

Creative Spots, Courtesy of a Stalled Economy

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Forget the fancy blandishments of Madison Avenue. An e-mail message sent on Thursday to advertise B. R. Guest Restaurants gets right to the point.

"The economy stinks," the subject line begins. "Twenty percent off online gift card purchases."

Since the fall, many marketers have been appealing to worried consumers by acknowledging that times are tough. Campaigns for everything from cars to food to clothing have played up saving money rather than status or fashion.

Now, with consumer spending slowing further — as evidenced by the lackluster retail sales data reported on Thursday, the weakest results for a March since 1995 — there is a noticeable increase in pitches that are focused on value.

For instance, readers of the April 14 issue of *In Touch Weekly* magazine will find ads for the N.Y.C. New York Color cosmetics sold by Del Laboratories ("You're beautiful and smart ... Why pay more?"), the TreSemme line of hair care products made by Alberto-Culver ("Curls you'll love. A price you'll adore") and the \$1 Spicy Chick'n Crisp sandwich sold at Burger King.

"Value is a big part of the equation for fast food," said Rob Reilly, partner and co-executive creative director at a Burger King agency, Crispin Porter & Bogusky in Miami, part of MDC Partners, which is creating commercials for a new menu item, the Cheesy Bacon B.K. Wrapper, priced at \$1.39 each.

"As the economy struggles, people still have to eat," Mr. Reilly said. "You want to get into the value game, because it's a nice way to drive traffic."

The May issue of *Redbook* magazine carries five ads that speak to consumers whose mind-set is recessionary. The Suave hair care range owned by Unilever asks women to "Say yes to beautiful without paying the price." Wal-Mart promises "brand-name bras at a great price."

And Home Depot entices shoppers with an "exclusive 15 percent discount" on Bali window shades and blinds.

"All the research we are doing says absolutely there is concern about the economy," said Bill Koenigsberg, chief executive at Horizon Media in New York, an agency that works for marketers like Ace Hardware, Geico, Harrah's and Jack in the Box.

As a result, "you've got to tell it like it is" in ads, he said, rather than avoiding the economic elephant in the room.

One advertiser that is taking that candid tack is LoJack, the maker of automotive antitheft devices. One of five commercials in a campaign that started this week addresses a subject rarely discussed in ads until now.

The spot features a man describing how "the first thing" he thought of when he realized his car was missing was "how upside down I was on my car loan" — a term meaning he owed more than the car was worth.

"I'd still be making payments on a car I didn't have," the man frets. But his car was equipped with LoJack, a stern-voice announcer reveals, so the spot has a happy ending.

"We'd done interviews in Los Angeles, New York and New Jersey, big markets for LoJack, and a car dealer used the expression," said Greg Smith, chief creative officer at the LoJack agency, the Via Group in Portland, Me.

"We'd heard it, but didn't know how much a phenomenon it was," Mr. Smith recalled, "so we Googled 'upside down on a loan.' " After learning how prevalent it is — by some estimates, a quarter of car buyers owed more on their previous cars than the resale values — a decision was made to devote a commercial to the subject.

"A lot of clients don't want to ever mention anything negative," Mr. Smith said. "But advertising doesn't have to be just fun and frivolous."

"When times are more uncertain," he added, "advertising can play a role in solving problems for people."

As altruistic as that may sound, the purpose of ads that sell the idea of value is, of course, to move merchandise.

For example, since Wal-Mart introduced a campaign in September with the theme "Save money. Live better," its sales have increased faster than before — and faster than those of competitors like Target.

Amid the gloomy reports from retailers on Thursday, Wal-Mart's was a bright spot; the company also raised its profit projection for the first quarter.

"We continue to get all kinds of great feedback from customers," said Stephen Quinn, chief marketing officer at Wal-Mart in Bentonville, Ark. "A lot of research showed us how important this is to the majority of Americans."

That is why a Wal-Mart television, print and online campaign introduced on March 31, which celebrates April as "Earth Month," goes green in two ways: saving the planet and saving money.

The campaign promotes products like a \$7.50 T-shirt that is made with plastic recycled from Coca-Cola bottles; mulch made from recycled tire rubber (\$5.47 for a 20-pound bag); and Tide Coldwater detergent, marked down to \$15.87 from \$17.97.

The theme of the campaign is epitomized by the headline of an ad in a 16-page booklet that will be inserted in May issues of magazines: "Earth-friendly products won't save the Earth if they don't save people money." The campaign is by the Martin Agency in Richmond, Va., part of the Interpublic Group of Companies.

It is "safe to say," Mr. Quinn agreed, that the campaign would not have been approved if it had not demonstrated to shoppers that green products can be bought on a budget.

As for results, Mr. Quinn said, "we're really pleased at this stage," adding that Wal-Mart plans "new initiatives after Earth Month is over."

In a twist, some ads about the sagging economy are centered on the efforts to improve the sagging economy, notably the federal stimulus plan approved in February.

A humorous campaign for AirTran Airways, by Cramer-Krasselt in Chicago, urges consumers to spend their bonus checks from the government on travel.

"It's what you and your country can do for each other," the ads declare, paraphrasing the inaugural address of President John F. Kennedy.

The economy "is sputtering, but passenger demand has been steady" for the airlines, said Tad Hutcheson, vice president for marketing at the Atlanta office of AirTran Airways.

"Our greatest fear is that consumers will stop buying airline tickets," he added. "Our job is to remind them to keep buying."