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### The Advertising Report: Creativity: King of Nothing Takes on Web, Defends Spider-Man's Honor

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Questions For . . . Jerry **Seinfeld**

Title: Comedian and actor

HAVE YOU ever noticed how Internet commercials are kinda dull? Well, just cue up the music from "**Seinfeld**."

Comedian and actor Jerry **Seinfeld**, 50 years old, is best known for the quirky sitcom that ran under his name on General Electric Co.'s NBC. Ostensibly a show about "nothing," the program instead tapped into all sorts of widely held attitudes about the excruciating minutiae of daily life.

These days, Mr. **Seinfeld** is making another splash, having created a "Webisode" for American Express Co. that shows him at play in New York City with an animated Superman. The minutes-long commercial puts mainstream concepts to work in a medium that previously relied on annoying pop-ups or ad work that was decidedly alternative in tone. Below, he explains what creative people want, examines changing consumer habits and defends Spider-Man from controversy.

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WSJ: **Seinfeld** and Superman. Even though this thing is several minutes long, it could have been a great TV or Super Bowl commercial. Why didn't this debut on TV?

Mr. **Seinfeld**: It really wasn't intended to be a commercial to begin with. It's "What could we do that would be fun on the Internet?" and the first thing we thought of the things we could do is make it as long as we wanted. Most of our commercials would be two, two-and-a-half minutes if we had the time, because we tend to overwrite them and try to tell a funny story. The idea was what would be fun to do on the Internet, and this is the first thing we thought to do that would be fun to do on the Internet.

WSJ: We hear so much about advertising via the Web and other new-media platforms. But a lot of this stuff is "underground" in nature. Are well-known creative people like yourself interested in coming up with ideas for these venues and making them more mainstream?

Mr. **Seinfeld**: Creative people are always looking for creative freedom. That's the big thing that the Internet is providing right now. Yeah, I can make a 30-second commercial that's going to be well received on TV, but here I had a chance to kind of spread my wings a little bit. We didn't know if it was going to work, if people were going to be able to access it easily enough, and also if they would go, or if they would go to the trouble of watching a commercial. We're making people go to some effort to watch a commercial. . . . I thought it was time that somebody could go bigger with it, and so, you know, I just felt like this could become a legitimate new medium. I don't think they've had, in the non-porno realm, I don't think they've had any big names yet, on the Internet.

WSJ: Many consumers are online, watching DVDs and playing videogames rather than watching TV. How have your own media habits changed?

Mr. **Seinfeld**: I'm definitely watching less TV, and spending more time on the Internet at night, because the Internet is, you know, so personal. I can see things that are of interest only to me, whereas TV is a mass medium. They are trying to get a lot of people, so the general quality of TV has deteriorated so much. . . . So if I'm doing it, other people must be doing it.

WSJ: Most ad folks think the 30-second commercial is the optimal format. Your "Webisode" lasts for several

minutes. Do consumers have that long an attention span?

**Mr. Seinfeld:** There is no such thing as an attention span. There is only the quality of what you are viewing. This whole idea of an attention span is, I think, a misnomer. People have infinite attention if you are entertaining them.

WSJ: The only commercial endorsement deal you have is with American Express. Surely, you could do many others. Why just one?

**Mr. Seinfeld:** I don't do it for the money. I do it because they want me to just kind of have fun and make funny things, and I like to make funny things that are small. That's kind of what stand-up comedy is. You are telling stories in 30- and 90-second bursts, so that's what attracts me to advertising. . . . The thing about American Express, they don't really need me to hard-sell anything. They get me. They don't micromanage what I'm doing, and I like the product. . . . They encourage financial responsibility from the consumer, so I like it, it's classy. I remember I've had friends that have done endorsements for chips and sodas, and they have gone on stage and the audience would be heckling them about it, and I've never had anyone say anything to me about doing this that isn't flattering. . . . As long as they keep it fun for me, I'll keep doing it, but normally it's not the kind of work that I'm looking for.

WSJ: You have a strong association with Superman. One of his superhero brethren, Spider-Man, has gotten into some trouble lately, thanks to a promotion between Sony and Major League Baseball. Are you surprised by Spider-Man's behavior?

**Mr. Seinfeld:** I like to think Spider-Man didn't have anything to do with that. I can't believe Spider-Man would be so disrespectful to an American institution. That had to be some marketing guy. To sully the puffy pure whiteness of a base, I don't know who could be that dumb to think that's a good idea.

WSJ: Network TV is going through a sea change. A lot of the more innovative content is showing up elsewhere. Would you ever contemplate a return to network TV, and in what fashion? Would you consider producing a program or doing a late-night talk show?

**Mr. Seinfeld:** I don't know. I'm pretty happy with my network-TV experience. I'm not looking to improve on it.

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