

A 1950s Brand Mascot Fights 21st-Century Indigestion

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A MAJOR marketer is plop-plopping a vintage brand character back into ads, hoping to generate some fizz-fizz among a new generation of consumers.



Speedy Alka-Seltzer returns, as friend of the overindulgent.

The clues give it away that the character is Speedy Alka-Seltzer, the cheerful elf — or pixie, boy, sprite or homunculus, it was never quite clear — who sold Alka-Seltzer effervescent tablets from 1951 to 1980 with slogans like “Relief is just a swallow away” and jingles like “Plop, plop, fizz, fizz, oh, what a relief it is.”

A print, online and promotional campaign from a division of Bayer is reviving Speedy, still sporting tablets for his body and hat, as a sensible and soluble problem-solver. The ads present him as a beneficent bubble-bearer for those suffering the symptoms of overindulgence, like headache, indigestion and heartburn.

The new campaign aims for narrower audience than the general one that was the focus for previous Speedy campaigns, or for recent Alka-Seltzer campaigns that featured celebrities like Peter Boyle, Kathy Griffin and Doris Roberts.

The goal is to portray Speedy as a helpful “wing man” for fun-loving men in their 20s and 30s — the type of consumers who often eat, drink and make merry to excess. Persuading them to use Alka-Seltzer for their frequent discomforts could increase sales more than courting older consumers who have cut back on la dolce vita.

“We think Speedy can be ‘retro cool’ ” and “appeal to a new, younger target than has been the historic user,” said Jay Kolpon, vice president for marketing and new business at the Bayer consumer care division in Morristown, N.J.

“We’ll be looking at placing him where the new target consumes media,” Mr. Kolpon said, “which means doing a lot in media that is not mainstream television” because younger men watch less TV than most other consumers.

Thus, Speedy is showing up in ads in magazines like Maxim, Playboy and Rolling Stone; as the star of his own online game (alkaseltzer.com/speedy/); in commercials on rock radio stations, which offer mock salutes to gourmand treats like beer-battered shrimp (“delicious, efficient”); and even on pizza boxes, where Speedy proclaims, “A meal like this deserves an after-dinner drink.”

In research, “some younger guys we exposed him to said ‘That’s Speedy Alka-Seltzer,’ but they didn’t necessarily know about Alka-Seltzer,” said Karen McIntyre, vice president and senior creative director at BBDO Worldwide in New York, an Omnicom Group unit working on

the campaign with an online agency, Proximity Canada in Toronto, that is also part of Omnicom.

The idea is to familiarize the desired audience with Alka-Seltzer by introducing Speedy to them as "the good-times enabler," Ms. McIntyre said, "who shows up whenever guys are being guys."

That is underlined by the theme of the campaign: "Good times. Speedy Alka-Seltzer is there." In most ads, he is there literally, in the form of a statuette perched on a bar or standing on a table at a steakhouse, or an image decorating the pizza boxes.

This is not the first time Bayer has reached into the Alka-Seltzer archives for a nostalgic pitch. In 2005, BBDO New York remade a popular 1972 commercial for the brand that was known by its catchphrase, "I can't believe I ate the whole thing." A year later, the agency remade another popular Alka-Seltzer spot, from 1971, known as "Try it, you'll like it."

The difference this time is that Bayer is using Speedy as he was, not updating him, and hoping the younger consumers will respond to his authenticity and old-school charm.

That approach has worked several times recently on Madison Avenue. Examples include a comeback for Buddy Lee, a brand character from the 1930s for Lee Dungarees, sold by the VF Corporation, and the namesake king character for Burger King. In both instances, characters that were originally aimed at children were successfully presented again to younger men.

"There are so many brands, so much content, that everyone is looking for what will stand out and be iconic," said Rob Reilly, partner and executive creative director at Crispin Porter & Bugusky in Boulder, Colo., and Miami, the MDC Partners agency that works for the Burger King Corporation.

The pitfall in serving up bygone brand mascots to skeptical consumers of Generation X and Y, Mr. Reilly said, is that "you have to be so inventive, and not come off as reviving old things."

"We brought the king back in such a different way that it felt very new," he added, referring to the character's persona as a mischievous hipster who turns up in video games, on football fields and even as a Halloween mask.

Dodie Subler, who helped revive Buddy Lee, recalled that a doll of the character was found in "what was called the 'archive closet' at Lee in Merriam, Kan., and it was literally a closet, in the basement."

When the doll was shown to younger consumers, they reacted positively "to his heritage and history," she added, "which all worked to breathe life into durability." That was a product attribute for Lee Dungarees that VF was seeking to play up among shoppers ages 17 to 22.

Asked for her opinion of the new Speedy, Ms. Subler said: "I could see him being a wing man, as long as they maintain the integrity of the character." Ms. Subler worked with Bruce Tait a decade ago on the Buddy Lee campaign at Fallon Worldwide, part of the Publicis Groupe; she and Mr. Tait are now partners at Tait Subler, a brand strategy company in Minneapolis.

Speedy was created by the Wade Agency, now defunct, and appeared in more than 200 TV commercials. For the 1980 Olympics, he teamed up with Sammy Davis Jr. for song-and-dance numbers.

The stop-motion animation used to bring Speedy to life in the 1950s was advanced for its day; Speedy was often shown marching across America, leading a parade of Alka-Seltzer packages.

One '50s spot takes a tack that viewers of the 21st century might consider delightfully postmodern. The commercial begins with a man watching Speedy delivering an Alka-Seltzer

commercial on TV. When the man stirs, as if to change the channel, Speedy says, "Hey, don't do that," then relieves the viewer's upset stomach and headache with you-know-which-Seltzer.

What a concept: a commercial that keeps itself from being zapped.

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