

## With Strike's End, Oscars Regain Marketing Allure

Stuart Elliott



The actress Kate Walsh in a spot for the Cadillac CTS that General Motors will run during the Academy Awards.

A TELEVISION show on Sunday will bring into millions of homes subjects like war, betrayal, corporate malfeasance, murder, greed, illegal drugs and unwed motherhood. And Madison Avenue could not be happier.

The reason is that the show is the ABC broadcast of the 80th annual Academy Awards, where five films with those themes — "Atonement," "Michael Clayton," "Juno," "No Country for Old Men" and "There Will Be Blood" — will vie for the Oscar for best picture.

The settlement of the writers' strike means the show will proceed as usual — stars, red-carpet fashions and all. That alleviated the fears of more than a dozen blue-chip advertisers, worried that their elaborate — and expensive — marketing plans centered on the Oscars would be disrupted.

"We're very, very happy the show's back" to normal, said Aldo Papone, vice president for global advertising at the American Express Company in New York, an Oscar sponsor since 1996.

Amex plans to run a new commercial during the show, featuring the designer Diane Von Furstenberg. The spot was created by Ogilvy & Mather Worldwide in New York, part of the WPP Group.

The end of the strike, which meant that nominees like George Clooney would attend the show rather than honor a picket line, was deemed noteworthy enough that one Oscar sponsor was considering producing a special commercial to celebrate the settlement. But logistics could not be worked out and the spot was scrubbed.

Other advertisers in the show will include Coca-Cola, General Motors, L'Oréal, Mars, MasterCard, McDonald's, J. C. Penney, Procter & Gamble and Unilever. (No word on whether McDonald's will delight Daniel Plainview, the character played by Daniel Day-Lewis in "There Will Be Blood," and advertise its milkshakes.)

ABC, part of the Walt Disney Company, is charging an estimated average of \$1.8 million for each 30 seconds of commercial time during the broadcast, making its spots second only to the

Super Bowl in price. Fox charged advertisers about \$2.7 million for each 30-second spot on Feb. 3.

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Oscar sponsors prefer the nominated films to be blockbusters, which often have upbeat themes, rather than the type of movies that predominate among the honorees for 2007. The least downbeat of the five contenders for best picture, "Juno," is the only one to have taken in more than \$100 million so far.

The reason for advertisers' preference for big over small is that in recent years, the ratings for the show have improved when the nominated films were widely popular and have fallen when they were not.

The biggest audience in the last five years, an estimated 43.5 million, according to Nielsen Media Research, watched in 2004 when "The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King" was crowned best picture. The smallest audience in that period, estimated by Nielsen at 33 million, was in 2003, when "Chicago" toddled to the honor.

"I wouldn't be surprised if the ratings for Sunday night come in 3 to 4 percent lower than last year," said Jon Swallen, senior vice president for research at TNS Media Intelligence in New York, part of Taylor Nelson Sofres. About 40.2 million viewers watched when "The Departed" won best picture last February.

"In years that the ratings are down from previous years, there is always a decline in aggregate box office for five major categories," Mr. Swallen said, referring to the best picture and the four acting awards.

"This year," he added, "that figure is the lowest it has been in the past 10 years." Still, an Oscar show with no high-earning epics among the nominees may be better for advertisers than no show at all. During the writers' strike, awards shows like the Golden Globes and People's Choice went on in truncated form, without stars or red-carpet parades. The ratings fell significantly.

"We were just happy the strike was resolved," said Ryndee S. Carney, a spokeswoman for G.M. in Detroit, which plans to run six commercials during the show for three brands, Cadillac, GMC and Saturn.

"Events like the Super Bowl and the Academy Awards, you pay your money and you take your chances," Ms. Carney said, referring to the fact that sponsors receive no audience guarantees.

Even so, the Oscars "is a premier media property," she added, because "to the extent that anything is these days" the show is much more likely than regular TV fare to be watched live — commercials and all — rather than captured on digital video recorders for playback later with the spots skipped or zapped.

Mr. Papone echoed that sentiment.

"Nobody can forecast what happens with the audiences," he said, "but for us the Oscars has been a very good platform for our messages and to launch new messages."

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A case in point is the spot on Sunday with Ms. Von Furstenberg, which is part of an effort by American Express to play up the "passions and pursuits" of cardholders, Mr. Papone said, in areas like fashion, travel and entertainment.

The company was a sponsor this month of Fashion Week in New York with initiatives that included a special section of its Web site ([americanexpress.com/style](http://americanexpress.com/style)) titled the "American

Express Fashion Network." At ABC, the Oscar network through 2014, Geri Wang, senior vice president for prime-time sales at the ABC Television Network unit, said she was "thrilled to be in the middle of the madness of the Academy Awards."

She added: "Nobody's happier than me that the strike has been resolved. The alternative did not look good."

Although the nominated films this year may not be broad in appeal, Ms. Wang said, "the gestalt of the Oscars, if I can get a little corny, is larger than the individual movie titles."

And there may be "a little pent-up demand," she added, to tune in to see what the host, Jon Stewart, comes up with "given that we might not have had a 'traditional' Academy Awards had the strike not been settled."

Among the benefits of being an Oscar sponsor, Ms. Wang listed the large female viewership for the show, which appeals to brands like Diet Coke, Dove, L'Oréal and Penney. The ceremony is typically the second-most-watched sponsored program each year, behind the Super Bowl, she said, and it attracts a large audience of affluent viewers, particularly those with annual household incomes of \$200,000 or more.

So on Sunday, there will be Oscars. And there will be commercials. Will there be more or fewer viewers than last year? "Let me gaze into my crystal ball here," Ms. Carney of G.M. said, laughing.

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