

Blurring the line

Sometimes it is hard to know where the PR pitch ends and the feature story begins. Such is often the case on Food Network (even so, one of my favorites). Last night, on a program called Heavyweights, three very large fast food chains were featured. It was a “behind the scenes” look at everything these retailers do to produce a particular meal or the innovations they have created. In a sense, this was a puff piece. There was no critical look or journalist doing the interviewing. In fact, the spokespeople for each of these chains was telling the public, directly, all the great things the chains do to bring “great” food to the consumer. This is beyond a feature piece or a review. I am sure it must be a way for Food Network to give added value to certain advertisers. There is no other explanation. They have other shows like this too. Is it wrong? No. It is a boon to these advertisers, which receive an editorial type endorsement and lots of great exposure. But is it real TV? No. It is an advertorial and it is too bad it is not labeled as such. Magazines have been doing this for years—creating special sections for say, the hotel industry—and pitching it to advertisers as a chance to tell their own story, without the journalistic filter. But the difference is, these sections are nearly always listed (maybe in very fine print) as advertising or advertorial.