

Campaigns address today's anxieties by looking back

Stuart Elliott



A Depression-era insurance office was depicted in a campaign for Farmers. One of the company's executives said the point was that "there have been hard times we have weathered together."

Advertising almost always wants to be upbeat, the better to jolly consumers into, well, consuming. So it is startling to see a spate of campaigns invoking some of the most downbeat times America has ever endured: the desperate decade that began when the stock market crashed in 1929 and continued through the Great Depression.

For instance, a campaign for Farmers insurance talks about how the company was started "a year before the crash."

"Back then," an announcer says in a television commercial, referring to the financial crisis of March 1933, "when others paid claims with i.o.u.'s, we paid cash."

The clothing retailer Brooks Brothers is reprinting advertisements that appeared during dire years like 1934. Newspaper ads for the Gourmet Garage chain of food stores promote special sales called "new deals" — complete with drawings of a grinning Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Commercials for Allstate insurance discuss the company's founding in 1931 as the spokesman Dennis Haysbert walks past period photographs that include depictions of the Dust Bowl. Print ads for Soyjoy bars, which also cite the Dust Bowl, describe how "the Great Depression turned the land of opportunity into a land of despair."

And a catalog for the Postal Service, selling a new stamped envelope bearing an image of Seabiscuit, describes how the horse "raised the spirits of a beleaguered nation during the Great Depression."

The look back at the 1930s is inspired by current financial conditions, which many economists have described as the worst since the Depression. Those comparisons are much on the minds of consumers, according to agency and marketing executives.

"A lot of people are drawing that parallel," said Kevin Kelso, executive vice president and chief marketing officer at the Farmers Insurance Group in Los Angeles. "They sort of feel the 'D word' is perhaps in the air."

Farmers recently began running its history-themed campaign, created by the Richards Group in Dallas. The point is "not to dwell on 'Are we in a depression?'" Mr. Kelso said, but rather to communicate that "there have been hard times we have weathered together — and come out stronger than we were going in."

"We see it as an optimistic message," he added.

Consumers expressed those same feelings during tests of the Soyjoy campaign, said Lisa Bennett, chief creative officer at the DDB West unit of DDB Worldwide, part of the Omnicom Group.

GOURMET GARAGE
NEW DEALS
WEEKLY NEW DEALS
Good through May 24

Fresh Atlantic Salmon Filet	Reg. \$12.99 lb.	\$8.99 lb.
USDA Choice Certified Colorado Loin Lamb Chops	Reg. \$14.99 lb.	\$9.99 lb.
Imported "Tour de Marze" French Brie	Reg. \$8.99 lb.	\$5.99 lb.
Grilled Lemon Chicken w/ Roasted Spring Veggies Dinner	12 oz. Reg. \$7.99 ea.	\$4.99 ea.
Locally Made Sopressata "Chubs" Sweet & Hot	Reg. \$16.99 lb.	\$7.99 lb.

MONTHLY NEW DEALS Good through May 31

Gourmet Garage Extra Virgin Olive Oil Imported from Italy	750ml Reg. \$9.99 ea.	\$6.99 ea.
Ciao Bella Sorbets & Gelatos	Flav. Reg. \$4.99 ea.	2/\$6
Glaceau Smart Water	6 Packs - 20 oz. Reg. \$8.99 6pk.	\$5.99 6pk.

...and many more Monthly New Deals!

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Carnegie Hill 1245 Park Ave. at 90th St.

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Gourmet Garage food stores have promoted "new deals."

"People said, 'The Great Depression is somewhat similar to what we're going through now, and we did come out of it,' " said Ms. Bennett, who is based in San Francisco.

Likewise, the campaign for Soyjoy, sold by a division of Otsuka Pharmaceutical, "is focusing on the positive aspects rather than the negative," she added, recounting how farmers planted soybeans to replenish the soil with nitrogen.

"With the stabilization of the land helping to stabilize the economy," the ad says, "America was slowly pulled out of the Great Depression."

The first marketer to revisit the '30s may have been Allstate, which began running its commercials in January. The campaign was created by Leo Burnett in Chicago, part of the Publicis Groupe.

The spots were meant to address that "the public was more than a little worried about its money," said Lisa Cochrane, vice president for marketing at the Allstate Corporation in Northbrook, Ill., "and casting some wary glances at the insurance industry."

Allstate's birth during the Depression, as a division of Sears, Roebuck & Company, was a catalyst for the commercials, she added, which begin with Mr. Haysbert declaring dryly that "1931 was not exactly a great year to start a business."

He goes on to say that "through the 12 recessions since," Allstate has "noticed that after the fears subside, a funny thing happens. People start to enjoy the small things in life: a home-cooked meal. Time with loved ones. Appreciating the things we do have ... the things we can count on."

The tone is meant "not to be depressing," Ms. Cochrane said, "but to be optimistic, to say to Americans, 'Hey, together we can do this; together we can survive this.' "

"One thing about the Depression: things were bad," she added, "but we were all in the same boat."

Asked if ads about bad times are a risk, Ms. Cochrane replied: "I don't ever think it's a risky thing when you tell the truth, and tell it in a way that's comforting."

Indeed, she said, in her 32 years in the business, "I have never received so much unsolicited, plain-old-everyday-American correspondence" praising a campaign.

One result is a sequel, Ms. Cochrane said, that seeks to sound like people who lived through the Depression talking about "the good old days, when the best thing was to have a potluck supper or to go fishing."

The new commercial starts with Mr. Haysbert intoning: "In the last year, we've learned a lot. We've learned that meatloaf and Jenga can actually be more fun than reservations and box seats. That who's around your TV is more important than how big it is."

That light touch is also being taken by Gourmet Garage in New York, which is creating its campaign internally.

"I just thought it would resonate with people," said Andy Arons, chief executive at Gourmet Garage, who runs the company with his business partner, Adam Hartman, because the ads are "apropos for the times."

Some of the "new deals" have been big hits, Mr. Arons said, adding that during the sale on rib-eye black Angus beef, "we went from selling five or six hundred pounds a week to 3,000 pounds."

The only problem with the campaign, Mr. Arons said, is that some of the younger generation has looked at the caricature of F.D.R. and asked: " 'Who's that guy? And why is he smoking?'"

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