

## Marketers Find a Sound That Draws a Crowd

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IN cartoons, the Road Runner goes “Beep, beep.” On Madison Avenue, the popular onomatopoeia is pronounced “Bleep, bleep.”



The filmmaker Brett Ratner in an ad for the New York Film Academy with a vulgarity covered with a bleep. Ads with bleeped words are gaining popularity.

Advertisers are winking at the contentious issue of content regulation by using bleeping sounds in commercials and video clips. The bleeps mimic how television and radio obscure bad language in live news coverage or taped reality shows.

Many times, the bleeps heard in commercials are covering actual expletives, which are written into the scripts solely to be censored.

For instance, in a commercial for the New York Film Academy, a crude word spoken by the filmmaker Brett Ratner is bleeped.

“We were playing poker and he lost and I said, ‘Instead of giving me money, why not do a commercial for me?’ ” said Jerry Sherlock, director of the academy. “So we made it into a whole joke.”

In a video clip for Bud Light, titled “Swear Jar,” that appears on the bud.tv Web site and sites like YouTube, cast members curse a blue streak.

The plot spoofs a demand for linguistic purity in a large office. When employees learn that the quarters deposited into the jar will go toward buying beer, the 4-, 7- and 12-letter words fly freely. The video was created by the Chicago office of DDB Worldwide, part of the Omnicom Group.

“We’ve had about 12 million viral views of it that we can track,” said Robert C. Lachky, executive vice president for global industry and creative development for Anheuser-Busch in St. Louis, the brewer of Bud Light, “and 2.7 million have been on YouTube alone.”

Sometimes, there is nothing blue or objectionable about the words being hidden. Rather, consumers are being encouraged to jump to the conclusion that they are being protected from something crude.

That was the case with commercials for McDonald’s franchisees in metropolitan New York, which promoted a giveaway of items on the chain’s Dollar Menu.

A four-letter word — free — was bleeped in the spots to help make a point that the promotion was, as one character put it, “so good, it’s obscene.” The commercials were created by Arnold Worldwide, part of the Arnold Worldwide Partners division of Havas.

As a device to draw the attention of a bored or distracted audience, bleeps are an updated version of tried and true tactics like loud sound effects or laugh tracks.

For example, in a video for Bodygroom, a body hair trimmer sold by Philips Norelco, an actor's discussion, laced with double entendres, is interrupted by a bleep when he mentions a particular body part.

"We did that to resonate in a humorous way with our target audience, men between 20 and 30, maybe up to 33," said Arjen Linders, senior director for shaving and beauty at the Stamford office of Philips Norelco, part of Royal Philips Electronics.

"If you look at the results, they're pretty strong," Mr. Linders said, citing data showing that "four million people have visited the Web site (shaveeverywhere.com) and their average stay is four to seven minutes." The video was created by Tribal DDB Worldwide in New York, part of DDB Worldwide.

Bleeping can also serve as a comment on the debate over what constitutes indecency in popular culture. The Federal Communications Commission has levied large fines recently against broadcast networks for program content deemed inappropriate.

Concerned about the possibility of repercussions, some TV stations rejected a campaign for Citizens United Reciprocal Exchange, which sells automobile insurance under the Cure name, said Allen Kay, chairman and chief executive at the Cure agency, Korey Kay & Partners in New York.

The stations objected to a talking blue circle in the commercials, he said, which twice utters a word that is bleeped.

"They said bleeps are inappropriate and they bleeped the bleeps," Mr. Kay complained. "It's a little blue cartoon head that's not being allowed to swear."

The indecency rules that govern broadcasting do not, however, apply to cable TV, satellite TV, satellite radio or the Internet. That makes bleeping more common in those media.

For instance, Serena Software in Redwood City, Calif., uploaded to youtube.com video clips filled with scores of bleeps, part of a campaign carrying the theme "Just @#\$% it."

The bleeps mask the word mash, as in "Just mash it," which refers to a software product Serena sells for creating the Web applications known as mash-ups. The clips can also be watched on the company's Web site (serena.com).

And the Travel Channel cable network, to promote a series called "Anthony Bourdain: No Reservations," runs commercials that feature excerpts from episodes in which Mr. Bourdain curses. The words are bleeped in the spots, as they are in the series.

"Tony calls it like he sees it," said Pat Lafferty, chief creative officer at the Travel Channel, part of Cox Communications. "It's who he is and it's what the show is, so we extended it into how we promote the show."

"Certainly, you can take that too far, if it's just sensational," Mr. Lafferty acknowledged, so the network tries to make sure that the commercials are "not distracting or overdone."

And in scheduling the spots to appear on other networks, "we may ask that they run after 9 or 10 p.m.," he said.

Mr. Lachky, of Anheuser-Busch, said the company and DDB Chicago always intended that "Swear Jar" run only online.

Although "it's very much reflective of today's society," he added, it is also "very much over the top."

"At no point had we considered it for television, because it just isn't right for that," Mr. Lachky said. "When you're one on one, in the online space, and the viewer is seeking you out, that's the proper place."

The line between bleep and blunder is a fine one, as McDonald's and Arnold learned. Some viewers complained about the Dollar Menu commercials, because they inferred that the bleeps were covering up a lewd word.

So the spots were unbleeped to make it clear the actor was saying "free" rather than something beyond the pale for a family-friendly fast feeder.

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