

AD FAB

A guide to unlocking the mysteries of British humor.

By Ann Cooper



Client: PG Tips / Agency: Mother/London

Humor, like beauty, is often in the eye of the consumer, especially when it comes to British humor. Trying to define it is rather like trying to nail jello (or actually “jelly” in Britspeak), to the wall. But while it may not be everyone’s cup of tea, there’s no denying it’s often a multi-faceted, satiric, tongue-in-cheek, ironic, punning and self-deprecating thing worth studying. Even if you do you need a Ph.D in UK culture to get all of its subtleties and insider cricket references.

Case in point: The recent 30-second spot “Breakfast” for PG Tips, a 75-year old Unilever-owned leading tea brand that has had a storied history of famous ad campaigns, first via BMP DDB, and now Mother, London. “Breakfast” opens on a kitchen scene where UK comedian Johnny Vegas, who plays “Al”, is sitting at the kitchen table with a knitted monkey, named, well, Monkey. It turns the making of a cup of tea into a slapstick dance routine to the bawdy instrumental, “The Stripper.” After concluding the routine, they reward themselves with a cuppa.

Inside Cricket Tip #1: Both Al and Monkey are renegades from a 2001 campaign, also by Mother, for ITV Digital, a now defunct channel. The short-lived campaign was so popular, that Mother resurrected them on behalf of PG Tips.

Inside Cricket Tip #2: Monkey is a direct descendant from the original tribe of PG Tips chimps that were launched on TV in 1956 and went on to become the UK’s favorite ad characters. They also helped make PG Tips the best-selling tea. The strategy was to dress them as humans with recognizable voices supplied by the likes of actor Peter Sellers. After umpteen endearing incarnations, the chimps were axed in 2002 in favor of animated cartoon characters.

Inside Cricket Tip #3: In “Breakfast,” Al and Monkey are paying homage to a brilliant routine once performed by one of the UK’s most beloved pair of comedians: Morecambe and Wise. The original sketch showed the pair preparing breakfast in time to the striptease music. According to Ed Warren, creative on the account at Mother, viewers are not required to get every allusion. “We deliberately make the ads quite dense in terms of gags, allusions and humor so that people will still get something out of them with later viewings,” he says. “However, the Morecambe and Wise sketch is one of the most famous and loved sketches in the history of British TV, so we hoped that the majority of the audience would recognize that we were using our comedy double act to pay homage to one of the great British comedy double acts.”



Warren says it’s almost a badge of Britishness to know and ‘get’ the Morecambe and Wise ‘Breakfast’ sketch. “This love of comedy gives our advertising permission to be (relatively) so sophisticated in its humor—in fact, I think it pretty much demands it. Most of the truly famous commercials in this country have been funny ads—from the Smash Martians to Leonard Rossiter up to Al and Monkey.”

But even if younger viewers are unaware of the original Morecambe and Wise sketch and don’t pick up the reference, then they can still enjoy the ads as being “a cracking bit of entertainment,” says Warren. He’s not even sure that consumers are aware of, or interested in, Al and Monkey’s ITV Digital history. “After all, celebrities hop from brand to brand without anyone raising an eyebrow,” he says. “In some ways, ITV Digital made Al and Monkey such a famous part of British culture that we have a campaign that’s closer to celebrity endorsement than using a branded vehicle anyway.” Mother brought them back because, “They were characters with an existing fan-base that had lived on long after the demise of ITV Digital; they were the perfect successors to the ‘Chimps’ campaign (particularly as PG tips had lost their way a bit since ‘Chimps’ came to an end) and they were a great vehicle for delivering messages about tea

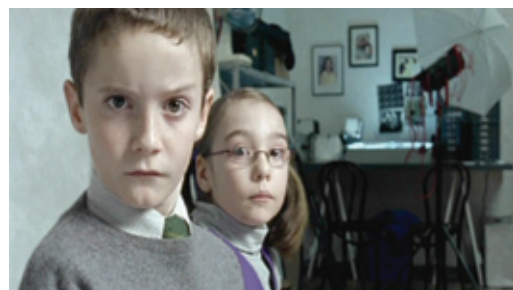
disguised as entertaining banter and sketches. From our point of view it was a no-brainer." As for the PG tips chimps, "Some people get the fact that Monkey is a descendent of the chimps, but again if you don't, we hope it doesn't spoil your enjoyment of the ad."

