

COMIC RELIEF

Several new campaigns make light of these dark times.

By Ann Cooper



Those Greek theatrical masks juxtaposing comedy and tragedy seem highly appropriate images for the current recession. Because, having done more than their fair share of crying, what consumers seem to want now is a good laugh. That at any rate is the assumption behind a number of new spots and campaigns currently doing the rounds. Many major marketers are betting their marketing budgets that a sense of humor is the best prescription to cure consumers' economic ills.

Art Directors: Paul Behnen, Amy Ferguson
Writers: Eli Terry, Randy Krallman
Producers: Bennett McC Carroll, Alison Horn
Director: Randy Krallman

Production Company: Smuggler
Creative Directors: Tor Myrhen, Noel Cottrell, Paul Behnen
Client: E*Trade
Agency: Grey/New York



E*Trade "Wings" and "Golf Baby"

GREY/NEW YORK

Early last September, online broker E*Trade and its agency Grey New York were all set for the 2009 Super Bowl. They had two new spots in the successful "Talking Baby" campaign that featured the tiny tyke laughing at the woes of those folks foolish enough to use a broker. Then came September 8.

"The economy began tanking and over the next couple of weeks the market went down 3,000 points," says Tor Myrhen, chief creative officer at Grey New York. "So our client said, 'We need to reassess if these messages still resonate with the American consumer.'"

The spots, which just a month earlier, had tested "off the charts," now tested badly. "People said, 'Why is the baby laughing—I just lost half of my savings and my entire 401(k).'" America was not in the mood for babies to be laughing at them," says Myrhen.

It was back to the drawing board, where they rethought everything, including whether it was even appropriate to be on the Super Bowl. But in the end, they decided, "It's the Super Bowl. No matter what's going on in the world, people want to be entertained. If you don't entertain them, then you're really wasting your \$3 million," he says.

Research showed people wanted empathy. "Our campaign for E*Trade is never going to be anything else but humor," says Myrhen. "The baby's persona is dry and witty. He's not the most sympathetic character in the world, so we had to find a way to be more empathetic about people's money."

The answer was to introduce a friend and let them both comment on the economy. While the E*Trade baby retains his cool, pal Bennie starts singing Mr. Mister's, "Take These Broken Wings," thus introducing a feeling of hope and optimism. "If you watch closely, the E*Trade baby is the one who's still himself, but he now has this empathetic sidekick."

Another spot that aired pre-game featured the rugrat in a golf club locker room berating his elderly playing partner, Frank. In it, baby explains how Frank refuses to settle up on their bet over a skins game "because his 401(k)'s tankin'." The spots were a huge success, says Myrhen, helped by a marketing plan using Facebook, Twitter and video outtakes. "Within three days the videos had eight million hits," he says. "And that's with very little advertising. This year's Super Bowl ad for E*Trade was even more successful than the last year; which was their most successful year ever."

Bud Light “Meeting”

DDB/CHICAGO

When it comes to beer, humor and the recession, it's pretty much business as usual for giant brewer Anheuser-Busch. “Some businesses, like beer, still do well in the recession,” says Mark Gross, SVP group creative director and one of DDB Chicago's phalanx of creative directors, writers and art directors who ushered the Bud Light “Meeting” spot into being. In it, a bunch of office workers are sitting around talking about cutbacks. “We're NOT LEAVING until we meet our budget! We need ideas,” one team member says. Then one poor sap suggests they stop buying Bud Light for every meeting, and promptly gets hurled through the glass window for his trouble.

“People still want to have a good time and drink during recessions,” says Gross. “I feel the same thing about humor. It's important to have a sense of humor about some things that are going on. As long as it's not at the expense of individuals who have suffered loss. There's a line between laughing at someone who's actually lost their job, and just making generic jokes about the situation we're all in together. And as long as we're sensitive to that, we're still just trying to be as funny as ever.”

Gross says the plan is to stay on brand message, which is always about fun and having a good time. “Did we choose that situation because it's topical?” he says. “No. I judged the work on, 'Do I think it's a funny script?' And I thought it was a great story line and a funny idea for Bud Light. It just also happened to be perfectly topical for this time. When the team was creating it, cutbacks were on everyone's minds, so that was the natural place to go. When my creative directors and I looked at it, it was just a great idea.”

As for results, “You can't put it down to any one spot, but sales have been excellent for Anheuser-Bush,” he says. “Bud Light has been up one or two percent in the past two quarters. So, things are going gangbusters for them.” Obviously, a nation that cries into its beer has A-B laughing all the way to the bank, to pun a clichéd phrase, or two.

