CEO STRATEGIES

Billboard Revolutionary

IN A MULTIMEDIA WORLD, WHO'D SPEND HIS advertising budget on a roadside sign that just sits there? Well, the industry grew to $1.6 billion in sales last year.

James McAndrew, CEO and president of Matthew Outdoor Advertising Inc. in Bangor, Pa., started his company in 1982 with 35 credit cards and lines of credit and now does $11.5 million in sales. He's using information technology to make the humble billboard high-tech.

McAndrew is taking the humble outdoor advertising industry high-tech.
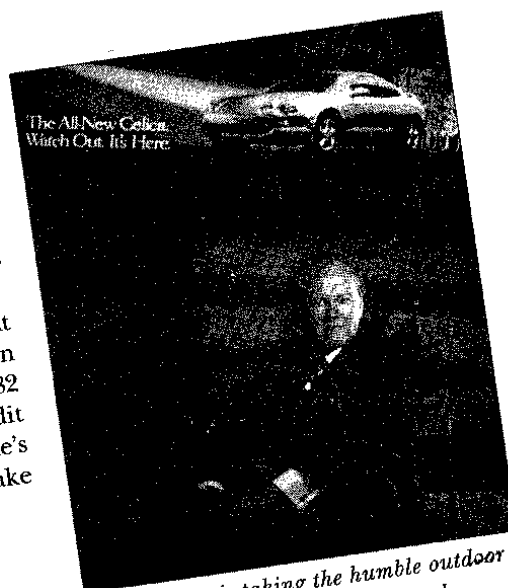
What are billboards good for?
Reaching a large proportion of the population quickly. They're ideal for product introductions. You get 75 percent of your impact in Week One.

What makes your company different?
We're using the computer to revolutionize the sale of the medium. Until now, the client had to get in a car and drive around the region to check out the site. But with a modem, we can show him a real-time video and superimpose a mock-up of his ad onto the billboard in the image. It's like trying on a suit. And when the poster technician puts up the sign, he runs a wand over a bar code on the billboard, recording which sign went up at which latitude and longitude, and when.

Why do latitude and longitude matter?
It makes everything third-party verifiable.

To say that a sign is "just south of Yankee Stadium on I-87" is one thing. But with satellite telemetry, we can say, "It's 600 feet south of the stadium – and people coming to the game can see it."

What's your next project?
A drive-by, Nielsen-type rating for billboards. Next year, we'll offer select car owners studio quality sound systems for their cars, free, in return for carrying a LoJack type chip. The chip transmits the car's location to computers we'll install on our billboards to count cars going by. You'll have up-to-the-minute ratings to compare with how products are selling in the stores.