Episode Book

EPISODE #6089

Cheap Ads for Two-Person Shops

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SYNOPSIS

A banner plane runs $400–900 an hour, and a city billboard can run tens of thousands for four weeks — neither is priced for a two-person consultancy. So how do you buy high-value attention cheaply, and what unconventional surfaces make people actually stop? Drawing on rate cards, a $6 search-ad stunt that landed two job offers, and the reverse-graffiti defence that got tested in San Francisco, this episode works through the ladder of cheap visibility: remnant inventory, dayparted digital slots, bus benches, coffee sleeves across the road from the conference, and the surfaces you clean instead of cover.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Three passes. It went past three times, and I still couldn't tell you whether it was a gym or a law firm.



Herman

It was a law firm. The phone number was most of the banner.



Corn

Which is a strange use of a plane. Anyway, that plane is more or less where Daniel's question starts. You can rent a banner towed behind an aircraft along a beach, you can rent a billboard on a motorway, and both of them are priced for companies with a marketing department. When we went through the hidden pockets in AI careers, a lot of the answers ended with somebody going independent, and this is the next problem that person has. Daniel's thinking about the small operator, the independent consultant, the two-person shop, and he wants to know how you get high-value advertising space for a fraction of what it normally costs. And beyond that, the unconventional stuff, physical if possible, that makes somebody stop walking. And since the one person in this flat who has spent real money on getting noticed is sitting across the desk from us, Hilbert is in the chair today.



Herman

Herman Poppleberry. I brought rate cards.



Corn

He brought rate cards. He's laminated one of them.



Hilbert

I've laminated the good ones. The plane first, because Daniel mentions it. Herman, what does the plane cost?



Herman

Depends who you ask, and the people you ask are mostly selling it. The beach operators' own guides put it somewhere around four hundred to nine hundred dollars an hour, and a big custom banner over a busy coast can go to around fifteen hundred. Some of them sell it as a day, a two-hour minimum, and that comes out in the thousands.



Corn

Two hours of people squinting upward with one hand over their eyes.



Hilbert

That's the trouble with the plane. You're paying for the sky. The sky is a very large place and almost nobody in it is your customer.



Herman

A billboard isn't cheap either, though the range is enormous. A rural board on a highway can be a few hundred dollars a month. A big bulletin in a major city runs into the tens of thousands for a four-week period.



Hilbert

Which is where the first trick is. Don't ask what the board costs. Ask what's unsold next month.



Herman

Remnant inventory.



Hilbert

A billboard company is a hotel. An empty board on the first of the month earns nothing, the same as an empty room. So a week before the start date, the man at the billboard company is a different man. He is a man with a problem.



Herman

The discounts people quote on remnant space are large, though I'd treat the exact numbers carefully. One digital vendor claims thirty to sixty percent off standard rates. That's a vendor talking about its own product. But the mechanism is real. A board that would otherwise run a public service announcement is worth something to the operator, even at a bad price.



Corn

So the trick is being flexible about where and when. Which a consultant usually is, and a big brand never is.



Hilbert

The big brand has booked its board fourteen months out because somebody's bonus depends on it. You can ring on a Tuesday.



Herman

Corn, would you actually do it, though? Take whatever board is going spare, even if it's on the wrong road?



Corn

No. I'd want the board on the right road, or nothing. A billboard on the wrong road is just a very large business card left on a bus.



Hilbert

He's right, and that's the second trick, which is better than the first. Digital boards have broken the thing into tiny pieces, and you can buy the pieces.



Herman

This is the part that genuinely changed, and it's quite recent in the scheme of things. A digital roadside board rotates. Your ad is one slot in the loop, a few seconds. And there are now self-serve platforms where you buy those slots one at a time. One of them, Blip, calls each showing a blip, seven and a half to ten seconds, and you set a daily budget.



Herman (continued)

Their own sample page for one state has twenty dollars a day buying a bit over five hundred showings.



Corn

Hold on. Twenty dollars.



Herman

Twenty dollars. Under four cents a showing on that example, and it moves with location and time of day.



Corn

That's less than I paid for the coffee I'm about to forget I have.



Hilbert

Now combine it with the right road. You don't want the board all day. You want the board on the road outside one particular business park, between seven forty and eight fifteen, Monday to Thursday, when the people who sign contracts are sitting in traffic with nothing to read.



Herman

Dayparting. And the programmatic side of the industry, the screens bought through an automated exchange, quotes cost per thousand impressions anywhere from a couple of dollars on a big roadside board up to twenty-five on screens inside places, gyms, lifts, that kind of thing. The spread between platforms is wide and nobody measures an impression quite the same way, so I wouldn't take any single number to the bank.



