

## **Toyota uses Olympic ads to seek redemption**

*Stuart Elliott*

*AMID the halfpipes, triple axels and doubled triple lutzers of the Vancouver Games, viewers are being treated to quite a feat: a corporate bend-over-backward.*

The television coverage of the Winter Olympics is being sponsored by a dozen automotive brands, among them Toyota, which is confronting unprecedented problems that have led the Toyota Motor Company to recall more than eight million vehicles worldwide.

A commercial offering a companywide mea culpa from Toyota, which appeared during the opening ceremony last Friday, has been followed by spots about sales at local dealerships and even the start of a humorous campaign for the Sienna minivan.

"Recently, our company hasn't been living up to the standards that you've come to expect from us or that we expect from ourselves," an announcer intoned during the apology, going on to describe steps that were intended "to restore your faith in our company."

The sales spots have also touched on the difficulties confronting the Toyota brand. "Your Toyota dealers appreciate the support a lot of folks have given them recently," an announcer said, "and these deals" — among them, zero percent financing for 60 months on Camry and Corolla models — "are their way of saying thanks."

The Sienna commercials, being mixed in with the sales spots, ask viewers to watch a series of videos on YouTube featuring a mother and father who believe they are cool despite all evidence to the contrary. For instance, they insist on calling the Sienna their "swagger wagon."

The campaign, promoting the redesigned 2011 Sienna, also includes print ads and a page on Facebook, where as of Wednesday afternoon the minivan had attracted more than 1,660 fans.

Toyota, needless to say, will need considerably more fans if it is to begin to wipe the tarnish from its once-vaunted reputation, the result of faulty pedals that can cause unintended acceleration as well as troubles with braking systems on some hybrid cars.

"They have their work cut out for them," said Steve Goldman, chief executive at Ace Metrix in Los Angeles, a company that measures the effectiveness of the creative content of television ads.

Respondents in a survey by Ace Metrix among 6,783 consumers, ages 21 to 60, reacted somewhat positively to the efforts by Toyota to apologize and explain its problems. After seeing the commercial, the percentage of respondents who said they "question" Toyota fell to 36 percent from 39 percent, while those who agreed it was "a great time to buy a Toyota" rose to 25 percent from 22 percent.

"This recall did not make all consumers flee from Toyota," said JuYoung Lee, chief scientist at Ace Metrix. "A lot still have quite a bit of faith."

Mr. Goldman said, however, that there were "some signs already of possible brand erosion." About a quarter of respondents said they believed the damage would be "very difficult" for Toyota to recover from, and 74 percent said they considered the matter a "serious public safety issue."

The most recent results of the BrandIndex survey of daily consumer perceptions conducted by YouGov, a market research company, gave Toyota a score of minus 51.6. By comparison, the

second lowest score for an automotive brand, Hummer, was minus 8.03. (BrandIndex scores can range from 100 to minus 100.)

The minus 51.6 on Wednesday represented a steep fall from the minus 42.1 on Friday and minus 14.7 on Feb. 5; as recently as Jan. 13, Toyota had a score of 28.8.

The creative agency for the Toyota subsidiary in the United States, Toyota Motor Sales U.S.A., is the Torrance, Calif., office of Saatchi & Saatchi, part of the Publicis Groupe. A spokeswoman for Toyota Motor Sales, Celeste Migliore, said on Wednesday that the company planned to begin running a new commercial about the matter, called "Restore."

The commercials for Toyota during the Vancouver Games were preceded by spots that appeared on CBS stations in many local markets during the Super Bowl on Feb. 7; those spots also took an apologetic tack.

There have been newspaper ads as well, carrying headlines like "An Open Letter to Toyota Customers" and "Toyota's Pledge to You." Those ads were signed by Jim Lentz, president and chief operating officer of Toyota Motor Sales. Ms. Migliore said an additional newspaper ad was scheduled to appear on Thursday.

And there is considerable material about the recalls on the Toyota Web site (toyota.com), including a video of the apology commercial that ran during the opening ceremony on Friday.

According to news reports on Monday about the National Automobile Dealers Association convention in Orlando, Fla., executives from Toyota Motor Sales told more than 300 of their dealers that the company would introduce an ad campaign next month to help them stimulate sales in the spring and was considering measures like new discounts and longer warranties.

Despite the brand's recent troubles, many Toyota dealers are continuing to advertise in local newspapers. But a search of ads in the New York market found none that made reference to recent problems.

Among the other car and truck brands that have been running commercials during the Winter Olympics coverage on the NBC network and its local station in New York, WNBC, are Audi, Chevrolet, Ford, Honda, Mercedes-Benz and Nissan. None of those spots made reference to Toyota's troubles.

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