

Modern Family Product Placement

KEVIN SANDLER

Abstract: Although television is overwhelmingly a commercial medium, audiences still expect boundaries between commercials and program content, particularly in narrative programming. Kevin Sandler examines an interesting case of product integration: the controversy that surrounded an episode of the hit sitcom *Modern Family*, the narrative of which conspicuously centered on Apple's iPad just days before that device became available for purchase.

"Game Changer," a first season episode of ABC's *Modern Family* (2009–present), begins with Phil Dunphy all set to wake up early the next day—his birthday—and get in line at 6 a.m. at the Apple Store to buy an iPad. "It's like Steve Jobs and God got together to make this the best birthday ever!" he says. His wife Claire, thrilled to have a handle on what her husband Phil actually wants for his birthday (her previous idea was light-up barbecue tongs), offers to camp out at the Apple store to get him the iPad. Alas, she falls asleep on the couch, and the iPad is sold out before she arrives. Claire subsequently enlists her two daughters, Haley and Alex, to "Facebook, chat, buzz, bling" their way to an "iPad thingy." In the meantime, Claire hears about a new shipment of iPads at the Apple Store, only to get thrown out of line with her brother Mitchell (who retrieved her wallet from home) for fighting with a man who cut in front of them. Ultimately, though, Phil's son Luke obtains an iPad by emailing all of his father's "geek friends," claiming that Phil is dying and his final wish is to get an iPad. The episode concludes with Phil getting his iPad and celebrating his birthday with his family. Happy ending achieved, narrative equilibrium restored.

Prior to the airing of "Game Changer" (March 31, 2010), *Modern Family* had received nearly universal acclaim from critics and fans since its debut in September 2009. The show was the highest-rated new comedy of the broadcast season, and eventually won the Emmy Award for Best Comedy Series later that August. By its second season, *Modern Family* had become the most watched scripted

broadcast series in the 18–49 demographic.¹ In fact, “Game Changer” drew the series’ biggest number in that key demo in almost two months—a 3.8 rating (with each point translating into 1.3 million viewers).²

In what proved to be merely a temporary setback to the series’ reputation, a heated debate ensued in the news media and blogosphere regarding the episode’s iPad-centric nature. Two distinct camps emerged: one side considered the iPad integration to be unforgivable and shameless, a profit-driven partnership of *Modern Family*’s production company, Twentieth Century Fox Television, the ABC network, and Apple. Another faction found it realistic and convincing, a savvy creator-fueled storyline that made sense within the show’s fictional world. Characterizing these divergent positions was a widely circulated pair of posts appearing on the “The Live Feed” blog of the *Hollywood Reporter* that involved television editor James Hibberd and *Modern Family* co-creator (with Steve Levitan) Christopher Lloyd. Hibberd suggested that “the iPad scenes felt like an advertisement,” the end result being that ABC “water[ed] down a brand with the perception of selling out . . . especially if it didn’t sell out.”³ In response, Lloyd claimed, “there was no product placement,” though *Modern Family* “ha[d] made those agreements with other companies.” In this case, he said, no financial transaction was guiding the iPad’s representation, as “it was all story-driven.”⁴

The “agreement” that Lloyd refers to here was the season-long product-placement deal for *Modern Family* that ABC had previously struck with Toyota for its Sienna and Prius vehicles. Unlike the iPad, these Toyota product integrations, which had totaled over eight minutes of airtime up to this point, drew virtually no media response.⁵ “Game Changer,” however, was a different story. Questions arose akin to Hibberd’s and Lloyd’s contrasting assessments over the motives behind the iPad integration. For instance, had ABC crossed the line in corporate synergy under the influence of Apple CEO Steve Jobs, who, at the time, was the largest shareholder and sat on the board of ABC parent corporation, The Walt Disney Company? Did *Modern Family* violate its trust with the viewing public, as the series had received a Peabody Award for its “distinguished achievement and meritorious public service” on the exact morning that “Game Changer” aired? Did the iPad qualify as product placement, since the device’s actual debut was April 3, three days after the episode’s airdate?

This brief controversy surrounding the iPad’s presence in *Modern Family* highlights the increasingly blurred line between entertainment and marketing that characterizes the contemporary U.S. television landscape. With more viewers making use of ad-skipping digital video recorders, watching TV on DVD, or streaming (or stealing) content off the Internet, marketers have begun to push for more ways to intertwine their products within network programming itself. Product placement, product integration, and branded entertainment—three common terms to

describe a form of advertising in which a product, corporate logo, or brand name is positioned as a “prop” in a program or is used as an integral part of the storyline—is one of those strategies. All have become a staple of broadcast and cable television, particularly with the influx of “non-scripted” or reality television since the success of *Survivor* (CBS, 2000–present) in its debut season. FOX’s *American Idol* (2002–present), CBS’s *The Amazing Race* (2001–present), and Bravo’s *Top Chef* (2006–present) all continually weave advertisers’ products within their storylines and gameplay. Integration has also found its way into scripted television with such notable examples as NBC’s *The Office* (2005–2013) and Staples, *30 Rock* (NBC, 2006–2013) and Snapple, and *Chuck*’s (NBC, 2007–2012) season-long Subway integrated sponsorship. *Modern Family*’s integration of the iPad, therefore, is more the rule than the exception in today’s media landscape.

