

Great British Bake Off's brave stand against the product placement plague

The hugely popular show's nostalgic charm will NOT be tainted by surreptitious advertising



Judges and presenters for The Great British Bake Off - from left, Paul Hollywood, Sandi Toksvig, Noel Fielding and Prue Leith, head of the new series launching on Channel 4

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That the seemingly innocuous Great British Bake Off has provoked much discussion and debate is I suppose evidence of its popularity and a comment on the state of television today.

It is undeniably the sort of reality show that unites young and old in its evocation of a safer, more comfortable time. And it combines this nostalgia with the best of contemporary Britain, too. 2015 Bake Off winner Nadiya Hussain has plainly done a great deal to advance the benefits of multiculturalism.



Nadiya Hussain

Plus it is clearly not Love Island. Bake Off is the antidote to the preening self-absorption and vacuity of other reality shows. It is a competition, yes, but its charm is in quiet, modest endeavour and the pleasure in seeing something created and appreciated.

This is of course something that Channel 4 hopes will seamlessly translate to commercial television now that the show has left the BBC. For many, though, Bake Off has lost its integrity and, more pertinently, its figure head presenters Mel, Sue and the revered Mary Berry.

Mel Giedroyc, Sue Perkins, Mary Berry and Paul Hollywood

Retaining the authenticity of the brand is now a priority for Love productions, the company behind the show. This is probably what was behind the revelation this week that the new series, to be broadcast later this year, would be free from product placement.

As a company insider recently told [the Guardian](#) : “The integrity of Bake Off is sacrosanct to Love. Bake Off has always been made with documentary sensibilities, so the notion of product placement is not a natural one.”

It is an interesting position to take because product placement on UK TV – where companies pay for their merchandise to be featured on screen as part of a particular programme – has increased. It’s no coincidence that the audience’s ability to avoid conventional advertising has also increased.

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Since 2011, when ITV first carried product placement on its flagship magazine show This Morning, the practice has grown practically beyond measure. In that year, ITV cut a deal with Nationwide Building Society ensuring that Coronation Street featured a branded ATM in Dev Alahan’s corner shop. Nationwide reportedly paid around £330,000 a week for the pleasure.

In 2015 Ofcom (Britain’s communications regulator) stated that it had no idea how much overall product placement was going on in British TV because it didn’t monitor the frequency, whilst in the same year ITV were moved to report that they were “thrilled to have shown more than 4,500 hours of PP”.

As their publicity which tempts potential customers makes clear: “We integrate your brand seamlessly into our most engaging programmes, creating targeted exposure for advertisers to influence and inspire huge audiences.”

But viewers don't like product placement...

Which is all very well – but it leads to the suspicion that the creativity of writers, directors and producers may be compromised by the presence of brands. The concern is the need to satisfy the requirements of a company by reference to a product will alter the narrative flow of a programme in a detrimental way.

This is precisely the criticism levelled at reality shows in particular. In 2013 the X Factor was routinely taken to task by viewers for over emphasising the products of its sponsor, Samsung. In regular episodes contestants were repeatedly shown using Samsung devices whether they were cameras or mobile phones.

More recently, The Only Way is Essex (TOWIE) attracted disapproval for the prominence of Visa cards and logos.

But how else do you pay for TV content?

However much viewers disapprove, though, we have to face the fact that content on commercial television is paid for by advertising money and always has been.

In fact, ITV itself was created in the 1950s not so much because there was public clamour for another TV station but because the post-war period of prosperity demanded a medium upon which a variety of new and exciting products could be advertised. Bluntly, ITV exists to provide an audience to advertisers.

But the historical home of product placement is cinema, and the James Bond franchise is a perfect example of how prevalent the practice is.

2015's Spectre is reported to have 17 different brands eager to be associated with the iconic spy. Heineken, Sony, Bollinger and Omega watches are all easily identifiable should you wish to play Bond branded bingo.

Daniel Craig with a Land Rover Defender in Skyfall

Daniel Craig with a Land Rover Defender in Skyfall

All of this doesn't seem to bother 007 fans too much. Product spotting has become part of the process of Bond viewing and aficionados are well aware of who provides the big bucks necessary to film the spectacular car chases in far flung locations.

[As Daniel Craig said when making Skyfall in 2012](#) : "The simple fact is that, without [product placement], we couldn't do it. It's unfortunate but that's how it is."

But television is different and the success of the Great British Bake Off has been built on its simplicity and freedom from gimmickry.

The introduction of product placement now would only serve to further shatter that illusion and potentially alienate its core following.

So for this move alone we should applaud Channel 4 and Bake Off's production company. Because, as ever, the times they are a' changing. Technology now exists which can "digitally insert branded goods into pre-existing video programmes"!

Imagine a future where it's possible to see an iPhone in I, Claudius. It's a terrifying thought.

*** Dr Jewell is director of undergraduate studies at Cardiff University's School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies.**

* The new series of Great British Bake Off is due to start this autumn at a date yet to be confirmed by Channel 4.

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