Art Director: Brant Herzer

Writer: Tyler Campbell

Agency Producers: Will St. Clair, Dan Bryant

Creative Directors: Mark Gross, Chris Roe, Chuck

Rachford

Client: Anheuser-Busch

Agency: DDB/Chicago





Carlsberg "Thatchers"

IRISH INTERNATIONAL BBDO

Humor in Ireland, recession or no recession, is a slightly different beast from humor in the UK. "Irish humor tends to be more self-effacing, where the storyteller often recounts tales of his/her own misfortune for the benefit of the audience," says Colm McNamara, account handler on the Carlsberg account at Irish International BBDO.

That was certainly the case in "Thatchers," made for the Irish market, which features three workers weighing up their options once their current job—thatching a pub—is over.

"How are we going to beat this recession?" says Thatcher #1. "Learn a new trade?" says Thatcher #2. "That's four years. You mad?" retorts the third. Thatcher #1 suggests moving in with the folks. "I'm not living with your mother," says Thatcher #2. "There must be something else we can thatch." They find their answer on a Pacific island where they open a shop making—hula skirts. Work done, they sit back drinking Carlsberg. "Here comes another financial crisis," says one, when handed the check. "If it's not A and B, it's probably C," says the voiceover.

"Thatchers" is just the latest installment in the current Carlsberg ad campaign. According to McNamara, the strategy was to elevate the Carlsberg drinker and show how he has the street smarts to find a clever solution to a given predicament—thus drinking Carlsberg shows how he thinks beyond the obvious. Humor is central to the Carlsberg brand's DNA, which is reflected in all of its marketing activity including sponsorships. And even more so in a recession, tongue-in-cheek humor is seen as a way to highlight this. Research showed that "Thatchers" captured the sentiment of many, and gave consumers some much needed humor and light relief.

Apart from all that, the spot has also garnered huge "talkability," says McNamara. "Humor is an important part of the social currency in Ireland," he says. "Being able to tell stories in a humorous way is part of being Irish."

Art Director: Paddy Geraghty
 Writer: Bernie Martin
 Producer: Noel Byrne
 Director: Lenny Dorfman
 Production Company: MJZ
 Creative Director: Mal Stevenson
 Client: Diageo Ireland
 Agency: Irish International BBDO/Dublin

Priceline "Negotiator"BUTLER SHINE STERN & PARTNERS/
SAUSALITO

"Recession. We're in a recession?" deadpans John Butler of BSS&P, the agency responsible for the campy Priceline Super Bowl spot featuring relentless negotiator William Shatner, determined, as always to get the best travel bargain. "In this economy, we can't afford a vacation..." says the wife to hubby, who's being coached on how to respond by a hidden Shatner, so that they can get the vacation they want.

But even though the spot directly addresses economic issues, Butler says it was actually written months earlier, before the depths of the recession had hit. "Seriously, with the lead times for television, the current economic crisis really wasn't even upon us full force as of yet," he says. "That said, we all saw that belts were indeed tightening, and as a discount online travel agency, Priceline has great deals regardless of what is happening to the economy. This spot revolves around 'Name your own price,' which is one of Priceline's key products. It was just fortuitous (as odd as that may sound) that by the time it ran, the line, 'In this economy, we can't afford a vacation...' become more apropos."

The buy was only made the day before. "Art imitates life," says Butler. "Like the 'Negotiator,' Priceline drives a hard bargain. The Super Bowl ad buy was an opportunistic one, based on available inventory. It was literally purchased the day before, that's why when the articles came out the next day, we weren't included in some of the press coverage."

The recession doesn't even really affect how Priceline advertises, says Butler, because the brand DNA is all about saving consumers money on travel anyway. "So it would be fair to say that as times get tougher, we are naturally going to be more of a destination for consumers."

In addition to TV, the Priceline Negotiator is turning up in all the usual places: print, digital online, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, etc., etc. And it's apparently doing very well, thank you, particularly in the current environment. "The Shatner/Negotiator combo has great recall for consumers, and remains very popular," says Butler. "Online travel is not doing very well overall as a category, mostly because travel is down, but Priceline is ahead of the pack. We finished the year with bookings up 25%, while the overall industry was down."

So despite the recession, Priceline seems to be succeeding in persuading people to boldly go. Anywhere. 



Art Director: Steve Mapp
Writer: Lyle Yetman
Producer: Kat Friis
Director: Erich Joiner
Production Company: Tool of North America

Creative Directors: Mike Shine, John Butler, Lyle Yetman, Steve Mapp
Client: Priceline
Agency: Butler, Shine, Stern and Partners/Sausalito