Timothy Havens and Amanda D. Lotz provide a model that helps to explain how the iPad integration in “Game Changer” underscores the ongoing tensions between art and commerce in the media industries.⁶ They propose an “Industrialization of Culture” framework to take into account the wide range of cultural, economic, institutional, professional, and personal forces that lead media practitioners to shape the aesthetic content and ideological meaning of texts on three different levels of influence: mandates, conditions, and practices. A mandate is the primary purpose of an industry organization, its reason for operating, such as profit-seeking or public service. Conditions refer to the broader behavior of the media sectors—the various technologies, regulations, and economics that affect how media industries operate. And practices encompass the myriad of professional roles and activities that make up the day-to-day operations of the media industries. Together with various social trends, tastes, and traditions that media producers might draw on when creating programming, this framework can account for how media industries bring a show into being. Media workers, particularly those in commercial media organizations, have only some degree of individual autonomy, or, as Havens and Lotz call it, “circumscribed agency.” Cultures, mandates, conditions, and industry practices invariably all work to impinge on the agency of media professionals. Yet, “the drive for popularity,” they argue, “and the conflicting and competing interests of a wide range of decision makers involved in creating an individual media text provide opportunities for agency and self-expression.”⁷

When viewed through this framework of circumscribed agency, the iPad integration and ensuing debate over “Game Changer” exposes the myriad pressures faced by *Modern Family*’s creators in constructing an episode of commercial television. ABC’s primary mandate, as one division within a massive publicly traded company, is to make money for its parent company’s shareholders. It does this primarily through selling the audiences gathered by its content to advertisers. For instance, the cost of a thirty-second spot for *Modern Family* began at \$130,388 in

fall 2009 before the show's ratings were proven.⁸ However, not all audiences that comprise the value of this spot are created equal. The most coveted demographic for the television industry is 18–49-year-old white, college-educated males with above-average incomes. Advertisers consider such audience members to have more discretionary income and be more susceptible to changing brands than other demographic segments. Networks thus create programs, first and foremost, to serve these specific demographic and advertiser needs.

Since *Modern Family* was designed to attract this demographic, and subsequently has drawn a large portion of it, it is not surprising that ABC would enter into a brand partnership with Apple. While the demographics for a typical Apple user skew differently across product lines, the computer company also pays attention to the psychographic market segment of the “early adopter”—a person who embraces an advantageous new product or technology before others do. A 2007 report conducted by Solutions Research Group on the potential first-generation “early adopters” of the iPhone concluded they were educated men in their thirties, living in New York or California, with household incomes of \$75,600 a year.⁹ The late thirty-something, affluent, Californian Phil Dunphy—the self-identified “early adopter” himself—makes “Game Changer” a textbook description of this psychographic. A preliminary market research report shortly before the airing of “Game Changer” lends further support to this argument, revealing that 27% in the 18–34 age range (compared to 18% of all consumers) expressed an interest in buying the iPad.¹⁰ Five months after the device's release, iPad users, according to Nielsen, were 65% male and 63% under the age of thirty-five. Additionally, 25% of iPad users had incomes of \$100K or more, while 51% had a bachelor's degree or higher.¹¹ This demographic and psychographic compatibility suggests that integrating the iPad into *Modern Family* was a no-brainer: a high-profile show integrating a highly desired device just days before its launch made perfect sense.

Demographic alliances between brands like ABC and Apple have greatly increased due to profound technological and economic changes in the media industries during the last ten years. These partnerships reflect a volatile historical moment in which networks, advertisers, and viewers are reevaluating the terms of their relationships with one another. Media clutter, audience fragmentation, and digital convergence have increasingly made it more difficult for media companies to reach the younger end of the 18–49 demographic. The increase in the number of media, media outlets, and media technologies has given audiences more choices for consuming entertainment where they want, when they want, and how they want. For instance, almost 36% of TV households (up from 13.5% three years earlier) were equipped with digital video recorders (DVRs) when “Game Changer” aired, while the average American was watching more than ten hours of time-shifted TV per month.¹² Together with viewer erosion, greater

competition, and rampant piracy, social and cultural shifts such as these have dramatically reshaped the way the media industries do business with one another.

