

## A D C L I N I C

## He Who Gets the Last Laugh . . . May Not Buy the Product

By Gary Zenker

**H**umor is one of the best ways to make someone remember you. It is also one of the most dangerous ways to sell a product.

While the two statements seem contradictory, together they still represent a truth in advertising.

Humorous ads have tremendous potential for recall. Recall is important in creating branch identity and loyalty, which can, if properly used, lead to increased sales. The problem is that very few people are good at using humor to actually promote products successfully.

Some misplace humor. The things that are presented as being funny just aren't, or are misinterpreted by the viewer. What an ad, especially a humorous one, *doesn't* want to do is allow for too many interpretations. Also, it must be funny enough for a majority of the audience to remember the product or service in a positive manner. Remembering the ad, but thinking it stupid, is not the kind of recall on which one typically relies for eventual sales.

Sometimes, the humor backfires. Ethnic or gender sensitivity can be aggravated. Poking fun at a competitor seems like fair game for most of us with a bit of competitive spirit. However, a large group of people don't like that kind of approach. A good part of the audience was put off by Burger King's commercials knocking McDonald's in the early 1980s (compare this to the phenomenal success of the more positive "We try harder because we're number 2" by Avis). Granted, neither of these campaigns were that funny, but each was a good example of how ads affect attitudes.

I have to admit that when glancing at some of these types of newspaper ads, I'm left with a negative impression of the bank instead of laughing with the ad. Take, for example, an ad I saw recently, with a wonderfully funny picture of a boardroom full of bankers, asleep in their chairs and entombed in cobwebs. The headline reads, "Every wonder why it takes so long to get real estate financing?" I understand what the purpose of the ad really is: to show that while most banks are slow, the advertising bank is fast. If I were the average reader, I probably would have breezed past the ad, remembering only the illustration and maybe the bank name. The competition could probably not have done a more effective job at discrediting them.

Sometimes the ad *is* funny. However, it fails because you remember the humor

but not the reason for it. This problem occurs most often because the joke has very little to do with the product or service being sold, or with the reason you *should* purchase the product or service. There are a number of syndicated commercials in which a company inserts its product description and company name. In evaluating these, I found that the audience remembered the jokes, but seldom the company sponsoring the ad or the product being offered.

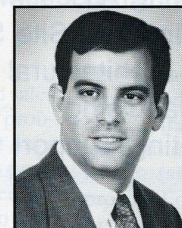
If this whole process seems like we are overanalyzing a joke, it's probably because the humor itself shouldn't hold too much weight. In most cases, the problem with humor in advertising stems from the fact that the humor should be viewed as a means to an end (getting the message across), and not an end unto itself. It seems that too many times, the producer of the ad, and even the advertiser, becomes preoccupied with the humor itself.

There are many examples of excellent humorous ads which work. Think of the Bartles and James commercials which were responsible for the wine coolers sales skyrocketing; or the commercials with the sisters hawking Denny's ten minute lunches. They work not because you want to emulate the characters, but because the humor revolves around the product or an embodiment of the product. An image is conveyed, and the humor helps to stimulate your recall that product. The service or product itself becomes an integral part of the humor.

Successful work is done with humor in banking, as well. A newspaper ad by Norwest promoting their electronic tax filing service (a BMA 1990 Best of Advertising Award winner) illustrates one example of an ad that does use humor well. The illustration is relevant to the product being sold. There is no misinterpretation possible.

There are a number of excellent radio scripts which also do the job well. In fact, there is a school of thought that argues that radio commercials should be funny. Those theorists say that the listener needs to be rewarded for the attention granted to the advertiser. After all, you can't use visuals on radio.

If you use humor, use it carefully and beware: even if they laugh, they may not buy the product. ■



Gary Zenker, marketing director at Progress Federal Savings Bank, Plymouth Meeting, PA, was a judge for BMA's 1990 Best of Advertising Awards.