

## A Live Promotion, at 14,000 Feet

*Eric Pfanner*



Channel 4

Skydivers spelling out Honda as part of a live television advertisement for the carmaker on Channel 4 in Britain.

"THIS is live, at 14,000 feet, over Spain," a man shouted over the roar of the wind as he and a group of fellow skydivers plunged toward the earth near Madrid.

Before deploying their parachutes, they created human formations spelling out the letters H, O, N, D and A. The jump was broadcast live on Channel 4 in Britain last week, during a three-minute commercial break from a reality television program.

Live TV advertisements have been making a comeback in the United States, usually with the host of a late-night program promoting the virtues of a specific product — for instance, Jimmy Kimmel and a sidekick doing a skit about Quiznos subs. The idea is to reach people who normally fast-forward through commercials, and at the same time to have the host's popularity rub off on the brand.

Honda Motor, the Japanese automaker, has gone to particularly great lengths with its skydiving stunt in Britain. Instead of having a pair of comedians in a TV studio read jokes from a script, the ad involved 19 skydivers doing a dangerous jump that was subject to the vicissitudes of the weather as well as the synchronization of two airplanes.

Honda and its ad agency in Britain, Wieden & Kennedy, developed the idea to illustrate the tag line "Difficult is worth doing," which is being used to promote a new version of the Accord.

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It is the latest in a series of high-concept spots for the British unit of Honda. The first of those ads, in 2003, featured dozens of actual car parts arranged in a dominolike sequence; the parts seemed to take on a life of their own after a rolling cog set off a chain reaction.

The follow-up, an animated spot that introduced a new diesel engine in 2004, featured the humorist Garrison Keillor singing a jingle with the chorus, "Hate something, change something, make something better."

Both of these spots, as well as more recent Honda ads in Britain, rejected the conventions of automotive advertising — sport utility vehicles splashing through streams, sports cars charging along mountain roads and the like. The live spot continues that tradition.

“We’re good at telling stories,” said Ian Armstrong, manager for customer communications at Honda in Britain. “I think the point is people like good content, whether that’s a book, a TV program or an ad. Our job is to make good ads that people want to watch.”

Live advertising, which was the norm in the early days of broadcasting, has made a comeback in part because of the increasing use of digital video recorders. By turning ads into events, advertisers hope to keep viewers interested.

In Honda’s case, the audience actually grew from just under 2.1 million at the start of the spot to more than 2.2 million when it ended three minutes later, said Becky Mew, a spokeswoman for Channel 4.

The ad required considerable logistical coordination for Wieden & Kennedy, Channel 4 and Starcom, Honda’s media buying agency. They had to ensure that the skydivers had sufficient practice and that the planes involved took off on time. The spot also required a dispensation from British advertising regulators, who typically preview all television ads (though in this case they saw only a script).

The weather could have scuttled the whole stunt at the last minute, requiring Honda to run a different advertisement in its place. As it was, the visibility was good, except for a thin layer of clouds that momentarily obscured the skydivers’ D.

Channel 4, which helped produce the ad, said the safety procedures for the jump were approved by the British Parachute Association and by health and safety consultants. But the risks of skydiving were demonstrated a day after the live ad appeared, when one of the two planes used in the advertisement crashed while on an unrelated flight, killing the Spanish pilot and a Brazilian skydiver, and injuring several others.

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None of the people were involved in the advertising shoot, Honda said. “It was in no way connected to our live ad, but we have expressed our condolences to the families of the victims,” Mr. Armstrong said.

He said the crash had not changed Honda’s plans to go ahead with a \$12 million campaign for the Accord in Britain, featuring a similar, albeit recorded, spot.

That ad started running Sunday. It features an even more complex jump, involving more than 50 parachutists and five aircraft, and was filmed over the Mojave Desert in California. The skydivers created three formations — a steering wheel, a suspension spring and a rearview camera — to highlight technological innovations in the car.

Mr. Keillor makes a cameo appearance, delivering a voice-over in the role of a ground controller for the jump, telling the skydivers, “Gentlemen, remember, difficult is worth doing.”

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