function as narrative shorthand in scripts, and Jones emphasizes this, saying, "Say you have a Montblanc pen, you automatically think, 'That character has a pen worth hundreds, if not thousands, of dollars.'"

Jones says that the majority of product placement in film and TV happens on a quid-pro-quo basis rather than in exchange for payment. An example would be a car company lending an expensive car to a set in exchange for an appearance in the show, or S'well water might mail a case of bottles to propmasters for consideration.

Of course, there are paid placements as well, particularly with large streaming companies like [Netflix](#) and [HBO](#). It's more frequently an agreement made to reduce production budgets.

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"There's nothing like a \$5,000 espresso setup, free of charge," Ruby Moshlak, who manages props on film and television sets, says.



The Effects of Product Placement

Product placement isn't always easy to manage.

Blatant product placement can hurt a plotline and strain the credibility of the project. A recent example that comes to mind is Netflix's gender-swapped remake *He's All That* and the constant showcasing of bags of Doritos and buckets of KFC chicken that were oddly placed at a high-class teen pool party. This crosses some kind of line that makes us distrust the film due to its commercialization of media.

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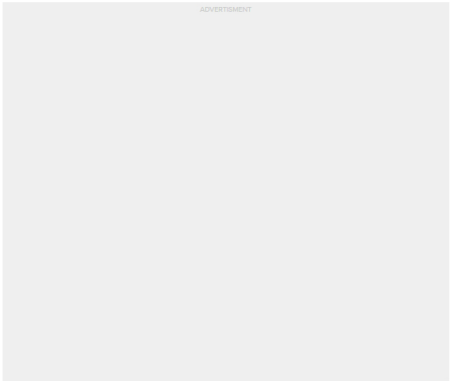


Specific contracts with products also place constraints on creative freedoms. Moshlack told the New York Times, “Two years ago, I worked on a rom-com with really big actors in it, and it was gross. In every scene, there was an in-place money agreement. There was a kitchen appliance that was in a third of the movie for over \$1 million—literally written into the story.”

The success of a product's placement as a marketing strategy relies on how it functions in the story's reality. This became extremely obvious when a character on *And Just Like That* had a heart attack while [riding a Peloton](#), causing the real-life brand's stock to plunge.

On the other side of the coin, the brand Eggo was reinvigorated when featured as a key point in the first season of *Stranger Things*.

Some companies have been aware of how the products used in a story directly affect their sales. Rian Johnson revealed in a [Vanity Fair video](#) in 2020, “Apple, they let you use iPhones in movies, but, and this is very pivotal, if you're ever watching a mystery movie, bad guys cannot have iPhones on camera.”



There are some filmmakers, like Quentin Tarantino, who have made their own faux trademarks that live within their films' universes. Rodofo Rivas writes in his article, “[Tarantinos in the Attic: A brief history of Quentin Tarantino's use of trademarks in storytelling](#),” that this technique “... is now considered a necessary element in the narrative, which is necessary to bring a semblance of reality and continuity to a fictional universe.”

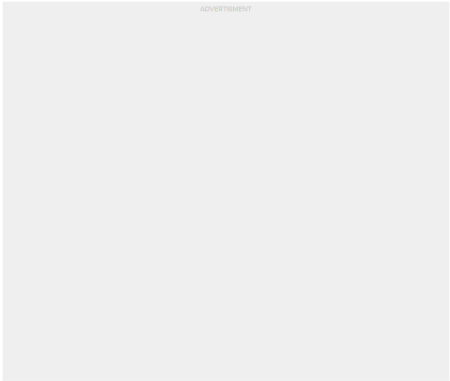
Products are a constant element in our day-to-day lives, and we notice that something is missing when a character pulls out an unmarked box of cereal that is clearly Cheerios, for instance. So we have to find that line of a realistic world that doesn't cross over into blatant commercialism.



Kill Bill, Vol 1 CREDIT: Miramax Films

The Future of Product Placement

Maybe you don't have to worry anymore about what brand is going to be featured in your story (if that is something that you often worry about when staging a set). Tech companies are experimenting with tools to [place products into shows that have already been taped](#) thanks to an AI solution that can swap a bottle of Pepsi for a bottle of Coke.



Essentially, you can end up selling ad space for different markets with your project. Jones notes that this can be tricky to pull off successfully given that there is a specific art to choosing what belongs on screen in the first place, but Amazon disagrees.

[Amazon](#) has been testing a beta version of “virtual product placement” with shows like *Reacher*, *Jack Ryan*, and the *Bosch* franchise.

“It creates the ability to film your series without thinking about all that is required with traditional placements during production,” Henrik Bastin, chief executive of Fabel Entertainment and executive producer of *Bosch: Legacy*, said at a conference in May.



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Product placement has its own sense of realism in the world of filmmaking. You can't completely separate the fictional world from its influence from the real world where brands reign supreme.

What we can do, as filmmakers, is understand the importance of integrating products into a story seamlessly without forcing the audience to stare at a specific item with the label turned towards the camera. Attempt to capture products in a style that makes the world feel grounded in a reality that is naturally messy, or create a story that emphasizes the consumer nature of the story's world. Not only with the brand be satisfied that they are getting their 15 seconds (or less) of screen time, but the audience will appreciate the discreet product placement.

Do you have a least favorite moment of product placement in film or TV? Let us know why it was awful in the comments below! 🗨️

Source: [The New York Times](#)

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