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SMALL BUSINESS



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WATCH OUT FOR THE MOVING BILLBOARD: Blake Pollack, left, and Steve Pollack, are the founders of Mobile Vision Marketing. The father-son team began operating the Culver City-based business in March and has since created \$275,000 in revenue.

To Marketers, Drivers are a Captive Audience

Growth in outdoor advertising spurs a father and son to offer movable messages.

BY ALANA SEMUELS
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Blake and Steve Pollack love traffic jams. When there's traffic, people can't help but stare at the advertisements that the Pollacks mount on the sides and backs of big-rigs. The trucks slog up and down Southern

California freeways in the mornings, when the traffic is bad, and travel over surface streets during the day, making more traffic as they try to navigate sharp right turns and hills.

"You can't ignore these ads," said Blake Pollack, the younger half of the father-son partnership behind Mobile Vision Marketing Inc., a Culver City-based company hoping to thrive off renewed interest in outdoor advertising.

As people look for ways to avoid traditional ads on television and radio, advertisers are tracking them down with movable messages. In 2005, billboards and other outdoor ads raked in \$6.3

billion. They have become the fastest-growing advertising form after the Internet, according to the Outdoor Advertising Assn. of America.

The trucks cause traffic on already-crowded city streets, and belch pollution from their diesel engines. But when Blake Pollack is asked whether this might turn off people, he said that the fact that they see the ads is the important thing, regardless of what they think about the trucks.

Companies that want a good return on their advertising investment like the idea that consumers can't click off or fastforward through outdoor ads.



HOW IT WORKS: Clients of Steve Pollack, left, and son Blake choose whether to use an empty truck and tailor the route or place ads on the sides of trucks that run pre-scheduled routes.

“It’s a medium that isn’t controlled by consumers,” said Stephen Freitas, spokesman for the industry group. “You can’t zap it or TiVo it.”

Increasingly clogged roads also lead to more eyeball time on outdoor ads. Nationally, the average commute time to work each day is 25.5 minutes, up three minutes from a decade earlier, the latest census data show.

As a result, more and more companies are opting for messages that inch along with their traffic-jam-trapped targets, the outdoor ad group said. Transportation-based advertising — posted on cars, trucks, trains or buses or displayed in airports and at transit stations — accounts for nearly 20% of outdoor ad revenue.

The Pollacks, who started their business in March, are concentrating on Los Angeles, where people spend an average of 28.9 minutes traveling to work, according to the Southern California Assn. of Governments.

It’s the perfect business venture for the Pollacks. Steve, 58, who owned a textile company for more than 20 years, is familiar with the printing side of the business. The company prints colored graphics on vinyl siding that are then attached to the sides and back of the big-rigs. And Blake, 24, who worked in the film business before starting the company, says he brings creativity to the table.

Mobile Vision Marketing leases trucks and outfits them with global positioning systems to follow the drivers’ routes. Clients then choose whether they want to use an empty truck and tailor the route to a targeted audience or, for less money, put ads on the sides of trucks that run pre-scheduled delivery routes.

Clients pay about \$3,500 for a four-week campaign to put their ads on delivery trucks

running their normal routes and as much as \$25,000 for dedicated trucks, which give clients control of the route. The Pollacks contend that this is a much better investment than a billboard on, say, Sunset Boulevard, which costs more and stays put. The more expensive option is comparable to the cost of a radio advertising campaign or ads on city buses, according to the company.



NO ADHESIVE: Mobile Vision uses a framing system, above, to slide ads in and out instead of adhering them on the sides of trucks.

Radio station KRBV-FM (100.3) — aka “V-100,” formerly known as “The Beat” — used a Mobile Vision gasoline tanker to advertise a free-gas promotion. Marketing director Celessa Batchan said the campaign worked well because the radio station could design a route that targeted the station’s listeners in the Inland Empire and the Valley.

That a radio station, once the go-to place for advertisers, looked to an outdoor advertising company because it could reach a more targeted demographic highlights the lure of the movable message.

But not everyone is enamored with the idea of advertisements traveling the crowded streets of Los Angeles. Standing billboards have long been controversial. A 2002 city ordinance to limit the number of billboards sparked lawsuits from outdoor advertising companies. The resulting settlements were opposed by local activists, who contend that the deals would allow signs to proliferate.

As Americans try to push advertisers away through the use of spam filters, the fast-forward function on their digital video recorders and other methods, the outdoor advertising industry is trying to “jam it down our throats,” said Kevin Fry, president of Scenic America, a Washington-based organization that sees billboards as visual blight. “How much of the public realm do we want to turn over to advertising?”

Hawaii, Alaska, Maine and Vermont have banned billboards, and some local governments around the country have moved to limit or outlaw the signs. There are some sections of freeways throughout California that also are billboard-free because of local ordinances.

To Fry, companies such as Mobile Vision Marketing, which are able to slip past outdoor sign bans, are an indication that billboards are “metastasizing.”

But clients say that this type of in-your-face advertising is one of the only ways to get a message to the consumers who turn off ads when they can.

“In this day and age, there’s so much advertising that you have to do something to stand out from the crowd,” said Eric Lituchy, founder and chief executive of Delightful Deliveries, an Internet-based gift basket retailer that advertised on a Mobile Vision truck. Many visitors to his website said they heard about the company after seeing the truck, Lituchy said.

For now, the Pollacks aren’t worried about the negative aspects of their advertising campaign — the medium is thus far unregulated. Since they started operating in mid-March, the business has generated revenue of \$275,000 with four employees. Further success depends on convincing clients that people will see their ads. In L.A. so far, this hasn’t been very hard to do.

“You cannot miss a 48-foot trailer traveling on the freeway,” Steve Pollack said.

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