

The Boston Globe

December 25th 2008

Pushy promotions

In '08, some ads gained attention, good and bad, by being bold, sassy



Rachael Ray and the Dunkin' Donuts back flak from bloggers who claimed a scarf she wore was a keffiyeh.

By Brian Steinberg | Globe Correspondent | December 25, 2008

Rather than enticing and flattering us, as they often do, many marketers opted to be rude. They brought up crass subjects, hijacked popular events, and even called some of us names.

These days, marketers push harder than ever. Would-be customers have become surrounded by commercials all day long, from the computer screen at the office to the TV screen at home. And people are eager to zap past all these clusters of promotions, whether with a mouse click or a DVR. The slumping stock market and credit crisis have made things even worse.

So, advertisers have grown brassier and sassier. In 2008, they pressed deeper into the Boston Marathon and posted mouthy fish on the MBTA. And, of course, they appealed to our sense of financial panic by talking about low prices and massive discounts.

With this in mind, the Globe sifted through ads from Boston-related agencies and marketers and came up with five advertising wonders and five blunders. Also included are a few honorable mentions. You may not agree with our choices, but here are the ads that caught our attention this year.

HITS

IT

WI

"fo

WI

A I

ma

tak

THE BEST OF THE REST

Owater, of Concord, made a splash by luring Red Sox outfielder Jacoby Ellsbury to promote its line of water, and even gave him a small stake in the firm.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

What: Food Network personality Alton Brown gets scientific on us when touting the health benefits of the flagship drink from Welch's of Concord. He talks about "free radicals," "antioxidants," and "polyphenols" in this academic commercial from the VIA Group of Portland, Maine.

Why: Isn't sweet, purple grape juice for kids? Well, Welch's had marketed itself that way for years, only to see sales decline, said Chris Heye, chief marketing officer.

By touting health benefits, he said, sales have been on the upswing. "It may not be as funny as some other ads, but if they help the consumer and make our product more relevant to the consumer, that's what counts," Heye said.

SCARY TALK

What: New ads from John Hancock and Boston's Hill Holliday scared us in April by featuring people having difficult conversations via instant message. In one, the discussion centers on a couple who move in with their kids because retirement funds wouldn't last. In another, a woman e-chats about ensuring that a father's assets stay in the family should he die.

Why: Dour ads from Hancock have been frightening and depressing us for years - even though they catch our attention by doing so. This time, the ads were quite prescient. We all should have been talking about our financial health in April.

ATHLETES, NOT ATTRIBUTES

What: Roger Federer, Tiger Woods, and Derek Jeter use their athletic skills to prompt guys to choose Gillette's five-blade Fusion razor over its older Mach3 model.

Why: Gillette's advertisements have largely been about performance and product attributes - close shaves, great design, and so forth. That formula can fall flat, as was the case in a super-wonky 2006 Gillette Super Bowl ad that showed how Fusion represented the combination of "a revolutionary technology" and "a unique idea." Yawn. This time, Gillette gets it right by lacing in humor and celebrities.

IT'S OUR OLYMPICS, TOO

What: Timberland Co. wasn't an official sponsor of the Summer Olympics, but that didn't stop the Stratham, N.H., company from horning in. In an ad that aired in China and on national US cable during the athletic events, a man makes his way across rough terrain to a snow-crested mountain peak wearing Timberland footwear.

Why: Just because you don't pony up millions of dollars like Coke or McDonald's doesn't mean you can't play to an Olympic audience. During an investor conference call, the company said the ad drove e-commerce traffic and increased orders on its US site by 23 percent from the four-week period before the advertising was launched.

MISSES

RACHAEL RAY INVASION

What: Conservative bloggers insisted a black-and-white wrap worn by celebrity chef Rachael Ray in a Web ad for Canton-based Dunkin' Donuts was a keffiyeh, or traditional headdress worn by Arab men, and was thus insensitive. Dunkin' ultimately pulled the commercial, opting to brew coffee rather than controversy. The intent of the ad "was simply to promote our iced coffee - nothing more, nothing less," said Stephen J. Caldeira, chief global communications and public affairs officer for Dunkin' Brands.

Why: Why anyone would equate Rachael Ray with terrorism is difficult to fathom. No matter how well-intentioned a commercial may be, its ultimate point is in the eye of the beholder, not the marketer.

THE FISH ARE BITING

What: In June, Legal Sea Foods placed ads on the MBTA Green Line featuring wisecracking fish uttering lines such as: "This trolley gets around more than your sister," and "This conductor has a face like a halibut." The idea was to promote the fresh fish served at the company's restaurants, but some MBTA employees took the bait and lashed out at the commercials.

Why: Another case of causing offense when none was intended. Unlike Dunkin', Legal Sea Foods wants to keep casting about. "The business is reacting positively," said Ellis Verdi, chief executive of DeVito/Verdi, the New York ad agency behind the campaign. "It's not an easy climate to find positive business excitement, so it's a good thing. We want to try to continue with it."

A RACE FOR ATTENTION

What: To accommodate sponsors, the Boston Athletic Association discontinued a 112-year-old tradition and allowed ads at the world's oldest annual marathon. Signs from Adidas and John Hancock - 26 ads in all - were allowed to grace the area around the finish line and other places.

Why: With consumers set upon by dozens of ad messages a day, it's no longer enough to simply sponsor an event. So it makes sense that Hancock and Adidas wanted to take an extra step and become more of a part of the race.

Even so, consumers accustomed to an ad-free race might find the new commercials

BOOK UP! - THE AD USED TO BE THE SEXY SWEETIE THAT ALSO MEANS GETTING CONNECTED.

Why: Young consumers can be motivated through any number of clever appeals: inspiration, word of mouth, acting hip. Several marketers - retailers Abercrombie & Fitch and American Apparel among them - have chosen to use ads that appeal to young folks' hormones.

Comcast's effort - which marks the third year the company has tried to reach out to the 250,000 college students who arrive in the Boston area each fall - caught the attention of Globe columnist Yvonne Abraham, who suggested Comcast was "selling its cable services using a sexual proposition."

In a statement, Comcast spokesman Jim Hughes said, "We use a variety of creative methods to reach this audience, including street teams on Segway scooters, banner ads on social-networking sites, and opt-in text messaging for students who want to learn more about our voice, video, and high-speed Internet services. Since we launched this seasonal campaign in 2006, the response has been very positive."

NOW THAT'S VIRAL!

What: Wakefield's Agion Technologies unveiled a second season of Web videos, crafted by Watertown agency Captains of Industry, featuring actress Florence Henderson in a "Brady Bunch" sendup called "That's Revolting." Her family contends with mucus, raw meat, and hamster droppings, among other things, while viewers were asked to locate all the potentially harmful microbes these materials create.

Why: This stuff is revolting! The series was meant to garner recognition for the Wakefield biotech concern and demonstrate how its products fight bacteria. "We weren't at all disappointed in the results," said Cyndy Hunter, Agion's director of marketing. "Some people don't think it's funny, but others did. Any kind of attention is good attention."

THE BEST OF THE REST

Owater, of Concord, made a splash by luring Red Sox outfielder Jacoby Ellsbury to promote its line of water, and even gave him a small stake in the firm.

If playful animated polar bears work for Coca-Cola, why not for National Grid? The power company introduced a virtual polar bear named Floe in ads crafted by Wexham's Mullen.

For those about to buy a rock album, we salute you! Boston's Arnold Worldwide helped promote Wal-Mart's exclusive launch of AC/DC's first album in eight years.

Brian Steinberg is the television editor of Advertising Age. ■