

On the Stump, for Consumers

Stephanie Clifford



Among the companies that have adopted political themes for their ads are Svedka vodka.

WHILE the long primary campaign may have exhausted candidates and voters alike, Madison Avenue is busy rolling out politically themed ads, sometimes lifting incidents straight from the campaign trail.

Though the point is to position their brands as hip and current, advertisers do take some risks when they delve into politics — not just of offending people's partisan views, but of coming off as silly or awkward. After all, what flies on Comedy Central may fall flat on a billboard or Web site.

Unilever, which makes the margarine spread I Can't Believe It's Not Butter, is about to introduce a series of six Webisodes in which the female cartoon mascot for its spray version, Spraychel, runs for president. The series starts on Monday, when the character announces her campaign.

Although she is running for president of the refrigerator, Spraychel's experiences on the campaign trail bear an eerie resemblance to those of Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton.

In one Webisode, her opponent, Maxwell Butterman, is accused of exaggerating the danger of his trip to visit refugees (though in real life, it was Mrs. Clinton, not her opponent, who was criticized for her description of a trip to Bosnia). Mr. Butterman's trip was to the freezer because Bosnia "does not exist in the fridge," said Javier Martin, senior brand manager for I Can't Believe It's Not Butter.

Spraychel (rhymes with Rachel) also argues with Mr. Butterman about global warming (refrigerator warming, in this case) and encounters edible versions of real people, like Howard Dean and Ross Perot. The original plans included Tim Russert, but the company will change the character because of Mr. Russert's sudden death last week.

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Mr. Martin said that Unilever had a year ago timed the Spraychel Webisodes for early summer to promote the product's use at barbecues, and that the plan was to move forward with an election-themed campaign no matter what was going on in real-world politics.

"Obviously, we didn't know what would happen during the primaries," Mr. Martin said. "We didn't know exactly what mishappenings would occur, but we knew some would occur."

He said that Unilever had also considered a story line based on the Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr., the pastor whose inflammatory remarks prompted Senator Barack Obama to renounce him, but had decided against it.

"You don't want to offend anybody," Mr. Martin said, adding, "We had one making fun of Bill Clinton and his affair in the Oval Office, but consumers told us, 'ain't funny.' So we took it out."

Unilever's digital media agency is Story Worldwide, which has created all the Spraychel campaigns. "It's margarine," said Stacy Thomson, the agency's director of marketing services. "It's not the easiest thing to make exciting and sexy, and we're really proud that we can."

Spraychel's first Webisodes were introduced in 2005, when she starred in a mock soap opera, "Sprays of Her Life"; the series drew about 250,000 visitors over five weeks. The two subsequent series included a riff last year on "Sex and the City" called "Sprays in the City," which attracted about a million visitors.

Mr. Martin said that Unilever liked the Webisodes because each one is longer than a television commercial, and people actually choose to view them, unlike TV spots. "The longer they interact with the brand, the more likely they will be to purchase the brand," he said.

This time, the character will have a campaign Web site, VoteSpraychel.com, with features that were inspired by Mrs. Clinton's Web site, Mr. Martin said. There will be polls, a map of her standing (segmented by refrigerator section rather than by state) and a Facebook group.

For six weeks, Unilever will release a new Webisode weekly along with a new casual game. The company will also offer a contest for people to vote on how Spraychel should proceed with her campaign, and one contestant will win \$400,000, the amount of the president's annual salary.

In deciding whether to go with a political theme, Unilever did not try to gauge people's political leanings. Rather, "we tested to see if they feel it was something we could make fun of," Mr. Martin said.

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Spraychel is not the only female character on advertisers' tickets. Svedka vodka is running a "Join the party" campaign featuring its robotic Svedka Girl and promoting a "Fembot in the White House."

Svedka has hired buses, called the Straight Shot Express, to drive people to election-night parties, a play on Senator John McCain's Straight Talk Express. It has introduced a drink, the Cosmo-politician, sponsored an Unpresidential Debate between the "Saturday Night Live" star Seth Meyers and the political writer Matthew Cooper, and, starting this week, will hold "rallies" in 800 bars.

Svedka, which created the ads in-house, began the campaign on Feb. 5, the day of coast-to-coast state nominating contests, and will end it in November. "Politics is where the action is," said Marina Hahn, chief marketing officer for Spirits Marque One, which markets Svedka. "We want to put our brand right in the epicenter of pop culture."

Svedka has tried to capitalize on the twists and turns in the campaign to keep its own messages as topical as possible. For example, two days after Mrs. Clinton conceded the race to Mr. Obama, Svedka ran a newspaper advertisement offering her a personal supply of vodka for the duration of the campaign season.

"The Hillary Clinton ad, we were able to turn around in 24 hours, so as issues come up, we'll be able to address them," said Ms. Hahn.

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The trappings of a political campaign are also prominently featured in a promotion that started in May for Universal Media Studios, which produces shows like "30 Rock," "The Office" and "House." The studio is running ads in Los Angeles entertainment publications, trying to lobby members of the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences to nominate its shows and stars for prime-time Emmy awards, which are open for voting until Friday.

A Web site, nominate08.tv, uses the tag line "Exercise your Emmy rights" and offers free campaign buttons and bumper stickers, like "Those who know vote Leno." Universal said it received 25,000 requests for buttons in the first weeks of the campaign, and it is currently out of them. Bumper stickers are still available, but only to academy members.

Normally, the company's Emmy campaigns are "reverential," with glamorous shots of the stars, said Katherine Pope, the president of Universal Media Studios. But this year's campaign, created by BBDO West, part of the Omnicom Group, is a bit of an aberration for Universal, whose shows appear primarily on NBC (the studio is part of NBC Universal Television).

"There's just such an incredible sense of a renewal of optimism in the political arena," she said. "And for us, all those things are so applicable about the way people feel about a certain show."

The twists and turns of the campaign trail can leave some marketers behind the times. Last week, Jones Soda introduced a line of drinks called Campaign Cola with pictures of the presidential candidates on the labels: Yes We Can Cola for Mr. Obama, Pure McCain Cola for Mr. McCain — and Capitol Hillary Cola for Mrs. Clinton.

Stephen C. Jones, the chief executive of the company, said the Clinton bottles were already in production by the time Mrs. Clinton conceded.

"Why pull it?" he said. "We had hers made before she decided to suspend her campaign, so out of respect to her and anybody who wants to buy them — I think people are still buying them."

Jones is selling the sodas until November through a Web site, campaigncola.com. As of Monday afternoon, Mr. Obama was selling the most, with 3,636 bottles, versus 1,320 for Mr. McCain and 1,188 for Mrs. Clinton.

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