Gap secretes sweet smell of ad success

by Bob Garfield

Marketer: The Gap
Agency: In-house
Ad Review rating: Three and a half stars

There was this Sinatra movie in 1959. "Hole in the Head," set in Florida. Sinatra has to meet Cesar Romero, a racketeer, and as they shake hands Frank tries hard to be nonchalant. But Romero has him scoped out.

"Your hand is sweating," he tells Sinatra.

He could sense the fear.

Because you can. When someone is running scared, no matter how they try to camouflage it, you can always sense it. Hell, you can smell it.

In Levi's advertising, you can smell the fear. You can feel the uncertainty. You can taste the desperation. Watching the last three years of work from Foote, Cone & Belding and TBWA/Chiat/Day is like witnessing a drowning.

Not that it's easy to navigate the vagaries of youth fashion, but it's particularly unsettling to watch failure when, right next door, you can witness success. Success--minus the assistance of advertising agency geniuses--as defined by The Gap.

You can sense their confidence. You can sense that this is an organization that makes no wrong steps, and knows it.

Why wouldn't they know it? They have the whole deal figured out. Fashion advertising is about getting people to stare at the fashion and come away impressed with how cool the fashion is. The formula is
obvious, uncomplicated and, for most marketers, completely elusive. Some of these people go to elaborate, tortured lengths to imbue themselves with cool, and yet more often than not, you can feel the sweat on their palms.

Indeed, the alchemy of image creation had gotten so convoluted that The Gap's simple departure of putting irresistible entertainers, clad in the advertised product, against an all-white background was practically revolutionary.

Less wasn't only more, it was much, much more.

No heavy-breathing fashion models, no bizarre vignettes, no implied copulation--just reasonably (but not impossibly) attractive people dancing and singing and looking very good in khakis. The big breakthrough was "Khakis swing," which was simply impossible to take your eyes off of, on first viewing or 101st. Our particular favorite in the series is "Khaki a-go-go," though we also are quite taken with "Khaki country," which managed to be sympathetic towards, ironically detached from and clueless about country music all at the same delicious time.

But now comes yet another perfect iteration of the same formula. It is called, wryly, "Everybody in vests." It's a very slight Zeitgeist joke, because these people aren't daytrading. They are singing Madonna's circa-1985 song, "Dress You Up," dressed . . . in vests. Ha ha.

No dancing this time, no enthralling dynamism; the singers just stand there, four deep and the camera slowly moves left to right as various singers take solos. But if this spot is far more static than the others, it is no less mesmerizing. Indeed, once again you sit and wonder how they did this seemingly endless tracking shot.

You also wonder how they understood the power of this fairly dated, not-quite-hit song when performed by people who sing it not with ironic distance but the coolest of cool detachment. It's as if removing the energy from the performance redistributes it elsewhere. The spot bristles with its potential charge.

As a matter of fact, it bristles with the potential charge of 75 million teen-agers with charge cards, all of whom will be wearing vests by October in every high school and middle school in America.

How does The Gap continue to achieve these phenomena?

Hey, no sweat.

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