



ADELE T. CHAVEZ / Anchorage Daily News

Joe Budrow, Jackie Thornton and Rick Thornton show off their newly painted city bus Wednesday.

Beauty and the bus

Wholesaler wants to stop traffic with mobile billboard

By ALYSON PYTTE
Daily News business reporter

Anchorage does not have the billboards that dot cityscapes in the Lower 48, so when advertisers want to do something really big, they paint a bus.

The result is a 40-foot-long cow on wheels and Bart Simpson surrounded by a sea of pink. The buses drive tirelessly through the city encouraging consumers to drink Matanuska Maid milk and watch Channel 4 television.

As of today, Arctic Beauty and Barber Supply Inc. has a bus that tells you how to wash and style your hair.

Decorated with shampoo bottles, company logos and other graphics in magenta, teal, black, gray, lavender and green, the mobile billboard will cost the company more than \$20,000

over two years. That's out of about \$80,000 the wholesaler has spent to advertise Matrix Essentials Inc. beauty products since it became Alaska's sole distributor a year ago.

"In my opinion, for the money it is the best advertising available," said Rick Thornton, president of Arctic Beauty. Running the bus for two years costs about the same, he said, as six full-page color newspaper ads, but does a better job of grabbing attention.

Thornton had to wait eight months to find a bus he could use; the Transit Department limits the number of painted buses to 10 percent of the fleet. The department also reviews design proposals, said Gary Taylor, manager of operations and maintenance, to make sure nothing "obnoxious or obscene"

goes on city buses. Included among banned ads are cigarette and liquor promotions.

The Transit Department pockets \$7,500 a year for each painted bus under a two-year contract, with the option of a third year. The city pays to paint over the original People Mover design, and advertisers do the rest.

Arctic Beauty paid Alaska Neon Design about \$5,000 to make over its bus.

Advertising industry executives say the high cost of these mobile billboards make them a risky investment for some companies. Clark Mishler, who came up with the original People Mover design and is now a photographer and marketing consultant, said full-body bus

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BUS: Rolling billboards are a hefty investment

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ads should never be a substitute for basic marketing.

"It's fun, but it's supplemental at best," he said.

Painted buses work best for "universal products," Mishler said — that is, products such as milk or television shows that can be sold to almost anyone. Otherwise, advertisers are better off targeting their promotions to the group of people most likely to buy.

Mishler and Rod Bradley, chairman of Bradley Communications, an advertising firm, were skeptical that a painted bus was the best way to sell wholesale products. "I would think if you're selling (wholesale) beauty supplies, you know who your buyers are," Bradley said.

But Thornton said he approaches advertising as a retailer, even though he sells no products to the general public. About 350 of the 400 salons in Alaska already market Matrix products, he said. Now he wants customers who go to those salons to ask for the product by name.

One reason Thornton and his Arctic Beauty co-owners, who include his wife, Jackie, his brother Jim and partner Joe Budrow, were able to invest such a hefty portion of their advertising budget in a painted bus is because they do not carry the entire burden for promoting Matrix beauty products in Alaska.

Matrix Essentials Inc., based in Solon, Ohio, has a multimillion-dollar national advertising budget. In addition, the company reim-

burses Alaska salons, and Thornton, for half their advertising costs if Matrix products are named. That reimbursement is capped at \$4,000 a year.

The company also pays for a full-time Alaska employee to visit salons and educate stylists about how to use and promote Matrix

shampoos, conditioners, gels and other products.

Matrix did not cover any of the costs of Arctic Beauty's painted bus. But Thornton said he is convinced enough the investment will pay off to be planning a permanent wave and hair-color coach for next year.

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