



Slipstream Marketing: Want Free Sponsorships with That?

By Max Sutherland

Dr. Max Sutherland's column is published monthly and posted on the web at www.sutherlandsurvey.com. Receive an advance copy by email - [free subscription](#). Max Sutherland is author of the book '[Advertising & the Mind of the Consumer](#)' (published in 8 languages) and is a registered psychologist. He works as an independent marketing consultant in Australia and USA and is also Adjunct Professor at Bond University. Contact msutherland@adandmind.com.

A few years ago I wrote a paper on Slipstream Marketing with Stephen Holden from Bond University (Journal of Brand Management, June 1997). Slipstream marketing is a means of achieving a bigger bang without having the biggest buck.

The idea is to be constantly on the look out for opportunities - to hitch a ride to drive your brand and your budget further.

A moving body creates a vacuum of air behind it. When a truck goes by at speed, you feel a wall of air following. Motor racers and cyclists use this to their advantage and call it 'slipstreaming' or 'drafting'. By getting in close behind the vehicle in front, they have no wind resistance- so they get 'sucked' along and can go further and faster with less effort.



By way of analogy, slipstream marketing is a powerful marketing tactic and mindset. The essential keys to getting an assisted ride are:

- a) Find something that has a lot of momentum – that already has people's attention
- b) Create an alignment link that lets you establish an association or synergy with it.

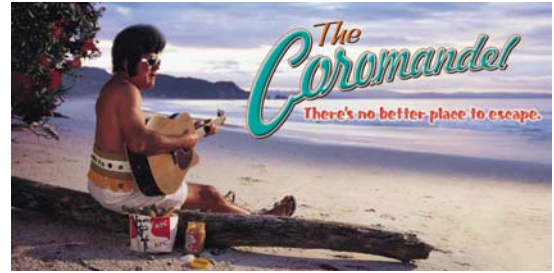
Much of the momentum in a market is usually with the market leader. A classic slipstream of a market leader was executed by the well known Avis campaign: *"We're number two, so why should you rent from us? We try harder!"* Avis positioned itself behind the market leader and established a powerful psychological alignment for an assisted ride.

Instead of working to displace what is top of peoples' minds, you tie yourself to it and harness, rather than oppose, its momentum. Anything that has captured the public's attention is a candidate to slipstream – not just market leaders.

Celebrities and events are hot candidates. By associating your brand with them, it attracts attention to your brand. 'But wait', I hear you say... 'that's sponsorship'. Indeed it is. Sponsorship can be seen as a special type of slipstreaming - where you *buy* the rights to slipstream. The trick here is to find slipstreaming opportunities that you don't have to pay for. Sounds crazy doesn't it – but its not.

For example, how good would it be to associate your brand with a celebrity like Elvis - for free? Sounds impossible? It's not.

Consider the persistent myth that Elvis hasn't really left the building but is alive and well but living incognito in Florida or somewhere. Where would our aging Elvis choose to live? Now insert the tourist destination you want to promote as the ideal place to escape to and presto you execute the slipstream for free - provided you do it carefully.



You won't be the first, however! The clever, tourist promotion association of the Coromandel Coast in New Zealand has beaten you to it. In a series of highly talked about ads that slipstreamed 'celebrities', one depicted an aging Elvis on the beach of the beautiful Coromandel coast, strumming guitar and eating Kentucky Fried chicken. (see ad this page) It reinforced the Coromandel theme: "There's no better place to escape."

The success of the political cartoonists' art is based entirely on free slipstreaming of public figures and events to generate impactful, 'talked about' cartoons on an almost daily basis. So, why can't advertising do the same?

Well, in fact it can and there are examples, but they are curiously rare. A favorite, from the times of Bill Clinton womanizing, was advertising by a personnel company named Equatorial Talent, who, tongue in cheek, slipstreamed Bill Clinton with the ad shown on this page. Full marks for opportunism.



It is amazing what you can do with a slipstream marketing mindset. You can slipstream events as well as people and you don't have to pay sponsorship fees – provided you're clever. For example, while Fosters, Panasonic and many others, pay to sponsor the Melbourne Grand Prix, a local real estate developer can't afford that kind of money.

At the time of the last Melbourne Grand Prix, developer New Quay Apartments placed ads using the headline: "Penthouse apartments just minutes from the Grand Prix." An adroit maneuver that shows how you can garner slipstream assistance for free.

An historical classic was Redback beer's slipstream of Gorbachov at the time of the highly publicized coup attempt in Russia. When the coup failed and Gorbachov was restored to power, Redback seized the opportunity to slipstream the blaze of world media attention by running newspaper ads with a photo of Gorbachov under the headline:

'It's always nice to have a Redback.' Redback beer.

The tricky bit is to find a workable point of alignment – a viable link between your brand and the public figure or event. With Gorbachov, the 'point of alignment' was created through a play on the brand name. New Quay did it using proximity. Coromandel linked with the 'Elvis lives' myth.



So what are the general principals here? Being sensitive to, and on the look out for, possible top-of-mind targets is the first principle. Second, finding an alignment, a synergistic, tie-in association, is the second principle. Third, letting the reader make the connection, ("Oh, I get it. How clever!") can help the whole thing resonate. (See my October column on word play 'A Pun is its Own Reword').

I predict we will see wider use of this type of slipstreaming because it can generate highly impactful 'talked about' ads. Public figures or events that capture media attention day after day are ideal because a high degree of involvement and interest is built up around the thing you are hitching to.

If you find something that you can slip your brand or your advertising in behind and hitch a free ride by being pulled along by its momentum, it enables you to conserve your effort and leverage your spend by a factor of many times.

Slipstream marketing is fun and challenging and gets your creative juices flowing. It will keep you glued to current events and give you a new slant on reading the news and thinking about what is going on around you that you can integrate into your brand's success. Creative thinking comes along as a regular partner in your front seat.