

With New Agency, Sony Tries to Focus Its Electronics Image

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Sony Electronics, whose account has bounced around a bit among agencies over the last two years, is stepping forward with its first big campaign from one of its new agencies of record, BBDO Worldwide.

The \$20 million campaign — which includes television, radio, outdoor and print, plus online promotions and a tie-in with the coming Sony Pictures movie “Spider-Man 3” — tries to emphasize the easy-to-use, high-tech features of Sony’s camcorders and digital cameras.

The ads depict humorous family situations, but the messages are about how Sony products can solve age-old photography problems like blurriness and shakiness.

One television commercial for the Cyber-shot digital camera shows scenes of family members who seem to be chatting with a horse’s hindquarters and calling it “dad.” The scene jumps to a blurry photograph of the father standing next to the horse rump, and explains that the camera’s antiblur and face detection technology can automatically focus on the faces in a picture “because,” as a voice-over says, “the face makes the photo.”

In another spot — this one for the Handycam high-definition camcorder — a graying couple is seen cooing and giggling over their adult son whom they are bathing in the kitchen sink. The message that comes on the screen is: “You can’t recreate special moments. Get them right the first time.”

The new Sony campaign started running on network television last week. One goal, said Bill Bruce, chairman and chief creative officer of BBDO New York, is to show the public that Sony is making the same kind of technological advances in high-definition as, say, Apple is making in music.

“Sony is doing amazing things,” Mr. Bruce said. “They are at the forefront of high-definition video and audio, and they need to do equally impressive messaging.”

Picture-perfect moments may be ephemeral, but Sony Electronics has itself taken a few shots at trying to select agencies whose work is lasting. In early 2005, Sony withdrew its account from Y&R, a division of the WPP Group, in a move that was seen as a major blow for the agency and that helped precipitate a change in leadership there.

Sony Electronics then moved its work to three agencies: Bagby & Company in Chicago; McKinney & Silver in Durham, N.C., owned by Havas; and Fallon Worldwide in Minneapolis, a unit of the Publicis Groupe. Sony split with Fallon in November 2005, after only five months.

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Last year, Sony moved its estimated \$100 million consumer electronics business to BBDO and 180, which are both part of the Omnicom Group. At the time that Sony selected the two agencies, 180, of Amsterdam, was independent. Omnicom has since taken a majority stake in it, and 180 has opened an office in Los Angeles specifically to work on the Sony Electronics account.

While the game of musical agencies may have contributed to awareness problems for Sony Electronics, the San Diego-based unit of the Sony Corporation of America, the Sony brand name has lately suffered problems that go beyond a particular unit, said David Martin, United States president of Interbrand in New York, a brand consultancy.

Sony has dropped to 26th place in his company’s annual brand rankings, from 18th in 2000, not because of its advertising but because of competition from consumer electronics companies like Samsung, Mr. Martin said. Samsung surpassed Sony in Interbrand’s rankings, he said.

In creating the campaign for Sony Electronics, BBDO decided to play up the message that the company had new technology to sell, like the face-detection system in the Cyber-shot cameras, BBDO executives said. Each advertisement focuses on a key product benefit.

David Lubars, BBDO North America's chairman and chief creative officer, said the humorous quality of the ads was meant to make the brand feel more accessible. "They make products that delight people, that are fun and entertaining, and their communications should reflect that humanness," he said.

For Sony Electronics, the campaign is the first under the direction of Stuart Redsun, senior vice president of corporate marketing who joined the company last June from Helio, a maker of wireless hand-held devices, where he was executive vice president for marketing.

At Sony Electronics, he is responsible for designing a brand strategy for specific product lines, including Vaio computers, Bravia televisions, Cyber-shot cameras and Handycam high-definition camcorders. He reports to the chief marketing officer, Michael Fasulo.

Mr. Redsun said the BBDO campaign was a prototype of future ones that would promote individual products but speak with one voice and make the Sony brand the centerpiece. Sony's consumer research showed that consumers had great passion for Sony but that the brand was not making an emotional connection, he said.

"We have such passion from consumers for our brand and product, but we haven't been known for creating those emotional ties for those brands," Mr. Redsun said.

The current campaign is timed to the spring and summer seasons when Americans are vacationing, barbecuing and celebrating holidays like Father's Day.

"This is first of many things you'll see coming from us where we will take windows when consumers are buying, and create a big Sony story with Sony as hero," Mr. Redsun said.

In digital cameras, Sony is battling Kodak and Canon for market share, said Ross Rubin, director for industry analysis at the NPD Group, a market research firm. Meanwhile, camera prices from the top of the market (over \$500) to the low end (under \$100) are dropping along with the cost of digital components, Mr. Rubin said. About 31 million digital cameras were sold in 2006, up from 25.5 million in 2005, NPD said.

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The camcorder market is also growing — to 3.2 million units last year, from 3 million in 2005 — as consumers move from tape-based to disc-based camcorders, Mr. Rubin said. Sony is by far the market leader in camcorders, with a 38 percent share of units sold, followed by Canon with 13 percent and JVC and Panasonic with 12 percent each.

Mr. Martin of Interbrand said he doubted whether an ad campaign could have a big impact on Sony. Traditional ads have grown less effective in the consumer electronics sector, where consumers often base decisions on objective product reviews and Web critiques.

"The game in consumer electronics is much more new marketing techniques, and buzz marketing and traditional public relations to get those third-party endorsements," Mr. Martin said.

The ads from Sony Electronics could encourage more people to consider the brand, but, he said, they had better be impressed by what they find. "Unless the products walk the talk, that could be a real risk," Mr. Martin said.

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