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ADVERTISING

Airbnb Campaign Uses Birdhouses to Widen Its Reach



A magazine ad for Airbnb, which links travelers with people who have homes to rent.
By JANE L. LEVERE
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AIRBNB, which lets travelers rent accommodations in private residences worldwide, is introducing its first integrated, national advertising campaign on Monday, using birds and birdhouses as a metaphor for its customers and their accommodations.

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The service lets people rent rooms or homes to prospective guests online. Rates are set by the individuals who offer accommodations; Airbnb provides guidance on rates and on being hosts, and receives a transaction fee for bookings. Travelers can review ratings by previous guests. Airbnb also operates a system that rates guests that can be viewed only by hosts.

Started in 2008 and based in San Francisco, Airbnb lists 500,000 properties, operated by about 350,000 hosts, in 192 countries and more than 34,000 cities. Its largest markets, for hosts and guests, are Paris, Barcelona, New York and San Francisco.

The scope of its operation actually dwarfs that of traditional hotel companies. According to Bjorn Hanson, divisional dean of the Preston Robert Tisch Center for Hospitality, Tourism and Sports Management at New York University, Airbnb far exceeds IHG (InterContinental Hotels Group) with more than 4,600 hotels, and Marriott International, with more than 3,800 hotels, making it the largest lodging company and brand in the world.

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Although Airbnb had done limited advertising — including online search and display advertising; a promotion in the Los Angeles market; and a film with the Sundance Channel — the new campaign is its first, major, integrated national effort.

Amy Curtis-McIntyre, chief marketing officer of Airbnb, said the campaign's goal was to help build awareness for the brand, among hosts and guests.

"The business has gotten to be this size through word of mouth, and our growth plans are significant," she said. "We are building a meaningful presence in Asia in 2014, and a deeper presence in Europe and South America, specifically Brazil. Our business mandate is to build greater awareness faster, to keep the growth trajectory."

Created by Pereira & O'Dell — also based in San Francisco and controlled by Grupo ABC, with headquarters in São Paulo, Brazil — the new campaign uses a metaphor of migratory birds and birdhouses.

The agency commissioned five artists to create birdhouses inspired by 50 accommodations — including a cottage in Cheshire, England, and a Victorian townhouse in San Francisco — and made a film featuring the artists and their birdhouses, which hang from an ancient oak tree in Audubon Park in New Orleans.

Copy on the film says, "Every year, millions of travelers arrive somewhere by land, sea and air. All of them are looking for a place to feel at home." After the Airbnb logo is flashed, it continues, "Book a home anywhere in the world. Go to birdbnb," a microsite with the film, pictures of the 50 birdhouses and links to the accommodations that inspired them.

P. J. Pereira, chief creative officer of Pereira & O'Dell, said: "The whole idea of traveling is an important thing for me, and I realized the ultimate travelers are birds. Those little, fragile things are always traveling — how wonderful it would be to actually celebrate them and use them as icons."

Ms. Curtis-McIntyre added, "Airbnb is the world's most interesting hospitality company, and you can't explain it in traditional ways."

A two-minute version of the film will be shown in movie theaters in Boston; Chicago; Fort Lauderdale, Fla.; Los Angeles; Miami; New York; Oakland, Calif.; San Francisco; San Jose; and Washington, D.C., and in select suburban markets of many of those cities through December, and in early January. The film will also be shown during the Travel Channel program "Mysteries at the Museum," on Dec. 19.

A link to a longer version of the film will also appear, with banner advertising, from Dec. 16 through Jan. 12 on websites of BBC, Dwell, Brit & Co. and Lonely Planet. And a full-page ad with the tree and birdhouses will run in the January issue of *Afar*, the travel magazine. It says: "Every traveler deserves a home. Airbnb. One tree, 50 birdhouses, a tiny epic story. Watch it at Birdbnb.com."

Ms. Curtis-McIntyre said the campaign was aimed at people who are "youthful, adventurous, very social and big travelers." The budget is \$2 million.

Mr. Hanson said the campaign's use of birds and birdhouses would appeal to adults and children. He also said featuring a park named after the ornithologist John James Audubon suggests that Airbnb is an "environmentally friendly" lodging choice.

Jonah Berger, a professor of marketing at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, predicted that the campaign would "not only generate awareness, but also make a larger segment of the population comfortable with the idea of peer-to-peer housing."

Henry Harteveltdt, travel analyst for Hudson Crossing, said the campaign allowed Airbnb to spread a message "no other hotel chain can replicate." Airbnb and rivals like HomeAway, whose vacation rentals will be sold by Expedia starting next year, "are no longer small potatoes," Mr. Harteveltdt said.

"They are a significant part of the travel accommodation landscape."

Marshall Kohr, a lecturer in integrated marketing at the Medill School of Northwestern University, said, "My expectations about unique home sites I will be able to stay at are elevated after seeing the execution" of the campaign.

The campaign also does not address [legal challenges](#) faced by Airbnb in New York, where many hosts are violating a 2010 state law that prohibits them from renting their apartment for fewer than 30 days if they are not present. Airbnb would like the state to revise the law

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to make short-term rentals legal. In exchange, it has proposed that renters pay the city's hotel tax.

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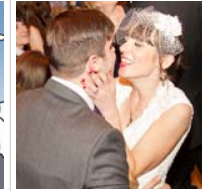
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