Hilbert

I wouldn't take it to the bank either. I'd take it to the business park.



Corn

There's something slightly sinister about it, though. One board, one road, one window of time, aimed at about four hundred specific commuters.



Hilbert

It's not sinister, Corn, it's a letter. A billboard aimed at one road is a very large letter that you only had to pay to post once.



Herman

The most famous version of this isn't even physical. There was a copywriter in New York, Alec Brownstein, who wanted to work for a handful of creative directors he admired. He worked out that creative directors Google themselves. So he bought search ads on their names. When they typed in their own name, the top result was a message from him asking for a job.



Corn

How much?



Herman

About six dollars, total. He heard back from all but one of them, and he got two job offers.



Corn

Six dollars. The plane costs that before it's left the ground.



Hilbert

The plane costs that to start the engine. And this is what Daniel should take from Brownstein. He didn't advertise to New York. He advertised to five men. Everything good in this business is the same move. Pick the five people, then find the cheapest surface they're guaranteed to look at.

L

Larry

Hello, friends, Larry here, with a true story from a real satisfied customer. Meet Gerald. Gerald was a consultant. Gerald had no visibility. Nobody could see Gerald, not even Gerald's own mother, who walked straight past him at a christening. Then Gerald discovered Personal Blimp, the inflatable advertising blimp that clips to your belt and floats three metres above your head wherever you go! Within a week, Gerald had impressions. Within a month, Douglas had so many impressions he had to hire a second Douglas just to receive them. Today Douglas floats to every meeting, the blimp does the talking, and Douglas has not been indoors since March, because Personal Blimp does not fit through doors, and that, friends, is what we call exclusivity. Personal Blimp. Be seen. Be seen from the next town.



Corn

Does it come in a smaller size? For a sloth, say. Below the ceiling.



Herman

Corn, you'd spend the whole day tethered to a lamp post, upside down, and the blimp would still be getting more meetings than you.



Hilbert

The vehicle. Everybody's first idea is the vehicle, and they get it backwards.



Herman

The vehicle wrap numbers are actually striking, with an asterisk. There's a Three M study from two thousand eight, three months in San Francisco, that put fleet graphics at about forty-eight cents per thousand impressions. Outdoor came in at three fifty-six, and television at twenty-three seventy.



Corn

The asterisk being who makes the vinyl.



Herman

That's the asterisk. Three M sells the film. It's an old study and a self-interested one, and the impression counts the wrap industry still quotes, tens of thousands a day, come from the same kind of source. I believe the direction of it. A wrapped van in a city is seen by a lot of people for not very much money. I don't believe the decimal places.



Hilbert

Here's where they get it backwards. They wrap their own car. A consultant's car spends nine hours a day in a car park behind a building, facing a wall. You don't wrap your car. You find the car that's already where you want to be seen and you rent its side.



Herman

Rideshare drivers, delivery vans, that sort of thing. There are companies brokering exactly that now.



Hilbert

Or the coffee van that parks outside the business park every morning. Ask the man. He's got a van and an overdraft. Fifty a month and your name goes on the side facing the queue.



Corn

The queue being the only group of people in any office who are standing still, awake, and have nothing to look at for four minutes.



Hilbert

The bench, then. Same queue, better seat.



Herman

Bus bench advertising is wonderfully cheap. The ranges quoted are something like seventy-five to six hundred dollars per bench per month. A self-storage operator wrote up paying around a hundred and twenty a bench in his city, and a real estate broker had



Herman (continued)

about twenty benches for about three thousand dollars a month.



Corn

Herman, you've gone a bit dreamy.



Herman

I've always liked the bench. It's democratic.



Corn

You've never sat on one. You stand at the bus stop like you're waiting to be photographed.



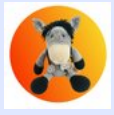
Herman

Strategic positioning. Hilbert, why the bench, though? Over a digital slot at four cents?



Hilbert

Because the bench is there for a year, and so are you. The digital slot is for when you want the man to see you this Thursday. The bench is for the man who walks past it every day for a year and one Tuesday rings you without knowing why he knows the name.



Herman

Mere exposure, the psychologists call it. Familiarity breeding liking, at least up to a point.



Hilbert

I call it a bench.



Corn

We're well into the reasonable part. Daniel asked for unconventional, and so far you've told us to ring a billboard company on a Tuesday.



