

Advertising / Hewlett-Packard Takes a New Tack: Being Cool

By Eric Pfanner

LONDON

FOR weeks, an unusual Web site linked to the World Cup soccer tournament kept visitors guessing: Could this be real?

The site, FingerSkilz.tv, shows what appear to be close-up videos of a man's hand on a desk, using two fingers to perform soccer tricks with a wadded-up paper "ball." The Brazilian-style handiwork attracted more than 180,000 unique visitors to the site, prompted widespread discussion on blogs and moved imitators to create their own "fingerball" videos and post them on the Web.

Last Thursday, the site, supposedly created by a bored young office worker, was revealed to be a "viral" advertisement from Hewlett-Packard, the leading edge of a new global campaign that aims to imbue H.P.'s machines with some of the coolness more commonly associated with Apple.

Hewlett-Packard started the campaign, the first global ad blitz on behalf of its personal systems group, in the United States a few weeks before the World Cup. Now that the tournament is over, with a better chance of drawing the rest of the world's attention, the company is extending the campaign to other big markets.

H.P. executives say the new campaign, which includes television and print advertising in addition to a variety of edgier approaches, is aimed at shaking up perceptions of the company as slightly stodgy, an image that has been reinforced by conservative corporate brand campaigns with themes like "everything is possible."

The new strategy follows last year's hiring of Satjiv Chahil, a former marketing executive at Palm, Sony and Apple, as head of marketing for the personal systems group, which includes the company's PC's and laptops. It emphasizes consumers, with all their quirky individualism, after many years in which manufacturers like Hewlett-Packard and Dell courted corporate customers first.

Instead of the stereotypical geeky, corporate PC users -- the kind that are mocked in a new Apple campaign that juxtaposes them with supposedly cooler Mac users -- people like Jay-Z, the rap artist, are featured in the H.P. spots. But not in the usual way. The Jay-Z ad shows him from the neck down, focusing on his hands as he sorts through the things he has stored on his hard drive, like "vacation photos you won't see in the tabloids."

"We wanted to step away from selling computers as a commodity to telling a story in an autobiographical way," said Steve Simpson, partner and creative director at Goodby, Silverstein & Partners, which created the ad.

Goodby, based in San Francisco, is working on the Hewlett-Packard account with the global agency groups McCann Erickson, which is a unit of Interpublic, and Publicis; the media buying is being handled by ZenithOptimedia. An H.P. executive said the company spent \$510 million on advertising in the United States last year. The new global campaign, the executive said, will cost several hundred million dollars.

The agencies are now looking for European and Asian personalities to supplement figures like Jay-Z and a snowboarder, Shaun White, who appear in the American ads.

The ads close with the tag line "the computer is personal again." Print work in the campaign also prominently features images of hands, which "are seen as a powerful symbol of communication around the world," said Luciana Broggi, vice president for marketing in the Hewlett-Packard personal system group for the Europe, Middle East and Africa region.

Like other marketers, the company is trying to reach consumers in new ways. It is sponsoring a television show on MTV called "Meet or Delete," in which young people decide whether they want to date potential suitors based on the contents of their hard drives, including records of the Web sites they have visited and the videos they may have watched.

The show started in the United States in May with college students, and has been extended to a number of European, Asian and Latin American markets. In some cases, instead of dating, the format is tamer, with participants scouting out new drummers for their bands, for instance.

Hewlett-Packard says the success of the FingerSkilz site demonstrates the effectiveness of nontraditional marketing approaches. At one point, more than 20 percent of British visitors to a company site created as part of the new PC campaign came from FingerSkilz, which ran a banner ad for Hewlett-Packard.

Even before the company's sponsorship of FingerSkilz was disclosed last week, the banner ad was a none-too-subtle hint that the site wasn't quite what it appeared to be. Still, in owning up, the company left one other thing unsaid: The nifty tricks that the fingers perform were actually created through computer-generated imagery.