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Looney Toon Promo Shows How Viral Can Spiral Out Of Control

by Erik Sass, Friday, Feb 2, 2007 8:00 AM ET

INTERFERENCE INC. THE VIRAL-MARKETING FIRM'S name couldn't be more perfect. Its TV promo for Cartoon Network paralyzed a big city, stuck thousands in traffic and got front-page headlines. And it sent a governor, an attorney general, a congressman and police commissioner into action.

At issue were magnetic light devices depicting cartoon characters that were placed around Boston (and nine other cities) over the last three weeks. And by Wednesday evening, millions of people previously unfamiliar with the Cartoon Network's "Aqua Teen Hunger Force" got a crash course in the show.

Was it worth it?

"There are people who believe that any publicity is good publicity, as long as you spell my name right," allows Mark Weiner, president of Delahaye, a division of Bacon's Information. "But working at a research firm that tracks publicity and media coverage, I can tell you that's absolutely not true. This event is going to shine negatively on the Cartoon Network--and even more negatively on the agency."

Massachusetts Attorney General Martha Coakley says she's going to prosecute two men hired by Interference--Peter Berdovsky, 27, and Sean Stevens, 28--under a Massachusetts statute prohibiting "placement of hoax devices... to cause anxiety, unrest, fear or personal discomfort."

In the statute, "hoax device" is defined as an object that someone could "reasonably" believe to be an "infernal machine" intended to cause death, injury, or property damage by "fire or explosion." Assistant Attorney General John Grossman argues that the devices resembled bombs, and that this constitutes intent. The men face up to five years in prison if convicted.

However, Dr. Marc Siegel, an associate professor at the NYU School of Medicine and author of "False Alarm: The Truth About the Epidemic of Fear," warns that the word "reasonably" may be close to meaningless in this context.

While the "hoax device" argument might not hold up in court, TBS is still open to a civil case by the city of Boston and various authorities to recover more than \$1 million in damages for unnecessary police work. The costs may run far higher, as the response also involved the Boston Fire Department, the Boston Regional Intelligence Center, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, Emergency Medical Services, the FBI, the Massachusetts State Police, and the Office of Emergency Preparedness.

"We need to realize that emotion is running amok here. The risk of terrorism is not zero, so it makes sense that we have a system in place for reacting to perceived threats. However, this kind of event makes it necessary to assess if we over-react routinely," Siegel says, "and what it costs us psychologically and financially." For one thing, he adds, "you can put a lot more effort into identifying the risk before you shut down the city."

Boston Mayor Thomas Menino isn't deterred. "I am prepared to take any and all legal action against Turner Broadcasting," he announced, "and its affiliates for any and all expenses incurred during the response to today's incidents."

In total, the police located 38 devices in the Boston area, some attached to structural elements of highway overpasses and bridges, and police bomb squads were dispatched to at least nine locations. The scare caused the closing of Interstate 93, two bridges connecting Boston and Cambridge, and the MBTA's Red and Orange Lines. The U.S. Coast Guard also closed the Charles River to boat traffic, and Tufts New England Medical Center was evacuated when a device was found in the basement parking garage. The first device found was detonated by a bomb squad in Sullivan Square Wednesday morning.