

In a Weak Economy, Quirky Restaurant Ads Yield to Tried and True

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ONE of latest victims of the sagging economy is a sass-talking “spokes- apple” that briefly starred in a campaign for Applebee’s, the budget restaurant chain.

Applebee’s introduced the apple — a regular-looking red one that exhorted people to get together and go out to eat — in October. The campaign, on television, the Web and in print, was supported by a budget of \$180 million.

But now the apple is gone, its mission far from accomplished.

Early tests showed mixed results — some people loved the apple’s attitude, though others found it off-putting — but the real problem was that the fruit in question failed to give the company’s bottom line an immediate lift.

And Applebee’s was in no mood to be patient. Throughout 2007, the company had not shown a quarterly increase in sales at stores open at least a year, or same-store sales, and its customers were being pummeled by the mortgage crisis, leaving little money to spend on dining out. Rather than give the campaign time to catch on, Applebee’s pulled the plug in late February.

“Typically you would give a campaign a couple rounds of testing to give it a chance to work,” said Shannon Scott, Applebee’s executive director for creative services. “We walked away quicker than we normally would have, because we had to get people in the seats now.”

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There was also a certain cringe factor for some people, a few of whom complained in blogs. In one commercial, the chatty apple sits on a park bench with a young man who is sending text messages to his friends. The apple, in the voice of the stand-up comedian Wanda Sykes, asks, “That’s how you carry on a friendship, baby? With your thumbs? Of course, it ain’t my business.”

Applebee’s is not the only restaurant to withdraw a quirky new branding symbol in these tough times. A similar situation has played out at Wendy’s, which dropped its “red wig” campaign in late January after eight months. In the ads, young men wore pigtails reminiscent of the Wendy’s character and demanded fresh burgers.

Some strong parallels exist: not only did the red wig campaign fail to lift Wendy’s sales in a significant way, its tone — perhaps too arch for a family-oriented chain — was called into question. Both campaigns were meant to attract younger diners.

Advertising and restaurant executives point to several reasons that neither campaign was a hit. The bizarre red wig commercials were too much of a departure from Wendy’s folksy brand; the apple was not a strong enough image to represent Applebee’s. It is unlikely, though, that either one would have been ended so quickly in better economic times.

Instead, both marketers have opted for a more recession-proof approach: glamour shots of food that are intended to make mouths water and prompt consumers to reach for their wallets.

For the last two months, Applebee’s, of Overland Park, Kan., has been running ads that star its food — none of it making conversation — and a voice-over by John Corbett (Aidan of “Sex and the City”) encouraging viewers to take advantage of lunchtime specials. The campaign is the second one created by Applebee’s new agency, McCann Erickson, part of the Interpublic Group of Companies; the spokesapple one had been the first.

Wendy's has taken a similar approach. Its new spots feature lingering shots of cheeseburgers and fish sandwiches, and the script talks up fresh ingredients and Wendy's "promise" of quality food. The ads hew much closer to the restaurant's down-home image.

Wendy's, based in Dublin, Ohio, turned to a different agency, Kirshenbaum Bond and Partners, a unit of MDC Partners, to compose its ads. The red wig campaign had been the first effort for Wendy's by Saatchi & Saatchi, part of the Publicis Groupe.

Bob Holtcamp, senior vice president for brand advertising at Wendy's, said that regardless of economic circumstances, it was important to keep the focus on meals, something the red wig campaign had failed to do.

"The consumers are now seeing the quality of our food in our advertising," Mr. Holtcamp said. "The economy can go back and forth, but our brand is built on the quality of our food as opposed to other fast-food restaurants."

Perhaps a lesson from these failed efforts is that difficult times are not the right times to try to create momentum for a quirky corporate mascot. "Building an icon takes time," said Hayes Roth, chief executive of the branding firm Landor Associates, a unit of the WPP Group. McDonald's, he said, has spent decades using Ronald McDonald in everything child-related that the company does, making him one of the most recognizable characters in the world. "That's how you build an icon," he said.

But the irreverent mascots tried by Wendy's and Applebee's owe less to Ronald McDonald than they do to the King from Burger King, whose slightly unnerving presence Mr. Roth likened to the Wanda Sykes apple. But the King has proven highly effective in reaching Burger King's core audience of younger men, now that he has been given the time to take root.

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Some see a missed opportunity for Applebee's. The apple "really did cut through the clutter," said Malcolm Knapp, a restaurant analyst and consultant who has his own firm in New York. "It was good and sassy, and gave some attitude to a brand that was lacking it."

"Applebee's is not a cool brand," he said. "If they are going to become cool, they are going to have to find a way to resonate with consumers."

Perhaps the current strategy is paying off for Applebee's. The chain, which was acquired by IHOP for \$2.1 billion last year, reported a 0.5 percent increase in same-store sales for the first quarter. Among company-owned stores (and excluding franchisees), the increase was 2.1 percent.

"The first quarter release is our first positive same-store sales in two years," Ms. Scott of Applebee's said. "It's safe to say this campaign is working for us, so we're going to stick with it."

Wendy's, which is being bought by Triarc, the parent of Arby's, for \$2.3 billion, showed a 1.6 percent drop in same-store sales in the first quarter in contrast to a 0.9 percent increase in the fourth quarter of 2007.

On the plus side, Wendy's says that its new ads are scoring much higher with focus groups than the red wig ads, particularly in important categories like "makes me want to eat at Wendy's."

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