Wisk blots out stain of `Ring Around Collar'

by Bob Garfield

Advertiser: Unilever
Agency: J. Walter Thompson USA, New York
Ad Review rating: Three and 1/2 stars

What if Jerry Springer hosted a civil, witty, roundtable discussion that commenced the end of gratuitous sex and violence on TV? What if Bill Buckner came out of retirement to lead the Boston Red Sox to the World Series? What if the ghost of Neville Chamberlain appeared at the United Nations, admonishing the world to stop the Serbs before it is too late?

It would be ironic, that's what, because these people are too identified with ugly events to be imagined transforming from monster or coward or scapegoat to hero.

Now consider advertising, where one brand name evokes painful memories of unbearable shrillness, obnoxious and demeaningly stereotyped gender roles. That brand is Wisk, whose "Ring Around the Collar" campaign sold lots of liquid detergent while becoming perhaps the most despised tagline in commercial history, and a dirty, grimy, male-sweat stain on the fabric of the industry.

In the '60s Anacin infamously depicted hammers in the head, but "Ring Around the Collar" was a garrote, grabbing your throat and choking you into submission. Next to Wisk, the Anacin hammers were Lionel Hampton on vibes.
So the last thing you'd expect from this brand is a witty, refreshing, thoughtful commercial about women doing the laundry. Yet Unilever and J. Walter Thompson USA, New York, have somehow pulled it off in a striking new spot that speaks to busy launderers with candor and charm.

"Wisk presents the ten thousand million things we have to do," says the arch female voice-over, "every day:

"Locate stuff." Here we see a woman, half under a bed, searching--in fulfillment of Roseanne Barr's analysis that men think a uterus is a homing device. Indeed, each of the listed duties is accompanied by a whimsical image illustrating it.

"Prevent osteoporosis." A woman sits on a cow, with a glass of milk on her head.

"Conquer flab." This lady's running, running, running--with an ice cream truck as her pace car.

"Train dog." A prize-winning Labrador has a model train balanced on its head.

"Pet husband." He looks like he needs to be reminded how wonderful he is.

"Control frizz." Posing in a topiary garden, she is having such a bad hair day a bird nests in her do.

"Remind kids of family infrastructure." The child is playing in front of a portrait of Mom and Dad, who are decked out as benevolent despots.

"Save the planet." Posed in front of the stars, this woman is thinking good thoughts, no doubt.

"Then," the voice-over continues, "we still have to do the laundry. Really well.

"Good thing Wisk has a targeted cleaning system. Now everything you wash gets done right the first time. Do it once. Do it right."

What's so marvelous about this ad is how it recognizes the responsibilities, concerns and vanities of the busy 1998 woman without pandering or idealizing--or going into an angry tirade. Resigned but
unresentful, it is endearing, self-deprecating and, above all, knowing about the semiliberated American mom.

And, of course--unlike, say, the world community staring another Balkan catastrophe in the face--it even offers to help.

**Correction:** A recent Ad Review column blamed a Bud Light spot about genital size on the wrong agency. It was created by DDB Needham Worldwide, Chicago.

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