

In new campaigns, spots take on a rosier hue

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The American economy is back — or so some of the country's biggest advertisers are saying in new campaigns.

It may be a sign that the recession is ending, or it may be a sign that consumers are sick of hearing about it.

While economists and investors study housing starts and gross domestic product predictions to measure economic vibrancy, General Electric, Bank of America and other companies are using commercials to proclaim that America's future is bright. And that may be something of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

"These are big companies demonstrating market leadership that will help shape public opinion," Robert Scalea, chief executive for North America at the Brand Union, a branding firm that is part of the WPP Group, said. "Marketing is always a reflection of societal values, and many times, for smarter marketers, is a driver of them."

The ads do not equivocate. "The American renewal is happening right now," G.E. spots say. Bank of America closes its commercial with: "America. Growing stronger every day." Ads for Levi's quote Walt Whitman's "America" and "Pioneers! O Pioneers!"

Marketers, by definition, sell things, but they are sometimes able to capture the mood of a country as they do so. Last fall, when stalwart firms like Lehman Brothers disappeared almost overnight, companies emphasized their trustworthiness and lengthy histories in commercials. In the spring, when it seemed as if the recession would go on endlessly, companies compared this era to the Depression and discussed how they had weathered that period. Now, marketers' emphasis on American pride and an economic comeback suggests that the air is starting to crackle with optimism.

On a more functional level, once banks like Bank of America begin lending again, corporations like General Electric begin hiring again and everyone begins advertising again, the economic recovery will have some fuel.

But a message that economic woes are over may seem insensitive to some viewers. "I was looking at the G.E. one, and my first reaction was, everyone in there is smiling and happy, and it's a very bright scene," said Timothy B. Heath, a marketing professor at Miami University's business school. "It seemed almost too cheery, given where a lot of people are right now."

Bank of America's spot begins with lights turning on all over the country in quick succession — at museums, at stadiums, in small towns. "Every business day, Bank of America lends nearly \$3 billion," the narrator says, "in every corner of the economy." It is the first spot in an estimated \$40 million campaign that will run through early next year and include more television commercials, along with print and online ads.

The spot was completed this summer, but Bank of America held it until about two weeks ago.

"We really waited for the proper time to put it on air, and we believe the time is now," said Meredith Verdone, brand, advertising and research executive for Bank of America. She checked with the bank's economists, and public policy and public relations executives to make sure they thought a recovery was beginning, she said.

Another part of the bank's decision was sensing the national mood.

"A lot of that is just gut," David Lubars, chairman and chief creative officer of the advertising agency BBDO North America, part of the Omnicom Group, which created the ad, said. "People are starting to look for opportunities to help them move ahead, and this feels like the right time to talk about that."

Of course, from some perspectives, Bank of America contributed to the economy's skid in the first place. Its chief executive, Kenneth D. Lewis, who recently announced his resignation, agreed last fall to acquire the faltering Merrill Lynch, but did not disclose some information about bonuses and losses at Merrill to shareholders. The decisions have made him and the company the subject of investigations by the New York attorney general and regulators. And the company accepted funds from the Troubled Asset Relief Program, opening it to some criticism.

"There were a lot of question marks, particularly when we took the TARP dollars, and everyone was questioning what we were doing with those dollars," Ms. Verdone said. Now, "that is not as much of an overhang as it was," she said, but "the headwinds are pretty strong — it's hard to get our voice heard. So this was an opportunity for us to tell the role that we're playing in the country's recovery."

G.E. is taking a similar approach. Television ads show G.E. employees working in labs and factories. "Manufacturing is part of G.E.'s belief that the American renewal is making things right here in America," says one spot. Another talks about G.E.'s "creating the advanced technologies that create jobs."

"We really wanted to focus on the idea that G.E.'s creating and manufacturing key technologies in America that are helping to drive and build the U.S. economy," Judy Hu, global executive director of advertising and branding for G.E., said.

G.E. declined to discuss the cost of the campaign, but its advertising spending rose 5.1 percent in the first six months of this year, compared with the same period last year, to about \$550 million, according to TNS Media Intelligence. The campaign, created by BBDO, will continue with ads in print, on television and online throughout the fall.

Smaller advertisers, too, are picking up the pro-America theme. In July, Levi's began a campaign about a redefined America, running ads on television, in print, outdoor and online that "bring out the pioneering spirit of Levi's and America today," said Megan O'Connor, director of digital marketing for Levi's, part of Levi Strauss & Company. Created by Wieden & Kennedy, the spots show images of young people set to recordings of Whitman's poems. Tag lines in the print and outdoor campaigns are even more specific to the economy, including "Will work for better times."

Also over the summer — on Flag Day, patriotically — New Balance began running a spot filmed in Skowhegan, Me., where it has a shoe factory.

"We're here to stay," a worker says over sun-soaked shots of forests, green fields and American flags. "Here we are, 2009, still making shoes in the U.S.A."

Christine Madigan, the director of global marketing and brand management for New Balance, said the company had long emphasized its made-in-America shoes, and older consumers had liked the message. But this campaign seemed to find a new audience.

"What's new is, it's actually younger consumers," she said.

And although the commercial is upbeat, the reason it is resounding with consumers may not be.

"For the first time in a long time, younger consumers are coming out of high school, out of universities, and are not able to get a job," Ms. Madigan said. "They are saying, 'Wow, I can't believe there aren't any jobs in the United States of America.' "

The depressing realities may partly explain why these upbeat ads appeal to marketers.

"The truth is, we want to believe they're right," Mr. Heath of Miami University said. "Deep down inside, even skeptics want to be hopeful."

New York Times, New York, Oct. 12th 2009, Advertising, online.

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