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Subway Tunnels Become Latest Frontier for Ads

In London, Several Firms Are Developing Ways To Shine Images on Walls

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LONDON – The commute to work could soon be like a trip to the movies.

Several companies are developing technology to allow motion-picture advertisements to be projected on the walls of subway tunnels. The gizmos are based on the same theory as a movie projector, but with a twist. “When you see a film, you sit still and the film moves past the shutter very quickly,” says Josh Spodek, co-founder of Submedia LLC, a New York-based start-up that is exploring technology to project these kinds of ads. “Here, the film is sitting still and you are moving.”

As companies seek more and more ways to display their messages, subway tunnels may be one of the latest frontiers. Already, outdoor advertising has developed in the past several years from rundown billboards to rotating displays on bus shelters and branded chairs in airport lounges.

There are several different competing technologies, and developers are keeping details under wraps. But put simply, the idea is to use the walls of subway tunnels like the flip-books children play with: They show a picture of one image on a page and then the same image, altered slightly on the next page. By flipping the pages rapidly, the image appears to move.

The idea appeals to transit authorities, who, if the technology works, are sitting on a whole new source of advertising revenue. “It is something we are very interested in,” says Jan O’Neill, spokeswoman for the London Underground, which operates the city’s sub-

way system.

The London Underground has spoken to London-based Metrocom, which has developed a technology to project ads in subway tunnels although no decision has been reached to push ahead.

Ms. O’Neill notes that safety is one consideration. Past proposals to project images in subway tunnels used flashing images, and if a subway car stopped in the middle of a tunnel—a common occurrence for London’s decrepit system—passengers watched the flashing image nonstop until the train moved again. This caused problems for children and epileptics.

The idea appeals to transit authorities, who may have a new source of advertising revenue.

Installation wouldn’t be easy. Subway networks “are sometimes very old,” says Mr. Spodek, “and you have to be sure that whatever you’re adding doesn’t complicate them.” And work in train tunnels could only proceed during limited hours. Ms. O’Neill notes that advertisers would face the risk that if the technology falters in the morning, it would be difficult to fix until train service stops that night, and the advertiser would lose an entire day of face time with travelers.

Various ad agencies, including Bartle Bogle Hegarty in London, have spoken to Metrocom to explore ideas about promoting clients like Levi Strauss & Co. jeans in London’s subway system. But no decisions are imminent. “It could be an interesting opportunity,” says Steve Parker, head of outdoor advertising for Starcom Motive, a media-buying firm part of Bcom3. “But it is a daunting project to consider.”