Humor has always been key to the PG Tips marketing strategy. "If you're in a category that people aren't that interested in (and let's face it, who really cares about teabags?), you need to give people a good reason to invest their attention," says Warren. "PG tips use humor to grab its audience's attention and give it an unfair advantage over the competitors. They've also always been topical and have reflected whatever's present in British culture at the time—from Bond-mania to the Tour de France. So, as the nation binges on nostalgia as we face recession, it made sense to reflect this in our ads."

And you can't argue with success. In the UK, PG tips are the market leader. The "Breakfast" ad has been viewed over 150,000 times on YouTube, and parents film their own kids doing their versions of the spot and post them online.

So what does all this say about the well-developed British sense of humor, with its fondness for irony, word-play, satire, self-deprecation and absurdity in particular? "Look at everything from, 'A Midsummer Night's Dream', to Edward Lear, to the Pythons, to 'The Office,'" says Warren. "As a nation we identify ourselves as being funny. We're proud of our comedians and our 'British humor,' and it's precisely for this reason that we hold bits of comedy very dear. I bet half the British people I know could do a word perfect of the Monty Python's 'Parrot sketch' for example."

Client: Cadbury's / Agency: Fallon/London



It's the Brit's penchant for self-deprecation that takes center-stage in a new campaign for Harvey Nicks (that's Harvey Nichols to you), whose latest print effort for Spring/Summer '09 makes fun of British stereotypes. While showing a selection of HN brands, such as a single Lanvin yellow patent shoe with gold heel, the accompanying headline reads:

Shoes: "The English are known for having bad teeth, that is why they need beautiful shoes."

Others include: Menswear: "The English gentleman is known for being a little boring in the bedroom. Except of course, when it comes to his wardrobe."

Handbags: "The English are well known for hiding their emotions. Except when it comes to these little beauties."

But not all ad campaigns require close study of *British Humor and Culture for Dummies* in order to appreciate them. Take Cadbury's "Eyebrows" for example. Having raised the bar with 2007's "Gorilla," in which a gorilla plays the drums to Phil Collins "In the Air Tonight," Cadbury's used the same strategy—of creating advertising as enjoyable as the product—on its next TV spot, "Eyebrows."

"Eyebrows" shows two young siblings sitting for a family portrait. When their photographer takes a phone call, the 1989 track "Don't Stop The Rock" by Freestyle plays. As it plays, the kids' eyebrows wiggle up and down in time to the beat. Then the girl finishes the routine by letting air out of a balloon. The point is, same as its predecessor, here's a funny film to be enjoyed just as you enjoy Cadbury's Dairy Milk.

Geddit? According to Phil Rumbol, Cadbury's marketing director in the UK, the idea is simply to make consumers smile. "The head follows the heart from a brand point of view," he has said. "If you can capture people's hearts and get them to like you' as a brand, they will think better of you and purchase you."

Some product categories have always been good for a laugh, especially at someone else's expense. The UK ad journal *Campaign* recently published a readers' poll of the Top Ten funniest TV ads of all time. Four were beer ads. Coming in at number five is "Dambusters" for Carling Black Label, an '80s TV spot that not only spoofs the 1955 movie *Dam Busters*, but also sends up the Germans. John Smith's "Wardrobe Monsters," is number four, and featured a family whose meal out is interrupted by a call from the young daughter in bed at home, and frightened of the "wardrobe monsters" in her room. Matter-of-fact, the father tells her that "it's the burglars that break in through the windows" that she needs to be worried about. Number nine is Heineken's "Majorca," a 1985 reversal of the Pygmalion story that depicts a be-pearled Sloane Ranger receiving an elocution lesson at the School of Street Cred; Castelmaine's XXXX "Wife," is number ten, depicting the misogynist male from Down Under. Two mates transport crates of XXXX, which are guarded by the wife of one in the back of their truck. When the truck gets stuck over a ravine, the wife calls out: "I reckon we'll be alright if we lose some weight off the back." The man in the passenger seat turns to the driver and says, dryly: "She's a good sport, your missus."

Just sometimes, British humor is so universal that everyone gets the joke. 🍀



Client: Harvey Nichols / Agency: DDB/London

