

the robin hood project



This is what happened: Kilometer Zero contacted some big companies and got them to lend us ridiculously expensive clothes and shoes and things with the promise we would run glossy fashion spreads promoting the products. Then, because our organization views such advertising as the corrupting seed of corporate-consumer philosophy, instead of actually running fashion shoots, we gave the clothes to children's charities here in Paris. It was a product placement sting and a political experiment. We called it the Robin Hood project.

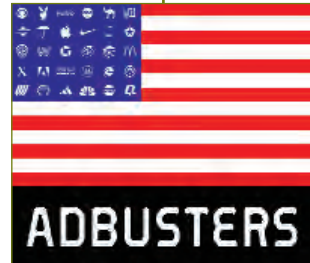
Like so many great ideas, the Robin Hood project was born over afternoon beer. We were talking about organiz-

ing a game of pick-up basketball but what began as simple three-on-three soon turned into visions of a Paris-wide expatriate league with divisions and tournaments and fist-pumping glory. "I bet we could even get a sponsor," someone said. "We'd probably get free shoes." Ha ha. Everyone laughed. But...ha?

Kilometer Zero was familiar with the sponsorship programs major companies undertake to enhance their name in communities. And as a magazine, we were aware of how companies give items to media outlets in hopes of getting free publicity. In fact, a friend, **Matt Lewis**, once told us how the small independent film company he worked for



Matt contributed this article to issue one of *Kilometer Zero*



Adbusters does noble work. They are a non-profit association based in Vancouver, Canada who publish a magazine devoted to exploring and undermining traditional, corporate-backed media systems. We here at Kilometer Zero sometimes daydream about joining forces. Check them out at www.adbusters.org.



Naomi Klein wasn't available to talk with us because she was in South America writing a new book. But we were allowed to excerpt *No Logo*. Thanks Naomi.

It is common knowledge that many advertisers rail at controversial content, pull their ads when they are criticized even slightly and perpetually angle for so-called value-added—plugs for their wares in shopping guides and fashion spreads. For example, S.C. Johnson & Co. stipulates that its ads in women's magazines "should not be opposite extremely controversial features or material antithetical to the nature/copy of the advertised product" while De Beers Diamonds demands that their ads be far from any "hard news or anti/love-romance-themed editorial."

—NO LOGO p.39

In some ways, these stories are simply pumped-up versions of the same old tug-of-war between editorial and advertising that journalists have faced for a century and a quarter. Increasingly, however, corporations aren't just asking editors and producers to become their de facto ad agencies by dreaming up ways to plug their wares in articles and photo shoots, they are also asking magazines to become their actual ad agencies by helping them to create the ads that run in their magazines. More and more magazines are turning their offices into market-research firms and their readers into focus groups in an effort to provide the most cherished "value-added" they can offer their clients: highly detailed demographic information about their readership, amassed through extensive surveys and questionnaires.

—NO LOGO p.41

gorged itself on product placement by asking for clothes, furniture, even cars, in exchange for a guaranteed amount of film time. To punctuate the story, Matt yanked his foot in the air to show off the 700 euro pair of boots he had finagled from a company two films ago.

So, as we sat there that beery afternoon, the idea of KMZ Gear was born. We would contact all of these companies, see how much we could wheedle out of them and then expose exactly how we had wheedled in the magazine—a little how-to guide and a culture jam in the honourable tradition of *Adbusters*.



Citizen K also offers its readers lovely shopping pages and a convenient list of their advertisers' contact information.

The **impositions of advertising** have been well documented and as we browsed newsstands, we realized exactly how hard it was to differentiate between catalogues and magazines. A recent *Vogue* magazine started with 75 pages of advertising and a 380-page issue of *Citizen K* featured 127 pages of advertising plus another 103 pages of **product placement** consisting of either product reviews or fashion spreads, complete with information on how and where to buy. Then there's the case of a **new European magazine** that sold the cover as ad-space to a major sporting goods manufacturer.