Hilbert

That's the ladder. It gets worse from here. The next rung is the conference.



Herman

The booths.



Hilbert

Never the booth. A booth at a decent industry conference is thousands for a table, a cloth and a man asking whether you've validated your parking. You don't go in. You go across the road.



Corn

Across the road.



Hilbert

Every conference has a café across the road. At ten twenty, three hundred people come out of a keynote and discover that the conference coffee is a tank of something brown. You've already paid the café for the morning. Every cup that goes out has your sleeve on it. Every person in the conference is carrying your name back into the conference, in their hand, warm.



Herman

The sleeves themselves cost very little. One printer lists plain paper sleeves at about eighteen pence each, with a minimum order of five hundred. That's just printing, though. What the café wants for the morning is between you and the café.



Corn

And the conference organisers, who sold the booths, presumably love this.



Hilbert

The conference organisers are not the café's landlord.



Herman

There's a real thing called ambush marketing, and big sporting events have rules and sometimes laws against it inside their zones. For a mid-sized industry conference in a hotel, I'd be surprised if anyone could stop you selling coffee across a public road. I'd also be surprised if they ever invited you to speak.



Hilbert

They wouldn't. You'd have to buy a booth next year. Then you're the one with the cloth. Next rung. The pavement.



Corn

Chalk.



Hilbert

Chalk is for children and estate agents. You want the clean ad.



Herman

Reverse graffiti. This is a lovely one. You take a dirty pavement or a grimy wall, lay a stencil on it, and pressure-wash through the stencil. The message is made of clean. You haven't added anything. You've removed dirt in a particular shape.



Corn

So the advertising is technically a public service.



Herman

That was more or less the defence, and it got tested. When companies did it in San Francisco, officials asked them to wash the ads off.



Corn

Wash off the washing.



Herman

Which they couldn't really do, apart from washing the rest of the pavement. Leeds council went after one of the practitioners too. The founder of one of the firms that does it described it as not necessarily illegal, but also not necessarily legal, which I think is the most honest description of a business model I've heard all year.



Hilbert

It's the one I'd actually do. Outside one office. The pavement between the car park and the front door, the bit everybody looks at because they're looking at their feet. Your name in clean, with nothing else, and it fades over about a month, which suits a consultant. Nobody wants a consultant forever.



Corn

Hilbert, you've been sensible for twenty minutes. Daniel asked for bizarre. He specifically asked for things that might hurt your reputation.



Hilbert

I've been coming to it. The roof.



Herman

The roof?



Hilbert

Everybody looks up for the plane. Nobody thinks about the people looking down. There are flight paths into every airport that go over flat roofs, warehouses and so on, at a height where you can read large letters out of a window seat. Rent a warehouse roof under the approach and paint your name on it. Every passenger in seat A on a Monday morning flight is somebody travelling for work, bored, holding a phone they're not allowed to use yet.



Corn

Your target audience is people who just closed the window blind.



Hilbert

Half of them don't. I never do. Next, the boat.



Corn

A boat. On an advertising budget.



Hilbert

The plane goes past a family on the beach in a few seconds and it's gone. A rowing boat goes at the speed of a cousin. Same beach, same banner, and you're in front of the same family for the whole afternoon. It costs you a dinghy and a strong cousin.



Herman

I'd want to check the maritime rules on that before anyone puts a cousin in the water. They vary a lot by country and I don't know them well.



Corn

The cousin's union will have a view.



Hilbert

Higher rung. Advertise on your competitor's board.



Herman

You can't buy someone else's board.



Hilbert

You can buy the slot after it. The digital board rotates. Your competitor bought a slot with a question on it. Struggling with your AI rollout. You buy the slot that follows it, and yours says, Yes. Then your name.



Corn

That's actually quite good, and I'm annoyed about it.



Herman

On the self-serve platforms you mostly can't guarantee the order of the loop, I think. You'd be relying on luck, or on buying a lot of slots so the odds work in your favour. But I've seen brands do the answering-the-other-billboard thing deliberately, with neighbouring boards, and it does get written about.



Hilbert

The top rung. This is the one Daniel meant by reputation.



Corn

Go on.



Hilbert

The protest. You hire eight people to picket your own office with signs. Too efficient. Stop him, he's automating everything. Bring back the spreadsheet.



Herman

Oh, no.



Hilbert

Local news loves a protest. Photographers love a sign. And every sign is a testimonial nobody has to sign their name to.



Herman

Hilbert, that one goes wrong the moment one of the eight posts about the job online. Then the story is a consultant who paid people to pretend to hate him, and that's the story forever. The rest of the ladder fails quietly. This one fails on the front page.



