

MARKETING *Benchmarks*

8 viewpoints on humor in advertising

Does humorous advertising work? In a word, no – at least not in the opinion of about every advertising expert on record. Not that their near-unanimous thumbs down will stop self-serving admen from making the experiment, as long as the client's money holds out.

Take Legal Sea Foods of Boston, for instance, a company with 33 fish restaurants on the East Coast. Its agency talked Roger Berkowitz, Legal Sea Food's owner, into plunking down \$150,000 for transit ads featuring a "fresh" fish that beguiled passengers with lines like, "Hey, Lady, I've seen smaller noses on a swordfish."

Sal DeVito, boss creative director of the agency, DeVito/Verdi of New York, claims that its kind of advertising works. "Our philosophy is based on a view that our job is to capture a truth either about the product or the consumer that will resonate."

Claptrap, writes Denny Hatch, a veteran adman and editor of the Business Common Sense newsletter.

"Advertising is aimed at two groups of people: existing customers and prospects," he says. And "funny" ads "are a total waste of money."

"This kind of clowning by the DeVito/Verdi agency is what you find in London, where smarty-pants creatives are hoping to force the reader/viewer to connect puzzling dots, which means that the product or service is lost in a blizzard of cleverness."

Ed McCabe, president of BMG Music Service, agrees.

In fact, he writes, "Every time we get creative, we lose money."

David Ogilvy, the legendary modern adman, also turned thumbs down on efforts to amuse in advertising.

"You should try to charm the consumer into buying your product," he advised. "That doesn't mean that your advertisements should be cute or comic.

People don't buy from clowns."

Financial-services advertisers invested \$13.4 billion in direct marketing in 2007 and generated \$178.8 billion in sales from it.

— Direct Marketing Association

Showco founder Jack Maxson chimes in, "Your job is to sell, not entertain."

Three possibilities make humor in advertising an iffy idea:

- 1) Your sense of humor may turn off your audience. To quote David Ogilvy again, "People don't buy from bad-mannered salesmen, and research has shown that they don't buy from bad-mannered advertisements."
- 2) Your audience may not understand your joke. In which case you accomplish nothing but to confuse people, when your aim should be to burn in your offer as attractively as possible.
- 3) Your humor may tickle your audience pink, in which case the joke will distract your potential customers from what you are selling.

Keep smiling. But heed the advice of the Benton & Bowles advertising agency: **"If it doesn't sell, it's not creative."**



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