

More to celebrity promos than meets the eye

by Chuck Bins

Joanne Worley went ga-ga over Bold's new brighteners. Muhammed Ali squabbled with Joe Frazier for Vitalis. Sammy Davis Jr. poured (but wasn't allowed to drink) Manischewitz. Henry Fonda went home to Omaha with Lifesavers.

It's no secret in the advertising business that the best celebrity commercials capitalize on that unique chemistry between product and personality. And nobody knows how to produce and direct those commercials better than Nat B. Eisenberg. He's been in the business for twenty years. Ten years ago he organized his own production company, NBE Productions, and he's been filming celebrity promos and other commercials ever since. (He directed all the above commercials.)

In recent months there has been talk brewing in Washington which could have serious consequences for the advertising agencies that write the celebrity scripts for the commercials NBE (and other production companies) produce. The Federal Trade Commission, the watchdog of the ad industry, charges that advertisers are able to communicate visually what would be deemed false if stated in words. Commercials get away with too much in their visual imagery, subliminally seducing the consumer to buy, they say.

Conflicting viewpoints

According to the FTC way of thinking, when David Janssen talked seriously about Excedrin, it triggered an unconscious response in the viewer, something like: "Aha! He's the Fugitive who was falsely accused of murdering his wife. Boy, if Excedrin can quell that headache, just think what it will do for me!"

"I don't think that was the thinking," Nat says. "His voice quality is so arresting—that's why they got him to do that." But for some other pairs of products and personalities we talked about the association was stronger, like Muhammed Ali touting Brut.

"I think the concept there was: This is for men, and what more of a macho image can we have than Muhammed Ali—the champ. Even as an ex-champ he looked like a brut of a guy, but a handsome 'brut.' And Brut is selling men's virility and vanity."

The most obvious connection for Nat, though, was Robert Young selling caffeine-free Sanka. "Well, we all can see that. He was Marcus Welby for so many years.



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Somebody had to be looking for the feeling of medical authority."

Nat does not squabble with the fact that there is often a link between a star's image, his personality and the product in a good celebrity promotion, but all that has already been decided by the time NBE goes to work. "The script itself is our bible. The ad strategy has been introduced long before by the ad agency or the client."

In those pickpocket American Express commercials, surely we know Karl Malden is an actor and not a policeman. But if people are going to remember his detective role on the 'Streets of San Francisco,' isn't that visually deceiving the viewer? Nat says, no.

Intelligent audience

"If we are all going to presume that the poor viewer is dumb and has to be regulated for everything, that doesn't speak so much for everybody who's viewing television. I'm influenced by television. I buy some of the things I see up there. But I wouldn't buy that Sanka because I remember Robert Young as a doctor.

"On the other hand, people who do motivational research can tell you we do everything for eight million reasons that we don't even

know about."

Whether the FTC can ever translate those images that talk to our subconscious into the cool language of regulation, is still a question to be answered. Congress is currently cracking down on the FTC, fighting to curtail some of its powers.

Although he insists he is on the side of the consumer, Nat maintains the regulatory climate is stringent enough already. "Advertising is a completely policed industry. Copywriters have to write draft after draft to get a commercial approved, either by the networks or the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB). We feel it on the set in that we're constantly asked to do alternates [extra takes with different words] for legal reasons... Now from a business standpoint, you're getting paid to do more work, but on the other hand it can be a pain in the neck... more of a distraction for the performers."

But Nat adds, "Forget that I'm in the business, that [using Robert Young to sell Sanka] doesn't bother me at all. I would just be listening for the way he says the words, the subliminal part of it—gee, that's Dr. Welby."

TELE Pulse

by Steve K. Waiz

Every week this column reviews the merits or demerits of a network series, miniseries, movie or special. More importantly though, we'd like you, the viewer, to get involved with the column by sending in your opinion about a certain show so we can register your tele-pulse. We'll pass on some of the more interesting comments to the network honchos in New York.

WHEN SHE WAS BAD

On Sunday, Nov. 25, the viewing public will be seeing another side of Cheryl Ladd and Robert Urich, when they co-star in ABC's 'When She Was Bad,' the story of a handsome young couple with marital woes.

Most of us associate Cheryl with high-fashion garb and lots of jiggy assignments in 'Charlie's Angels,' while Robert Urich is a macho private eye in a world of goldiggers a.k.a. 'Vegas.'

In 'When She Was Bad,' we see this duet locked into a contemporary battle to keep their marriage afloat as they combat the trials and tribulations of his new job in a new town. The couple's daughter, an exact replica of mom, is the victim of family tensions that exist within the household. Teeny (Cheryl) cannot cope with her daughter's need for attention and subjects her to verbal scoldings. Bob (Urich), while reprimanding Teeny for her selfishness toward the child, does not think she needs psychiatric help. Teeny, though, seeks out Mary Jensen (Eileen Brennan) to help her understand why she is having so many problems.

As the relationship with her daughter continues to deteriorate, so does her marriage. Those romantic evenings of a few months ago are now fight-filled. But with time the wounds heal and Teeny begins to understand her problems. It is up to the child, now, to see if she wants her mom.

For what it's worth, 'When She Was Bad' has a positive message to offer its viewers about raising children in today's society. Yet the story of this family could have been dealt with in less than two hours, perhaps 90 minutes at the most.

On the other side of the coin, I for one was touched and surprised by Cheryl Ladd's dramatic capability. This should help her movie aspirations once 'Charlie's Angels' hang up their uniforms. Bob Urich, in real-life, is somewhat like the loving Bob Morgan character in this tele-feature, and that gives him another feather in his cap. Eileen Brennan is one of those gifted actresses who can jump back and forth between comedy and drama without sacrificing a bit of her acting prowess. Nicole Eggert is a cute little tyke who really is a convincing pain in the neck for Teeny.

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Photo credit: Jack Anderson

Giant Steps—Morehead State isn't one of your basic big name colleges. But don't tell that to Gary Shirk and Phil Simms of the New York Giants. Both are graduates of the small college that's tucked away in the Appalachians of Kentucky, and both are beginning to earn accolades from rival players around the league. Shirk, a stubby tight-end who bounced around the WFL, has turned into a sure-handed receiver and blocker, while Simms is the new 'Golden Boy Wonder' quarterback for the rapidly improving ballclub.

TV COMPULOG SERVICES, INC.



Charles White