Increased product placement deals have become one solution to this crisis; integration spending in television, movies, Internet, videogames, and other media totaled \$3.61 billion in 2009 and is poised to double by 2014.¹³ Certainly, the hostility directed at the iPad integration in “Game Changer” partly had to do with the overwhelming pervasiveness of product placement in contemporary U.S. media. From the standpoint of Apple, the ABC network, and the program’s production studio, Twentieth Century Fox Television, *Modern Family* represented a timely marketing opportunity that could attract widespread media publicity for both the iPad and the series while also combating DVR ad-skipping in the home. Many viewers, however, felt that these companies had violated a social contract they had with the series by seemingly joining forces to impose a sales pitch into the narrative fabric of a beloved show purely for profit and marketing purposes. In their mind, the timing of the episode—three days before the release of the iPad—reeked of opportunism at the hands of corporate executives. The iPad integration seemed to be coordinated no differently than the well-timed, multiplatform product placements ever present in reality shows. In cases like *The Amazing Race* or *Survivor*, product integration is to be expected. Not so with scripted comedies and dramas, particularly those series like *Modern Family* that are defined as “quality television” by various interpretive communities.¹⁴ It is assumed that “quality television” series are not inhibited by the same financial constraints, popular trends, and advertising demands that plague most other television productions. *Modern Family* was believed to be above such base commerce for these critics and viewers. Or so they thought.

Even if ABC adhered to its commercial mandate and demanded that Levitan and Lloyd integrate the iPad into *Modern Family* at the behest of Steve Jobs, such an explanation does not fully account for the positive response about the product placement from many fans and critics, for whom Phil Dunphy’s excitement over the new device seemed to be a logical extension of his character rather than an advertisement for Apple. Longtime television journalist Josef Adalian of *The Wrap* personally took Hibberd and CNET’s Chris Matyszczyk to task for claiming product integration without proof and for being TV storytelling purists. “If you’re trying to tell a story about a character irrationally lusting over a tech product circa spring 2010, spoofing the iPad was the obvious (and reasonable) choice. If it had been spring 2009, Phil would no doubt be praying for a Kindle. And if it were 2011, he’d probably be begging for a 3-D TV set.”¹⁵ In fact, Levitan remarked that Phil’s frenzy over getting an iPad for his birthday would better tap into the zeitgeist rather than the original choice—a videogame.¹⁶

The writers of *Modern Family* had made Phil’s obsession with technology and gadgets clear earlier that year in “Fifteen Percent” (January 20, 2010). That plotline

concerns Claire's inability to work Phil's universal remote for their new theater system. After Claire breaks the remote out of frustration, Phil informs her, "The experts at CNET.com rated it the best remote. They gave it three-and-a-half mice." Following this setup, the iPad in "Game Changer" can appear then to be story-driven and a natural fit for techno-geek Phil. When Phil tells Claire, "Next week! That's like the worst thing you can say to an early adopter," after she fails to get him the iPad on its release day, his words likely rang true for many audience members. Thus, Phil's stroking of his iPad at the end of the episode while whispering "I love you" to it, can easily be perceived as true to character and a satisfying ending to the episode's narrative arc, rather than an awkward product placement.

When viewed as creative synergy between art and commerce rather than corporate synergy among Fox, ABC, and Apple, the general success of the iPad integration can partially be attributed to a certain amount of agency that Levitan, Lloyd, and their writing team had in the decision-making process. Even though the specific nature of their negotiations with executives over the aesthetic and narrative use of the iPad is unknown, the writers' creative agency over the depiction could not have been completely unfettered or unregulated. Thus, when viewed within Havens and Lotz's Industrialization of Culture framework, it becomes apparent that various industrial forces and practices circumscribed their autonomy, shaping how the device would be narrativized in the episode. These concessions—fueled largely by the profit motive of ABC and Apple—may have compromised *Modern Family's* free creative reign and might give validity to viewer claims that the show "sold out." "Organic"—a marketing term that suggests seamless, subtle, or inconspicuous product integration—disguises the notion that the iPad, like any product, must always be presented in a positive, consumer-friendly light. In this vein, one could view Phil's description of the device as "a movie theater, library, and music store all rolled into one awesome pad" as a virtual commercial about the iPad's selling points preapproved by Apple executives.

Or consider the dramatic pause on the exterior of the Apple Store in "Game Changer" as Claire rushes to the back of the line to pick up an iPad from a new shipment. Panning her movement screen right to left in wide shot, the camera momentarily freezes when the Apple logo hits the center of the frame in an aesthetic decision unmotivated by narrative concerns. And one can construe another scene as explicitly promoting Apple, as when Claire presents Phil his virtual birthday cake (after Luke ate the material one) in the form of an iPad app.