Corn

He's not wrong. Although I'd say a consultant whose fake protesters are sloppy enough to post about it has also just demonstrated his project management.



Hilbert

That's why I put it at the top. It's the one I wouldn't do.



Herman

You put it at the top of a ladder of things you would do.



Hilbert

It's a ladder, Herman. Somebody has to stand at the top and not climb it. Corn, can I ask you something?



Corn

Go ahead.



Hilbert

Does a sheep count as a vehicle?



Corn

For the purposes of the wrap?



Hilbert

For the purposes of the wrap. I'm renting the left side of a sheep. Her name's Margaret. She lives in Colm Prendergast's field, which runs along the bypass at the bottom of my road, between the roundabout and the garden centre. Every car that comes off the roundabout has about nine seconds of Margaret. I worked that out with a stopwatch from the garden centre car park. Colm gives me the left side for forty euro a week, and I've had a waxed coat made for her with my name ironed onto it in white. The trouble is that the good grass is by the hedge. So Margaret spends most of the day facing the hedge, and the left side of a sheep facing a hedge faces the field. Colm's position is that the field side is also a side, and that I didn't specify a road-facing side. He's right. I didn't. So now I pay for a bale a week to be put down by the fence, so she'll eat facing the traffic, and the bale's on my invoice as well. Then Colm sold the right side.



Herman

To whom?



Hilbert

A driving school. Mulcahy's. So now in the morning, when she's at the bale, the road sees me, and in the afternoon, when she's gone back to the hedge, the road sees Mulcahy's. Last Thursday a woman rang me to book a lesson. I don't drive. I gave her Mulcahy's number. I don't know what Mulcahy's does when they get my calls. Colm's brother-in-law has started doing Margaret's bookings for him, he took her to a christening in a hall two towns over on Sunday, she stood at the back for photographs, and I'm told my side was facing the font for most of it, which I hadn't agreed to and which I'm not being charged for, so I've let it go. The driving school has now written to Colm saying Margaret faces my way more than theirs, which is true, because of the bale. There's a meeting about it on Friday in Colm's kitchen. I've been told to bring my own chair.



Corn

You're dayparting a sheep.



Hilbert

I'm dayparting a sheep. And losing the afternoons. But that isn't the part I wanted to say. The part I wanted to say is Aoife. She's Colm's niece, she's fourteen, and she gets off the school bus at ten past four at the garden centre stop. Every day since the start of the month she's walked out into that field and turned Margaret round to face the road. Nobody asked her. Nobody pays her. I give her five euro on a Friday because I found out. A sheep doesn't want to face a road, Herman, a sheep wants to face the hedge, so she does it again, and again. On the second Saturday she turned Margaret nineteen times, and her phone says she walked eleven point four kilometres doing it, in a field about the size of this flat and the one below it. She showed me the screen. She's had a word with the driving school about it too, because she turns Margaret the same direction every time, and it's my direction.



Herman

That's a dreadful conflict of interest, for the record. She's working for both sides of the sheep.



Hilbert

She's working for the sheep. I priced the plane before all this, by the way. A man with a Cessna and a hook on the coast quoted me six hundred and ten euro an hour, two hours minimum, Saturdays extra, and I didn't. I'd have had about forty minutes over the strand and nobody would have known who I was by the Monday. Everybody on the bypass knows Margaret. Half of them know Aoife. She does it properly, every day, in the rain, and she's never once turned the sheep the wrong way.



Corn

Nineteen turns. In a field.



Herman

Which is a better ratio than the plane, honestly. The plane was going to give him two hours of sky for twelve hundred euro, and the girl gets him every afternoon for five.



Corn

There's a version of everything you've told us today that's about the girl in the field, though. The remnant board only works if you've got someone who rings on the Tuesday. The bench only works because somebody walks past it for a year. The cheap end of this business isn't cheap because the space is worse. It's cheap because you're paying in attention instead, yours or somebody's, turning the sheep back round every afternoon.



Herman

And the expensive end is what you pay when you'd rather nobody had to. The plane, the bulletin in the city, the booth with the cloth. You're buying the right to not think about it. For a big company that's a reasonable trade. For Daniel's consultant, the thinking is the one thing they've got more of than money, so they might as well spend it. Our thanks, as ever, to Hilbert Flumingtop for producing this one.



Corn

This has been My Weird Prompts. You'll find every episode at my weird prompts dot com.



Herman

We'll be back soon.