Outpost.com fizzes after brilliant intro

by Bob Garfield

Marketer: Outpost.com
Agency: Cliff Freeman & Partners, New York
Ad Review rating: Two stars

Dear Mr. Crain: In your recent column about Outpost.com, you referred to my vocal support of the outrageous introductory campaign and remarked, "Bob believes any kind of advertising, no matter how dumb, tasteless and inane, is acceptable as long as it's on strategy."

I deny this in the strongest possible terms. As you well know, I have long railed against gratuitous tastelessness in advertising. My criticism of the "creative" mentality that sees breaking the rules as an end in itself has been unrelenting, as has my admonition against offending the many in order to impress the few.

Your scurrilous misrepresentation of my viewpoint on this subject (you actually imply I championed the late, unlamented Miller Lite "Dick" campaign) leaves me no choice but to tear the Ad Review chevron off my uniform, turn in my badge and remote, and resign.

But I need your money.

Really, really badly. So, instead, I will resort to name-calling.

Listen here, Sport. Ignore your rancid Rance id and think this thing through rationally. As you correctly observe, Outpost.com's original strategy "was simply to register its name with the viewing public." Mission accomplished. Shooting gerbils through the middle "O" in Outpost.com, and sic-cing wolves on a high-school band will indeed burn a brand name into the viewer's psyche.

But tasteless? I say it was not. These stunts were so hyperbolic, so over-the-top, so essentially silly, they weren't tasteless at all. What they
did, brilliantly, was suggest tastelessness without actually inflicting it. Oh, some people may, like you, feel obliged to take offense. But in impressing the many, it is sometimes perfectly OK to offend the few.

Got that, Bucko?

Now then, as you also observe, what was lost in this introductory campaign was any information about what Outpost.com sells. Point well taken.

On the other hand, for Web site promotion, the all-important Job One is to make the viewer remember the URL. If that means deferring the information portion of the campaign, so be it.

This, Chumley, was obviously the considered decision of Outpost.com and Cliff Freeman & Partners, New York. Another gerbil was destined to drop and, lo and behold, it has.

Outpost.com is on the air with a follow-up campaign that specifically identifies the e-retailer with the computer hardware and software it sells. Three TV ads mimic cheesy sci-fi flicks of the '50s to dramatize the need for the right technology, available at a mouse click. But you don't like these ads either, do you, Champ?

And why? Why doesn't Mr. Smartypants editor in chief big shot like the new campaign?

Because, it stinks, actually.

I hate to admit it, Sparky, but you happen to be dead right on this one. The new ads from Freeman are so busy trying to be funny--in a "Mystery Science Theater 3000" sort of way--that they still fail to impart any useful information whatsoever. In one, we see some funny, dated-looking B-movie footage about "Rhino Man," whose controlling computer lacks sufficient memory, but we learn nothing about why we'd go to Outpost.com to buy more. We learn that Outpost.com sells "Hardware. Software. Answers." But, sheesh, these days, who doesn't?

So, in conclusion, Ace, while your judgment on advertising is only 50% defensible, I have immense respect for your personal fortune. Please continue giving me a tiny percentage of it.

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