

Critics to Marketers: Suicide Is No Joke

Stuart Elliott



THE backlash against a spate of advertising with suicide themes has claimed a third commercial. Washington Mutual has stopped running a spot that showed actors playing bankers poised atop a building as if about to jump.

The commercial for Washington Mutual, by Leo Burnett in Chicago, was among four spots — all appearing in early February — that had suicide as a central point in their humorous or lighthearted narratives.

Robert T. Gebbia, executive director at the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, one of several organizations that criticized the commercials, said Washington Mutual told him late last week that the commercial would be withdrawn.

Kristin Fletcher, a spokeswoman for Burnett, part of the Publicis Groupe, referred an inquiry to Washington Mutual. Libby Hutchinson, a spokeswoman for Washington Mutual, confirmed yesterday in an e-mail message that the ad was “no longer running” but did not comment further because, she wrote, “we don’t feel we have a lot to add to the conversation at this point.”

The other two commercials with suicide themes that have been withdrawn were for General Motors and Volkswagen of America. The G.M. spot, about a robot, resumed on Feb. 25 after the suicide references were removed.

The VW spot, in which a man was shown on a ledge, was taken off the air and has not returned.

The fourth commercial was created by Cramer-Krasselt in Chicago for CareerBuilder, the jobs Web site. A spokeswoman for CareerBuilder, Jenny Sullivan, said the spot was no longer appearing because the campaign it was part of had finished “running nationally for the quarter.”

The company “has had only positive response” to the commercial, Ms. Sullivan said, and plans to bring it back in September along with the rest of the campaign. CareerBuilder has three parents: Gannett, McClatchy and Tribune.

The debate over the commercials has raised anew the thorny question of what is appropriate to discuss in ads today.

So-called shockvertising, in the form of ads that are deliberately provocative to draw attention to themselves, is becoming increasingly popular. The reasons include a need to stand out amid the growing clutter and the rise of Web sites like YouTube, which enable people to watch repeatedly — and share with friends — attention-getting ads.

"So many commercials rely on shock value that we've gone to the edge on all possible shocks, death," said Barbara Lippert, the ad critic for the trade publication *Adweek*.

"But suicide and buying stuff, they're not exactly go-togethers," Ms. Lippert said. "There's an insensitivity that makes no sense."

It is particularly difficult to explain, said Bob Garfield, Ms. Lippert's counterpart at the trade publication *Advertising Age*, given that "in a mass medium like TV, by definition some percentage of the audience has suicide in the family past."

"Are these people so oblivious to common decency?" Mr. Garfield asked, referring to advertisers and agencies. "Death jokes do not belong in advertising."

Two agency executives offered explanations.

The Volkswagen spot featuring the suicidal man was one of three "centered on an archetype of pessimism," said Tom Birk, vice president and director for cognitive and cultural studies at Crispin Porter & Bogusky in Miami, part of MDC Partners.

Two related VW spots, which continued running, showed a man carrying a sign that read "The end is near" and an angry poet. In all three spots, news that Volkswagen sells three cars under \$17,000 was intended to cheer up the gloomy Guses.

"We were trying to use the archetypes of pessimism as foils to pick up on the optimism," Mr. Birk said. "Humans tend to notice things more when they are in contrast with something else."

The complaints were "proof of how sensitive our culture has become," Mr. Birk said, given that suicide "has been part of our entertainment culture forever, in plays, movies, advertising."

Asked if it was the intent of the agency or advertiser to provoke controversy by choosing suicide as a subject for a spot, Mr. Birk replied, "Of course not."

That was also the response from Eric Hirshberg, co-president and chief creative officer at the agency that created the G.M. commercial, Deutsch L.A.

"It was not borne out of any desire to be dark or do harm," Mr. Hirshberg said. Rather, "in building a character, a robot, to get across the idea of G.M.'s commitment to quality," he added, "the most natural place to go for the story, if someone's obsessed with quality and fails, is suicide."

In the spot, the robot seems to get fired by G.M. after making a mistake, fails at a series of dead-end jobs and jumps off a bridge. At the end, it becomes clear that the poor robot had been having a nightmare.

The story was made deliberately "fantastical," Mr. Hirshberg said, adding: "A, it was a robot. B, it was a robot having a dream. We felt there were enough layers of artifice to not offend anybody."

"Maybe a robot having a dream in outer space, in another dimension," would have passed muster, he added, laughing.

After the complaints, Deutsch L.A. — an office of Deutsch in the Marina del Rey neighborhood and part of the Interpublic Group of Companies — re-edited the commercial, replacing the imaginary suicide scene with additional scenes of the robot's awful alternative jobs.

"It afforded us a little more comedy," Mr. Hirshberg said, "so I'm not dissatisfied."

"Smart and adventurous marketers know you can't please everybody," he added, but "to this day I still haven't met anyone who doesn't work for a suicide-prevention group who was offended."

Mr. Gebbia of the foundation said that his group and the others "do not want to be in the business of being watchdogs," but want to help educate executives on Madison Avenue.

"In the last 10 years, 300,000 people have died from suicide in this country," Mr. Gebbia said, yet "you see this kind of ad poking fun at suicide."

"You wouldn't see an ad poking fun at someone dying of AIDS or cancer," he added. "We don't think it's appropriate to make fun of suicide or people with mental illness to sell products."

The foundation and three other organizations released last month what they called an open letter to advertisers and agencies. They thanked G.M. and VW for withdrawing their spots and urged others to "appreciate the seriousness of mental illness."

Despite the dispute over the suicide ads, Mr. Birk of Crispin Porter said, "Someone will give it another try because it's ingrained and entrenched in our culture."

Indeed, according to The Hollywood Reporter, a campaign with a suicide theme is planned by a small film studio, AfterDark Films, for "Wristcutters: A Love Story," described as a dark romantic comedy about young adults in purgatory after killing themselves.

The plans include placing cardboard cutouts of characters in trees and on telephone poles to simulate their method of suicide, like jumping, electrocution and hanging.

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