

Something to Rah-Rah-Rah about for Christmas

Stuart Elliott

GAP is celebrating the coming holiday season with glee — or perhaps that should be “Glee.”

Television advertising for the Gap division of Gap Inc. — its first commercials for Christmas since 2006 — takes the expression “holiday cheer” literally by featuring energetic young people performing as singers and cheerleaders. There is even a special Web site (cheerfactory.com), which is to go live on Thursday, where visitors will be able to send customized versions of 10 fanciful cheers to friends and family through e-mail messages, Facebook and Twitter.

“Glee,” the new hit series on Fox Broadcasting, is centered on students at an Ohio high school who belong to the glee club and cheerleading squad. The show’s vibrant musical numbers are best sellers on iTunes.

Gap is not alone in being gleeful, or cheerful, in its holiday advertising. For instance, TV commercials for Wal-Mart Stores feature a song from the musical “Mame” called “We Need a Little Christmas.” The song is sung in the show by characters who are trying to cheer themselves up before a holiday season during the Great Depression. The Wal-Mart campaign is created by the Martin Agency in Richmond, Va., part of the Interpublic Group of Companies.

And the J. C. Penney Company, in its national Christmas campaign, is taking “a very upbeat tone,” said Mike Boylson, executive vice president and chief marketing officer at Penney in Plano, Tex. The Penney campaign, which carries the theme “Giving matters,” is created by Saatchi & Saatchi in New York, part of the Publicis Groupe.

What also matters is whether the Christmas campaigns from the nation’s major retailers will stimulate shoppers to spend money when the unemployment rate exceeds 10 percent. Most analysts are forecasting that holiday sales will be flat compared with last year.

That would be better than a downturn, as occurred when the financial crisis shredded consumer confidence in 2008, but still disappointing given that in October retail chains posted the second consecutive month of sales increases — their best performance in more than a year.

The Gap campaign — created by Crispin Porter & Bogusky in Miami and Boulder, Colo., owned by MDC Partners — includes, in addition to the commercials, print advertisements, a presence on Facebook and a four-city tour by a troupe of cheerleaders and drummers who will “appear in unexpected places when you least expect it,” said Ivy Ross, executive vice president of marketing for the Gap brand at Gap in San Francisco.

Although the development of the campaign “started before we saw ‘Glee,’ ” Ms. Ross said, “there’s no accident to” the resemblance between the series and the ads.

“We were very conscious of the environment we’re in,” she added, and the idea was to produce a campaign that was “optimistic and bold,” countering the concept that “some people say you can’t be happy this year because we’re going through a crisis.”

Because “we’re going through hard economic times,” Ms. Ross said, the goal was “to liberate our customers to celebrate the holidays.”

And “instead of holiday carols, cheers are the biggest call to action,” she added.

The fast pace of the commercials, and their choreographed cast members, call to mind successful Gap spots in the 1990s in which khaki-clad dancers performed to musical genres like swing.

"The element that is similar is the high energy," Ms. Ross said. "It's saying: 'Smile a little bit, don't be burdened by what you think you should be doing. There are no shoulds.' "

The Christmas campaign is the first work for Gap from Crispin Porter, which also creates ads for the Old Navy division of Gap Inc. Those ads, which feature mannequin characters known as supermodelquins, have helped fuel large sales gains at Old Navy.

The reason Gap will resume running Christmas commercials is that "we really felt we wanted to wait till we had something to talk about," Ms. Ross said.

"This is the time to get back on TV," she added, because Gap sells clothing "that stands the test of time" and offers "a lot of value for your money" — both concerns of consumers in a tough economy.

To underscore those messages, one commercial will promote a "buy one, get one" sale on merchandise from Nov. 25 to Nov. 27.

The dancing cheerleaders spell out the retail acronym for such sales, chanting, "B-o-g-o!"

At Penney, Mr. Boylson said, the Christmas campaign will also emphasize "more things that are affordable," telegraphed by citing "easy-to-understand" sale prices for items (slippers at \$19.99) rather than the percentage reduction from regular prices (slippers at 30 percent off).

"We do a lot of consumer research," Mr. Boylson said, "and customers still want style," but they are being "more prudent and selective" in how they shop.

"Last year, we were reacting to the sudden drop" in demand after it happened, he added, but for "this year we planned it upfront" to concentrate on value.

Like Gap, Penney will supplement ads in traditional media with a presence in social media.

"We'll be leaking out our best deals" for Nov. 27, the so-called Black Friday of big sales, on Facebook and Twitter, Mr. Boylson said.

And Penney will buy commercial time on YouTube on Nov. 26, Thanksgiving Day, to run its first Christmas commercial, he added.

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