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BOB GARFIELD'S AD REVIEW

TD Waterhouse makes the trade with celebs

by Bob Garfield

Advertiser: TD Waterhouse

Agency: Emmerling Post, New York

Ad Review Rating: Three stars

Here are two ambitious ideas if you have a lot of money and you are a fool:

- 1) Run for president, promoting some crackpot flat tax, even though you have the speech patterns and intellectual gravitas of Barney. For extra credit, do this twice.
- 2) Mount an extravagant advertising campaign, featuring elaborate productions and big-buck celebrities with no connection to your product whatsoever.

Nobody, of course, would be self-delusional enough to try Idea No. 1. It would be just too expensive and humiliating. But it's rather astonishing how often people go for No. 2.

As we have said repeatedly, celebrities are seldom used in support of an advertising idea; they're used in place of an advertising idea. Whether its Chevy Chase for Dollar Rent-a-Car, or Eleanor Roosevelt for Good Luck margarine or--our particular favorite--Charles Barkley for Hyundai, such advertising depends entirely on borrowed interest, albeit not much of it.

The principal brand benefit is the senior vice president for marketing's ability to drop the celebrity's name in the men's grill after 18 holes. ("Yeah, Charles cultivates this feisty persona, but believe me, he's a sweetheart. And great with my kids!")

So, to recap: There is never, ever a reason to use random celebrities in big commercial spectaculars.

Um, except for sometimes.

Such as the new TD Waterhouse online brokerage campaign from Emmerling Post, New York, which trots out--with little apparent connection--Geena Davis, Phil Jackson and Jackie Chan. Quite (sigh) effectively.

The premise, such that it is, is that the celebs are in the middle of trying to trade securities on-line when they are interrupted by the business of their famous lives. Davis is being called to her scene in a 16th century period drama. Jackson is coming to Los Angeles to coach the Lakers. Chan is busy being attacked by a band of ninjas. In each case, the star is frustrated by the distraction because it is delaying that final mouse click to complete the e-trade transaction.

So, yes, this is an optical-fiber-thin connection between these personalities and the brand. It can therefore only succeed as advertising if the vignettes instantly engage the viewer and keep his attention till the endframe payoff: \$12 online trades.

Which, against all odds, these spots all do. The only true logical casting choice is coach Jackson, who sets off the action by arriving in L.A. and telling reporters "I think I'm gonna make a trade." The city misunderstands and commotion ensues.

The best spot, though, is with Davis, who is practically dragged to the movie set by an assistant director to shoot her scene. The whole movie-within-a-commercial is done with fetching, comical (and expensive) verisimilitude--at least, until Davis grabs a bow and arrow (Get it? She's a world-class archer) and hits a bull's-eye on her laptop's "place order" icon.

Granted, Geena Davis isn't exactly synonymous with personal finance, but the action and dialogue are so clever we're with her every frame of the way. Same with the Jackson spot, and the same with Jackie Chan.

It's demoralizing to even witness such a thing, because the success of this campaign will only encourage others, less deft and less lucky, to make the same old mistakes. It's also frightening to think that the combination of money and a famous name could yield such success.

President Barney? Dear God. What would it cost to trade now?

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