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STREET TALK

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Local A/C Guys Pimp Big Rig on “Trick My Truck”

by Amy Biegelsen

Careful viewers of Friday's episode of “Trick My Truck” — Country Music Television's answer to MTV's “Pimp My Ride” — could see something slightly larger than the trucker lifestyle niche.

There between the novelty snow machine blowing out the back and the snowmobile runners mounted on the front was a plug for the battery-operated air conditioning system, made by Mechanicsville-based Dometic Environmental Corp.

The mention was brief, but for Dometic, it amounted to a new rite of passage among retail businesses: the niche-reality TV show appearance.

Niche-reality programs such as ABC's “Extreme Makeover: Home Edition” and TLC's “Miami Ink” (which the channel describes as its “hot show about the art and drama of tattooing”) offer small businesses national exposure without the cost of a national advertising campaign.

“Anytime you're doing that, you're trying to create an association between two brands where the stronger brand pulls up the weaker brand,” says Kelly O'Keefe, a professor at Virginia Commonwealth University's Brandcenter.

“I think people place way too much emphasis on how much actual feet-on-the-street [effect] in the marketplace” it creates, he says. “It's good for credibility, but not a lot of people are going to come rushing to Richmond” based on a show.

Maybe not, but some businesses have been able to capitalize on the afterglow. The Food Network featured Dot's Back Inn, a North Side diner, on the May 8 episode of “Diners, Drive-ins and Dives.” Emily Righter, the restaurant's head waitress, says that appearing on the show led to a huge crunch right after the episode aired. While it's tapered some, she had tables this month seated with diners from Utah and New Hampshire who made sure to include a visit to Dot's after seeing it on the show.

Priya Raghuram, a consumer psychology professor at the University of California, Berkeley's business school, says product placement is tried and true, going back to the beginnings of television. But the new lifestyle shows offer a niche audiences preselected for interest in their topics

The shows offer “a very, very niche-focused audience who would truly be interested,” she says. “So that should have a high-buzz content.”