Ahead magazine has published 25 issues out of Vienna and Berlin since its conception in 1995. *Ahead* claims to be 'the uni-sex magazine about fashion, entertainment, future and all-day art.' For a 2002 issue, they sold their cover to a sporting goods manufacturer and devoted an eight-page interior fashion spread to that same manufacturer. With the money, they were able to produce a beautiful vellum overleaf for the magazine. The publisher and creative director, Alexander Geringer, said such partnerships are "the way you have to create things in the 21st century."

"My friends and I started *Ahead* to express the way we see the world. Mostly the advertisers are contacting us and we decide what we like to do and what we want...when we have the possibility of realizing our way of thinking with the help of advertisers, we are thankful...people don't get confused—the way we are doing the cover is more important than our association with advertisers...we understand *Ahead* is a lifestyle magazine and lifestyle is always related to products and to consuming." — Alexander Geringer



The use of a particular brand of candy in this film is considered a landmark of product placement. Sales went up an estimated 65% following its release.



Granted, product placement is a known phenomenon; the average media consumer has been deluged with masked advertising in everything from **E.T.** to Seinfeld but the idea of exposing the tool in full and perhaps inspiring others to take up arms was very appealing.

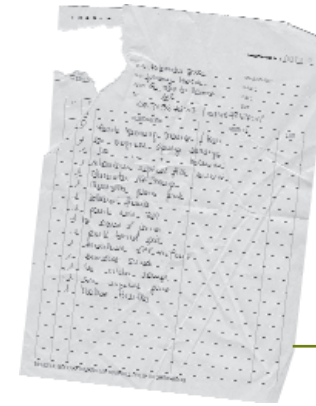
The first thing we had to do was figure out what we were doing. We called a friend of ours, Alison, who has been working as an advertising manager for big-market magazines for more than a decade. She told us companies were eager to associate their products with new media projects. “You’ll probably get too much,” she said and gave a few tips on **approaches to use and buzz words to drop.**

Alison told us how magazines used product placement to build bonds with advertisers. ‘It’s almost as if this much coverage gets you that much advertising.’ She cited the example of a magazine she worked at wanting advertising from a leading vodka distiller. She approached the company and offered to place the vodka in several photo spreads as a way to sweeten their budding commercial relationships.

kilometer zero
Advertising Policy
1. Kilometer Zero magazine does not accept advertising.

In a small way, we also had to cover our tracks. *Kilometer Zero* is a left-of-centre magazine that **doesn’t accept advertising** and tries in its own small way to attack traditional corporate and political thinking. So this was the story we came up with: *Kilometer Zero* had been bought by a big media company who was now insisting that we start a fashion section so we could have broader market appeal.

That done, we began inventing story lines. To get sports-wear, we used the fictional idea of shooting hip young Parisians watching the World Cup on television while wearing certain brands; for watches, it was models rushing into the metro or out of a café while glancing at their watch; suitcases? a spread on how the always-on-the-go Paris set pack their **brand name luggage.**



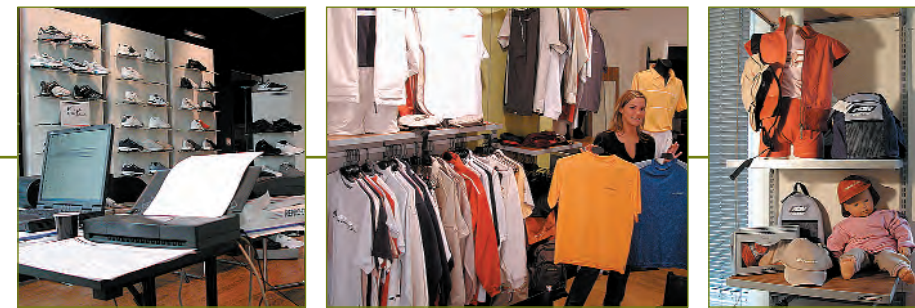
How easy is it to get stuff? Just show up, say you’re from a magazine and sign your name. Don’t have a magazine? Pick up a copy of an obscure yet beautiful magazine from your newsstand and claim association with it. Or better yet, say you’re with *Kilometer Zero* and report back to us...

