

Papal product placement: Building credibility, boosting sales

VATICAN CITY – The pope is one of the most respected and admired figures in the world, and millions of people watch or attend his many public and televised events throughout the year.

In the eyes of many advertising executives, that kind of exposure makes the pope and the Vatican heaven for product placement.

In fact, some items Pope Benedict XVI wore publicly the first year of his papacy led to fashion mavens trying to divine his brand preferences. Early headlines screamed – incorrectly at that – “The pope wears Gucci sunglasses,” “Shoes by Prada.”

But the scramble to turn the pope or the Vatican into a giant billboard didn’t end there.

One company that makes motion-sensitive surveillance equipment recently sent out a press release saying it clinched a major contract with the Vatican. Installing its high-tech security cameras along a 37-mile perimeter of sensitive areas, entry and exit gates, and the wall surrounding Vatican City marked “a milestone” for the company, it said.

But such big claims sent off alarm bells for some, because the 16th- and 17th-century walls surrounding the tiny city-state are barely two miles long.

A member of the Vatican security force told Catholic News Service this was just the latest example of using the Vatican to build credibility and boost sales.

The security officer, who asked not to be named, said while the security company makes “products of excellent quality,” the Vatican only uses its surveillance gear “in a few sensitive areas” and nothing more.

With a world-weary sigh he said, “Since anything can be useful for selling a product, one just has to advertise and promote oneself” whenever a deal is struck with the

Vatican.

Preserving a fair balance between receiving products and services the Vatican needs and allowing the supplier to advertise that its brand has the Vatican seal of approval is something the Vatican strives for, said the Vatican spokesman, Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi.

It's natural that in return for receiving goods or services for free or at a discounted price, the Vatican would expect a supplier to try to boost sales by advertising one of its clients is the Vatican, he told CNS in a recent e-mail.

But the Vatican must be careful the goods or services it acquires also agree with "the spirit and ends of the Vatican offices, especially with the ministry of the pope, whose spiritual nature and elevated high dignity" must be maintained, he wrote.

"The pope's image is carefully protected from inappropriate commercial exploitation," and Vatican departments also must be careful to not be exploited, wrote Father Lombardi.

A proper balance can be found, but if a supplier abuses this relationship, individual Vatican departments "would have excellent reason for choosing other" more appropriate suppliers, he wrote.

Using the Vatican or the pope to push a product, in fact, can sometimes backfire.

Right before Pope Benedict visited Washington in April, the city's Metro system introduced a special "Mass Pass" to help shuttle pilgrims to papal events and "avoid unholy traffic," a Metro ad said.

Metro aired commercials featuring a seven-inch bobblehead Pope Benedict riding the Metro trains and demonstrating proper commuter etiquette, such as letting people get off the train before trying to get on.

But the marketing campaign came to a screeching halt after the Washington Archdiocese complained.

Not only was it an inappropriate use of the pope's image, an archdiocesan

spokeswoman said, it also “was a bad bobblehead” wearing the red robe and skullcap of a cardinal, instead of papal white vestments.