

As the Snows Melt, Lowe's Encourages Spring Thinking

Stuart Elliott

Another major advertiser is placing a big bet on its ability to cajole wary consumers into behaving as if gasoline prices were not climbing, housing values were not falling and the stock market was not gyrating.

Lowe's, the home improvement chain, is planning what may be its most ambitious annual spring marketing campaign, which gets under way on Sunday. The starting date is a couple of weeks earlier than usual this year, to take advantage of the earlier start to daylight saving time.

The campaign, from several agencies owned by the Omnicom Group and an internal team at Lowe's, is relentlessly upbeat, as shown by its cheerful theme, "Welcome back spring." The centerpiece is a section of the Lowe's Web site (lowes.com/spring), scheduled to begin on Monday, where computer users can visit a make-believe town, Sunnyville, whose inhabitants are gaga over activities like grilling, gardening and riding around on lawn mowers.

The Web site, created by the Chicago office of Tribal DDB Worldwide, will offer new content that includes cellphone ring tones — called "spring tones" — that mimic seasonal sounds like birds, crickets and sprinklers. The site will also have a whimsical "meat calculator," intended to help determine how much food to buy for barbecues, and a weather-data widget for iGoogle, the personalized home page service offered by Google.

The site will later add a feature that is reminiscent of virtual worlds like Second Life: the ability for users to create a digital lawn, which will thrive provided it is watered and mowed.

In addition to the online effort, the campaign includes commercials on television and radio, outdoor posters and ads in newspapers and magazines.

Lowe's spends considerably this time of year to stimulate sales because "for our business, spring is our Christmas," said Bob Gfeller, senior vice president for marketing and advertising at the Lowe's Companies in Mooresville, N.C. In the last two years, Lowe's spent \$85 million to \$90 million in March and April, according to data from Nielsen Monitor-Plus.

As for the budget for the spring 2008 campaign, "I couldn't necessarily say it is the biggest in dollar investment," Mr. Gfeller said, "but it's the most integrated," adding more digital elements to "make it more interactive than just Lowe's talking to the customer."

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Madison Avenue is watching anxiously to see whether marketers like Lowe's, which spends about \$900 million each year to advertise in major media, will maintain their budgets or slash them because of the uncertain economic climate.

The risk is that tough times can offer a company a chance to increase sales, particularly if competitors cut back their campaigns. But if consumers are not eager to spend, or are concentrating on necessities, large ad outlays can be wasteful.

Pulling back "is certainly something you think about," Mr. Gfeller said, but because Lowe's has been gaining market share among sellers of home improvement merchandise, "we look at this as an opportunity."

"It's not that investing in their homes is off the list for consumers; it's a different level of investment based on the means they have here and now," he added. "You can buy a large plant, or build a deck."

That attitude was echoed by executives at the Lowe's agencies.

"When we say, 'Come in and get a grill,' it doesn't have to be the S.U.V. size," said Steve Rutter, a senior vice president and creative director at the New York office of BBDO Worldwide who works on Lowe's with Wil Boudreau, also a senior vice president and creative director.

"If we were selling the \$5,000 washer-dryer combo or a \$25,000 kitchen remodel, it would be one thing," Mr. Rutter said. "But everybody wants to spruce up the yard. We're celebrating that it's time to go to Lowe's and live outside again."

The campaign manifests that attitude in several ways. Along with the beaming residents of Sunnyville, there is a couple transformed, by shopping at Lowe's, from wintry black and white to springtime colors.

There is also a bear named Mike, symbolic of what Mr. Rutter described as "coming out of hibernation, the moment you go from cabin fever to spring fever."

Lowe's is the third prominent retailer to commit to a significant campaign in the last couple of weeks.

The others are Sears, Roebuck & Company, part of Sears Holdings, which is teaming up with the Hearst Corporation for a campaign that urges shoppers to "Reimagine yourself," and J. C. Penney, which is joining forces with Polo Ralph Lauren to introduce in Penney stores a merchandise line named American Living.

Retail sales last month, reported on Thursday, were decidedly mixed. Chains like T. J. Maxx, Target and Wal-Mart, which play up discount prices, fared better than department stores and fashion-oriented stores.

"As the economy we're facing starts to turn down, people are scaling back their dreams," said Kevin Flatt, executive creative director at Tribal DDB Chicago. "But they still have dreams, and it's nice to be able to satisfy some of them."

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In addition to Tribal DDB and BBDO, the other Omnicom agencies working on the campaign include Cultura, for ads aimed at Spanish-speaking shoppers; OMD, for media planning and buying; and TPN, for promotions.

Plans call for the campaign to run through mid-May, Mr. Gfeller said, then make way for ads with summer themes.

If the economy keeps struggling, he added, Lowe's has a strategy. It will encourage shoppers to "buy everything they need" during whatever store visits they are still making.

For instance, if someone is planning to paint a house, the goal is to sell "not just paint," Mr. Gfeller said, but also "the brushes, the rollers, the tape, the caulk."

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