

Super Bowl Sunday's Hail Mary Ad

Inside the making of a commercial that could be crucial as GM tries to build a new image

BY DAVID KILEY

FOR FOOTBALL FANS, THE drama will be over the second the clock runs out on Super Bowl XLI. But for General Motors Corp., the moment of truth will come the following day. That's when consumers and the media will weigh in on the latest crop of Super Bowl ads, among them GM's spot about an anthropomorphic robot. This isn't just a one-off spot: GM wants the robot to star in its ongoing effort to convince drivers it's as obsessed about quality as Toyota Motor Corp. If the \$5.2 million ad fizzles, it's back to the storyboard.

GM is understandably keen to convince Americans that, as surveys consistently show, it has substantially closed the quality gap with the Japanese. Nowhere is that perception tougher to change than in Southern California, a huge market teeming with Toyotas, Hondas, and BMWs—not Pontiacs or Chevys.

Hiring Deutsch/LA gave GM a twofold: ad executives who understand the California market but also have a long-standing link to Detroit. Chief Creative Officer Eric Hirshberg and President Mike Sheldon are both sons of former GM executives. Hirshberg's father designed the iconic

Pontiac Trans Am in the 1970s; Sheldon was a purchasing boss. "We liked the feeling Deutsch had for GM," says GM Marketing Vice-President Mike Jackson. "Outsiders living in the land of imports who were rooting for our success."

The robot ad was originally conceived to market GM's five-year, 100,000-mile warranty, which launched in September. But GM decided the conceit was perfect for the Super Bowl. The concept springs from a desire to tell a story in the context of GM's manufacturing prowess.

The script goes like this: An assembly line robot drops a screw. The other robots and line workers glare at the klutz, who is then escorted from the factory. The robot goes on to a series of humiliating jobs: holding a real estate for-sale sign, the speaker at a fast-food drive-through, and so on. He looks wistfully at GM cars driving by—the Cadillac CTS, Pontiac Solstice, Chevy HHR. Eventually, he makes his way to a bridge and hurls himself off. But the robot isn't dead after all; he wakes up in the factory to find it was just a nightmare. The message: Everyone at GM is obsessing, even dreaming, about quality.

Even before Deutsch began making the ad, the concept set off critics. They told Jackson that selling the carmaker as a whole was doomed. "People don't buy 'GM' vehicles," says Jim Sanfilippo of Automotive Marketing Consultants Inc. "So I think the emphasis on GM as a brand is wrong." Hirshberg disagrees. Besides the stock



ROBO-KLUTZ
Sheldon,
Hirshberg,
and their star

symbol being "GM," he says, thousands of mostly negative stories appear each year with "GM" in the headline. "We need to work on changing GM's story," he says. "People don't like to buy loser brands."

The sniping was bad enough; Hirshberg also knew that making a 60-second narrative resonate with viewers wasn't going to be easy, especially against the boozy backdrop of a Super Bowl Sunday. In one minute flat, the ad needed to get across not just the story but GM's quality message, too. And for this particular concept to work, the robot had to seem sufficiently human. If viewers didn't feel





sympathy for the bot, the ad would fail.

The commercial was shot at GM's five-year-old assembly plant in Lansing, Mich., on a gray Saturday in early December. Just 100 yards away hulked the empty shell of the shuttered Oldsmobile headquarters. Hirshberg couldn't escape the irony: At a place where GM's decline was writ large, they were trying to project the automaker as a 21st century company.

Inside the plant, director Phil Joanou, a veteran of Bud Light Super Bowl ads, was yelling at the people working the robot: "More subtle! Subtle! Subtle!" The robot's reaction to dropping the screw seemed

overly dramatic. "Take 10!" Hirshberg looked on. "This shot is important, but it's not the one I'm worried about," he said. The shot that would make or break the story was when the robot is ushered from the factory. "I won't be able to sleep unless this hunk of metal looks forlorn."

On Jan. 11, Jackson viewed a version of the ad at his Los Angeles home. Hirshberg was on the phone, listening as his client watched. "It's a winner," said Jackson. "But let me ask my expert." Jackson's 13-year-old daughter, Erin, watched as Hirshberg listened. She said "Awwww" and laughed in the right

places, he recalls. "If's not scientific," he says. "But it's important to know that even a kid gets the story."

But that wasn't the end. On Jan. 17, less than three weeks to airtime, some first-time watchers said the story line wasn't clear. The ad moved too fast. One viewer didn't get that the robot had been fired. On the way back to the agency, Hirshberg called Creative Director Mike Bryce, still toiling away in the editing studio. "We need better sounds out of the robot," Hirshberg told Bryce. "Put some sounds from R2-D2 into our robot and tell the studio we need some sounds more like that. And I think we have to take out some stuff in the middle to make the firing sequence more vivid. We're sunk if everybody doesn't get that."

SUICIDE WATCH

THE ROBOT WAS built by Stan Winston Studio, which devised R2-D2 30 years ago. But, unknown to Hirshberg, R2-D2's squeaks and buzzes were created by actors; the GM robot's utterances were based on mechanical sounds from power tools and car engines. Hirshberg and Bryce made the squeaks and grunts themselves; the audio techs did the rest. Suddenly the robot sounded more human.

The fretting didn't end there. To make sure the suicide scene seemed authentic, they viewed movies with bridge leaps (*Fearless*, *It's a Wonderful Life*). With just a week to the game, a version with a longer beginning and more emotive sounds was ready.

On Jan. 16, as Hirshberg kept tweaking, he videoconferenced with GM Chairman G. Richard Wagoner Jr., who loved the ad and gave Deutsch the \$200 million Saturn account. Of course, in an age of YouTube ad parodies, consumers have a lot of say over what advertisers do. They'll determine if the ad works—and if Wagoner's faith in Hirshberg is warranted. II

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