So cute, but someone please save the baby

by Bob Garfield

Marketer: Michelin North America
Agency: DDB Worldwide, New York
Rating: Three and a half stars

Speaking for ourselves personally, we've never been big fans of Michelin North America's U.S. advertising. Putting aside for a moment Bibendum (that revolting, happily waving anthropomorphic maggot), we've always been put off by the babies in the tires.

It's not the babies per se that bother us. We are in favor of babies. And it's not as though we don't appreciate the coy little wordplay in the safety message. "There's a lot riding on your tires"--i.e., the lives of your children. We get that.

What has always troubled us was the image of adorable little babies sitting--helplessly, in our view--in the center of a Michelin and scooting around the road, cooing and grinning, completely oblivious to potential hazards . . . such as oncoming trucks. Our reaction has never been, "Gosh, Michelin sure protects our most precious cargo." Our reaction has always been, "OH, MY GOD! SOMEONE SAVE THAT BABY!"

It's a visceral alarm that years of familiarity with the image have done nothing to alleviate. Michelin, via DDB Worldwide, New York, obviously wishes to communicate peace of mind. (And we readily acknowledge that many consumers understand the brand benefit in precisely that way.) But the only message we ourselves are getting is exactly the opposite.

Anyway, until now.

The company is on the air with a new spot that brilliantly leverages years of equity in the safety positioning, aimed at precisely the target
audience most concerned with the message: Young mothers.

The scene is a baby shower, eight or 10 young women celebrating a friend's imminent motherhood. The guest of honor is opening gifts, and the room is full of baby-shower enthusiasm. Gasps. Squeals of (ostensible) surprise and delight. Lots of laughter and kisses. It is a flawlessly rendered dramatization of feminine group behavior at its most empathetic, and everybody is having such a good time.

"Oh, this is sooooooo cute!" the mom-to-be says as she displays a set of sleepers. Then we see her opening another gift. "A baby monitor! I love it!"

Then, an infant's car seat. "It's beautiful!" Those last two items, of course, are standard child-protection merchandise, but as it turns out they are not the last word in the category, because--amid excited expectation from the gathered women--the expectant mom is opening another large package with a very familiar shape.

"You guys . . . you didn't," the guest of honor says. "You did!"

Yes, someone bought her a Michelin tire.

"And guess what?" three other guests joyously shout all at once. "We got you a matching set!"

A shower gift of four Michelins, because, as the voice-over once again observes, "so much is riding on your tires."

As a practical matter, that's a pretty extravagant present, although it is entirely possible this single TV commercial will actually stimulate a certain level of baby-shower tire giving. One way or another, though, the spot's superb writing, acting, editing and direction vividly hammers home the selling idea years of tire babies have established. The adorable little road hazards have been meant to have an emotional appeal that cuts through mere rational thought on the subject.

As we have seen, that emotion has cut two ways. In the baby shower spot, however, there is no room for misplaced anxiety. It is a pure expression of brand meaning in a familiar setting. And, while the spot doesn't show us any babies--in jeopardy or otherwise--it certainly is adorable.

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