How Apple Used Dramatic Outdoor Ads for the Surprise Reveal of AirPods Pro

When Apple launched AirPods three years ago, there was some understandable skepticism from consumers about the wireless devices. Would they stay in your ear? (Conan O'Brien doubted it.) Would they hold a charge? Would they really replace the wired earbuds that had been an iconic part of Apple's aesthetic since the iPod's "Silhouettes" campaign launched in 2003?

The answer, in case you haven't walked down a city street, worked in an open-plan office or seen a high schooler in the past year, was yes. AirPods proved a massive success for Apple and quickly became the dominator in the emerging category of wireless earbuds.

So when it came time to launch the device's first real evolution, AirPods Pro, Apple was in an enviable position. Instead of just selling (and laboriously explaining) a piece of technology, the brand could focus on unveiling a piece of culture.

Breaking from tradition, there would be no keynote address from CEO Tim Cook announcing the new earbuds. But that wasn't the only change from the brand's longtime marketing playbook. Bold advertising for the AirPods Pro would get a premium placement no product had gotten before and, according to those involved with the campaign, no product might get again: massive outdoor ads across the fronts of Apple's most dramatic retail spaces.

Apple and creative agency TBWA\Media Arts Lab revealed the AirPods Pro through a two-phase outdoor campaign. First, giant and unbranded images of dancers appeared on 16 outdoor boards

and across the facades of 17 Apple Store locations in major global markets. After the AirPods Pro were announced, the images—some more than 40 feet in height—were updated to include the new devices in the dancers' ears.



A Singapore placement, before the AirPods Pro were revealed.



The Singapore location, after the product was added.

Despite the limited number of placements, the process of developing the launch campaign was a complex one.

More than 30,000 photos of the dancers—some professionals, some not—were taken to find the perfect images. Creative, media and brand teams worked closely to create images that would work with the dimensions of each unique ad placement, including the storefronts, in cities like New York, Los Angeles, London, Tokyo, Paris, Dubai and Milan.

The goal of the photography selection was to find images of what the team called “in-between moments,” shots that would convey being caught up in the music rather than posing dramatically for the camera.



Paris ad placement, before product reveal.



Paris ad placement, after reveal.
Aside from looking less traditionally ad-like, the visual approach was also meant to convey a new feature of the AirPods Pro, “active noise cancellation” that blocks outside sounds (which can then be allowed in through “transparency mode” enabled by microphones built into the earbuds).

While ads for the original AirPods focused on the liberating aspects of wearing them in public, the launch ads took it a step further by showing the models enjoying their own worlds in a way reminiscent of 2018’s “Welcome Home” spot starring FKA twigs.



UAE ad placement, before product reveal.



UAE ad placement, after reveal.

Another way the campaign highlighted freedom from limitations was in how it broke the edges of its outdoor boards and other out-of-home placements, with dancers' arms and legs extending beyond the usual borders of each medium. For the outdoor boards, media agency OMD specifically looked for placements that would allow for extensions, including one that extended 15 feet outside the edge of a placement on Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles.

Because of the widely different placements—both in terms of specs and surfaces—adding the AirPods Pro into the ads for the second phase required a labor-intensive plan for each ad. In some, the earbuds could be added through a relatively simple visual patch over the original image. In others, the entire towering piece of creative had to be replaced entirely.



Apple Store placement in China.



Apple Store placement in Milan.



Out-of-home placement in Germany.

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