It was dead easy. For our first try, we phoned the American headquarters of an international sportswear company. The public relations team joyfully gave us the phone number of the Paris-based product placement liaison and we were on our way. Once we were on the phone with Aurélie it was blissful: “Oh, you mean you want to do some shopping!”

Aurélie told us to bring a copy of *Kilometer Zero* and we set an hour the next day to meet. Almost every major company has a ‘shopping’ service for media representatives allowing them to borrow or take products. In the case of this sporting goods company, there was a special room in the back very much like any retail store at your local mall but with no cashier or sales clerks or price tags. There were dozens of pairs of sleek shoes, **hundreds of shirts and jerseys** and a colourful selection of shorts and leggings.

It was an unnerving experience: the weight of the ruse, the adrenaline rush, the thief’s sweat. Clothes and shoes were stuffed into bags without question—almost 2000 euros worth and all that was needed was a **signature on a sheet** and a vague promise of return.

The rest of the project went just as smoothly. In some cases we dealt directly with the company, in others it was private communication firms that held the contracts for publicizing a handful of major brands. Everyone was eager to help, nobody asked any difficult questions. There was a niggling concern for the people we were burning; in most cases, the product placement representatives eagerly forging careers in marketing. Would there be fallout for Aurélie, Delphine, Phillippe, Samantha and the other helpful souls? Well, in the end we couldn’t be sure but we’ll send them a copy of this magazine and hope they understand.





All told, we approached more than 40 companies and received a **mass of items** worth more than 15,000 euros. Designer goods grew into an awkward heap in a corner of our office—don't ask us about **the leak**. The question began to weigh: what were we going to do with the bounty?

We had intended to give the clothes to a children's charity but some odd visions crept in: trooping into the poor suburbs and dispensing items to outstretched hands like war-zone aid workers; setting up a big party with a charity and calling in the media for a bonanza of fun; commandeering a truck and driving the items to Afghanistan. In the end, we actually started talking to local charities and worrying about what we had done.



The squat where we live and produce this magazine in is an abandoned building owned by a giant international insurance company. The building was empty for eight years before being squatted in 2000. It's scheduled for major renovations in 2003 because of structural problems such as this leak. Let us just say a few of the clothes got a little wet... (if you're wondering, the company is taking serious action against us in the French courts and we will probably have been expelled from the property by the time you read this).

Deep down, we knew there was something distasteful about ostentatiously celebrating our act of charity but we did need some photos of events to run along with this article. Then, several of the associations were worried about how a one-time windfall of expensive clothes might affect their work in the community. Would the children expect more such events? There was matching concern for what we were actually giving—brand worship among children from families who cannot afford brands is an acknowledged social woe. Much debate amongst the Kilometer Zero family resulted in one overriding principle: we had come into possession of things that were needed and wanted in the community and it would be shameful to not do some good with them. But that good could include a message.



What we did was separate the items into three piles. In the smallest were clothes made by the company we considered to be the most despicable. Those we shredded and took to a community street fair where we made **kites** for small children with the material. The second pile was made up of sportswear and we wrapped up the clothes in plain paper and gave the gifts to participants in a **football match** played between children from Paris and Marseilles. The final pile of clothes we gave to an association that assists newly-immigrated families to France.

And there you have it. Almost. From the very beginning there was the tiniest inclination to help ourselves. We are not the richest of folk and some days the baguette and wine money is scarce which means major purchases such

as replacements for eroded shoes are often not realistic. Why not something for Kilometer Zero's needy feet? And thus, the slippage began. A pair of sunglasses was pinched from a shopping bureau, and then sandals that had been sweated-out by a previous magazine's model were borrowed for a trip south. Finally, it was summer, it was Paris, there was a bag full of designer sandals and there were a lot of **hot feet around the office**. Communities are human and humans are weak. We hope our integrity hasn't become tainted; all we wanted to do with the Robin Hood project was step into the battle and lob a stone.

—Jeremy Mercer



For more information or if you have ideas for your own Kilometer Zero project, contact robinhood@kilometerzero.org