

MEDIA & MARKETING

Advertising / *By Brian Steinberg*

Ordinary People Starring in Ads Convey Realistic, Genuine Feel

Plain Folk Portray Retirees In Ameriprise's New Spots; Actors Felt 'Too Staged'

THE 30-SECOND COMMERCIAL has long been the province of beautiful actors and actresses with gleaming white teeth. But amid questions about the effectiveness of traditional ads, marketers are increasingly opting for plain folks or clips of real events as a way to make their commercials more compelling.

When Ameriprise Financial, formerly American Express Financial Advisors, began the casting process for a new ad campaign designed to lure baby boomers to its services, the firm was going to use actors to portray retirees. But the thespians just didn't feel right.

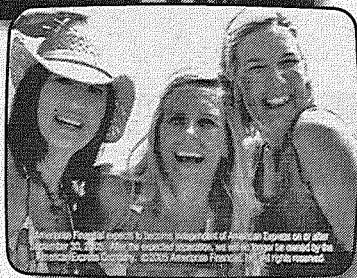
"We found that it was too staged," says Kim Sharan, chief marketing officer of the company, which is in the process of being spun off by American Express. When actors were asked to play out what they'd be doing in retirement, she says, they "just didn't seem to be genuinely able to envision what that would look like."

Instead Ameriprise's ad agency, Publicis Groupe's Saatchi & Saatchi, recruited average people. Those appearing in the campaign include Yoshi and Kyoko Kosaka, a couple in their 50s who run a vintage bike shop. Ameriprise will put a public-relations spotlight on some of these individuals over the course of the campaign, and some will talk to the media. The ads will launch today, airing on network television, in high-profile shows such as ABC's "Lost."

Ad executives believe that consumers have grown resistant to the type of slick, polished commercials that have long dominated the promotional landscape. They say the growth of reality programming on television and proliferation of amateur video on the Web means people are growing accustomed to seeing raw footage. For ads to get attention, they need to have a more realistic look, executives say.

"The new big deal is authenticity," says Mark Wnek, chairman and chief creative officer of the New York office of Interpublic Group's Lowe Worldwide. Using average Joes and Janes in more creative fashion is an idea that "is accelerating, gaining purchase."

To be sure, ads have long featured plain folks, such as commercials showing people taste-testing soda. Then again, some ads use actors posing as ordinary people. Figuring out who is real and who's not isn't always easy.



Real people figure prominently in new ads from Ameriprise Financial.

But more advertisers are opting not to use actors. A recent campaign from Unilever's Dove, which features real women rather than models, captured widespread attention.

Other ads echo bizarre stunts enacted in reality-TV programs and video clips posted on the Web. Ads for ConAgra Foods' Slim Jim snacks, crafted by Crispin Porter + Bogusky, show people doing extreme-sports stunts. Ads from Vonage, the provider of Internet-based telephone service, use real clips of people suffering accidents and pratfalls. One spot, created by Havas's Arnold Worldwide Partners, uses video of a skier taking a leap off a roof on to a pickup truck. The scenes are culled from a number of sources, including the TV program "America's Funniest Home Videos."

The Vonage advertising "stops people, at least for a second," says Matthew Lindley, an executive creative director at Arnold. "There is a strange honesty to it."

Reality has its limits. Many of these ads are likely to attract younger consumers, who have more Internet experience and more interest in reality television, say ad executives. That isn't necessarily a problem for advertisers, however, as young people are the audience coveted by many marketers. Lowe's Mr. Wnek says the end is near for traditional ads with slick pitchmen. "Those days are finished," he says.

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