

# 5c

## Hidden Messages: The Growth of Product Placement

---

Keeping track of who is renting our eyeballs is more difficult today as “stealth ads” become embedded into the content of movies, TV shows and video games. Known as *product placement*, it is an increasingly common practice whereby advertisers pay media makers to use or display their products as props yet never reveal this arrangement as a form of advertising. Having students locate product placements in media programs helps them understand the economics of the media they consume. Creating their own product placements for good causes reveals the strategy behind the practice.

**Objectives:** Students will be able to...

1. Identify product placements they see in TV programs and movies.
2. Build awareness of the pervasiveness of advertising in their culture.
3. Develop critical skills necessary to think independently in a media saturated consumer society.

**Correlation With McRel National Standards:**

Language Arts Standards and Benchmarks

- Grades 3-5: (S9/B7)
- Grades 6-8: (S9/B9)
- Grades 9-12: (S9/B4, B10), (S10/B7)

**Materials/Preparation:**

1. VCR & TV
2. Videotape short segments from TV shows or choose scenes from video or DVD movies that have numerous product placements.

**Resource Tip: Brandchannel.com** is a website that tracks brand appearances and product placement in each week’s number one film. An online archive back to 2002 cross-references both brands and movies.

3. Access to Internet or overhead projector.
4. Read the Backgrounder below to help you explain product placement.
5. For more understanding of product placement and its pervasiveness today visit the websites recommended throughout this lesson.

**Teaching Strategies:**

**I. “Stealth” Advertising**

- Begin a discussion about advertising by questioning where we typically see ads. Then challenge students to think about all the places where ads are “hidden.” Ask:
  - ? Where is selling going on without a specific ad or commercial?
  - ? Have you ever seen something that you would consider a hidden ad?
  - ? When you see the specific name of a product in a movie or TV show, do you think that is an ad? Why or why not?
  - ? Have you ever heard the term “product placement?”
- Have students go online to product placement industry web sites to see examples and read how the industry describes product placement.

- Entertainment Resources and Marketing Association (ERMA) is an organization made up of agencies and corporations that provide product placement to the film industry. Their list of members has many product placement agency links:  
[www.erma.org/ermaHome.html](http://www.erma.org/ermaHome.html)

## II. Finding the Ad

- Show short video clips from television programs or movies and have students spot and create a list of the product placements.
- Discuss different ramifications of product placement. Have students wrestle with questions such as:
  1. How can viewers know when a product is used for artistic or narrative reasons and when it is simply a paid product placement?
  2. Who benefits from product placement and who is hurt by it?
  3. Is it lying if money is paid for an ad that is never identified as advertising?
  4. Why are product placements not listed at the end of a TV show or movie?

## III. Placing the Product

- Break students into small groups and have them choose a favorite TV show that all members of the group are familiar with. Then have them select a client organization and create a skit that places a *public service* message for the client – eat healthy, don’t smoke, stay in school, say no to drugs, save the whales, etc. – into the fabric of a typical episode of the show. The challenge is to make their message appear natural and not stand out as an obvious advertisement. For example:
  - If the client were the American Cancer Society (ACS), they may want to get an anti-smoking message on. The product placement could involve having a character die from smoking tobacco, holding a dialogue between characters about the dangers of tobacco, an actor wearing an anti-smoking t-shirt, or placing a “no smoking sign” somewhere in the production set.
- Students can perform their skits for the entire class. The more air time they can create for the client without turning off the audience by appearing to “preach” their message, the more successful is the product placement.

### **Backgrounder: Product Placement**

Product placement is a strategy for businesses and advertisers to get their product, brand name, or service shown within the content and context of a TV show, movie, video game, or other mass media. Product placement allows advertisers to reach millions of viewers and since the product’s appearance seems “natural,” most viewers would not consider it advertising, even though considerable expense and planning were required for the product to appear. As a business practice, product placement is legal, but as long as the process and payment are hidden, the true intent of the message is veiled and ethical questions should be raised.

Products have been placed into TV programs and movies for years, yet the business of product placement really took off in 1982, when Elliot offered *E.T.* a handful of Reese’s Pieces candy. Once the movie was released, sales for Reese’s Pieces shot up 65%. Product placement is now a 1.5 billion dollar a year business that has created special product placement departments at almost every movie studio. Check out *Business Week’s* Product Placement Hall of Fame: [www.businessweek.com/1998/25/b3583062.htm](http://www.businessweek.com/1998/25/b3583062.htm)

The goal of this lesson is not to mobilize students against the practice of product placement but simply to educate students about the increasing use of product placement in almost all entertainment media today. Only when they can “see” product placement and understand its purpose, will they be able to evaluate its influence in their lives and behavior.