As Phil professes his love to his iPad at episode's end, celebratory music kicks in on the soundtrack as family members gather behind him in a picturesque tableau, all equally mesmerized by the iPad. These lines of dialogue and aesthetic choices appear market-driven rather than character-driven, designed to celebrate the device's functionality and splendor. Such a reading is reinforced by the absence



FIGURE 27.1.
Phil blows out the
birthday candles on his
brand new iPad.

of any criticism of the iPad in “Game Changer,” though a number of limitations of the device’s first version were in fact well known before it became available for purchase. No camera or video recorder, no multitasking capability, no Flash support (the latter a particular complaint since the introduction of the iPhone)—any of these deficiencies could have been addressed in the episode. That they are not suggests the creative limitations placed on the creators of *Modern Family*. Had there been no such limitations surrounding product integration, one might have expected to see an episode in which the Dunphys were terrified of driving their Toyota Sienna after unintended acceleration problems caused the automaker to recall over nine million vehicles in November 2009 and January 2010.

When viewed through this framework of circumscribed agency, it is arguable that whether or not Apple paid for the placement of the iPad in “Game Changer” does not really matter. The episode exposed the internalized logic of American commercial television, one that supports a broader consumerist mindset regardless of actual sponsorship. In fact, “Game Changer” was a textbook example of scripted brand integration of products into a primetime television program, as James Grant Hay, the founder and CEO of Australian brand integration agency InShot, has observed. For Hay, *Modern Family* told the iPad story in a compelling, innovative, and *organic* way: the iPad was strongly integrated into the story narrative, the device was positively mentioned in several different contexts, and the actors emotionally engaged with the product while using it on screen.¹⁷ Apple need not have paid for the iPad placement because the internalized logic of commercial television is to promote consumerism, turn audiences into commodities, and celebrate a product as a vital component of “realism.” In the end, a light comedy like *Modern Family* could never critique a real product, questioning the functionality of the iPad or the safety of Toyota cars, as doing so would bristle against the norms of general consumer culture.

Two months after the airing of “Game Changer,” Jeff Morton, a producer on *Modern Family*, told attendees at the Produced By Conference that the episode “may have gone a little too far in hindsight.” While he confirmed that Apple compensated no one at Twentieth Century Fox Television or ABC for the brand integration, he did acknowledge that “the public thought it was a giant sellout” and that it “sort of backfired on us.”¹⁸ Since “Game Changer’s” airing, *Modern Family* has not entered into any conspicuously overt product placement like that of the iPad. Or perhaps they have not found any prominent advertiser with whom to strike an iPad-like integration. Then again, there goes Phil, in the season 2 episode, “The Musical Man” (April 13, 2011), hurrying daughter Haley outside the side door of his Toyota van, exclaiming, “The doors slide, the seats slide. What can’t the Sienna do?”

NOTES

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2. Joe Flint, “‘Modern Family’ Gives Some Free Love to the iPad,” *Los Angeles Times*, Company Town, April 1, 2010, <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/entertainmentnews-buzz/2010/04/modern-family-gives-some-free-love-for-the-ipad.html>.
3. James Hibberd, “Release the iPad! Products Disrupt Wednesday Hits,” *Hollywood Reporter’s* The Live Feed, April 1, 2010, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/blogs/live-feed/release-ipad-products-disrupt-wednesday-53365>.
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5. Brian Steinberg, “Why Modern Family Still Drives Toyota,” *Advertising Age*, March 8, 2010, <http://adage.com/article/madisonvine-news/product-placement-modern-family-drives-toyota/142656/>.
6. See chapter 1 of Timothy Havens and Amanda D. Lotz, *Understanding Media Industries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 1–26.
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8. Brian Steinberg, “‘Modern Family’ Featured an iPad but ABC Didn’t Collect,” *Advertising Age*, April 1, 2010, <http://adage.com/article/mediaworks/modern-family-ipad-abc-collect/143105/>.
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15. Josef Adalian, "The iPad-'Modern Family' Non-troversy: Enough!," *The Wrap*, April 2, 2010, www.thewrap.com/tv/column-post/ipad-modern-family-non-troversy-enough-15905. Adalian was referring to Chris Matyszczyk's online column in which he called the iPad integration on *Modern Family* "less of a product placement and more of product kidnapping a show and holding it by the neck very tightly indeed until it handed over a pile of money." See "30-Minute iPad Ad on 'Modern Family,'" CNET, April 1, 2010, http://news.cnet.com/8301-17852_3-10471959-71.html.
16. Quoted in Sam Schneider and Suzanne Vranica, "iPad Gets Star Turn in Television Comedy," *Wall Street Journal*, April 2, 2010.
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