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**What Ever Happened  
To Mr. Wipple???**

## BY MICHAEL GILTZ

An old joke has it that many commercials are better than the TV shows they sponsor. Lately, this appears to be truer than ever and the 1984-85 fall lineup of new series reasonably can be expected to produce three or four hits, maybe. It hardly seems surprising that commercials are providing welcome and entertaining breaks in the monotony of prime time.

Yet, for years we were needlessly subjected to commercials that weren't as enjoyable. Lever Brothers Company, the makers of Wisk, gave us those annoying "You've got ring around the collar!" spots. And Charmin spawned the obviously sexually confused Mr. Wipple, who continuously whined, "Please don't squeeze the Charmin!"

Not surprisingly, Consumer Networks, a monitoring service for ad agencies, found respondents attacking the Charmin, Wisk and other similar commercials as extremely obnoxious. More importantly, the Marschalk ad agency released evidence that viewers' attitudes toward a commercial can strongly affect their decision of whether or not to buy a product. In addition, the Warwick agency discovered 55 percent of the people they polled had vowed to avoid products whose commercials they found in poor taste.

As a result, Mr. Wipple and other 30-second vexations are no longer the most visible spots in advertising. But why were these commercials con-

tinuously aired if they were considered so obnoxious?

During the late '60s and early '70s, Horace Schwerin conducted an influential study in which he showed a group of people many varied commercials: positive (entertaining) as well as negative (obnoxious) ones. When the group was questioned later, both types of commercials had the same audience recognition, and the commercials with no strong impact either way consistently registered lower. Schwerin concluded that it didn't matter if viewers had negative reactions to an ad because by the time the consumer reached the market, all he remembered was the product. Hence, the Schwerin findings became the bible of many ad agencies.

But the reign of these irritating ads has passed. In their stead, we find a refreshing new breed of "serial" commercials that are well made, provocative and polished.

L. Hirschberg of *Esquire* writes, "Commercial directors are taking more chances than at any time since the sixties, and it may even be fair to say that television advertising . . . is experiencing a renaissance."

Some of the best new commercials have certain characteristics in common:

1. **They are all series** — Leonard Hooper, UF advertising professor, said that a series of spots, such as the Levi's 501 Blue jeans ads, help build viewer identification with a product. Furthermore, the fourth or fifth ad in

a series can assume that a consumer has already seen the first three commercials. This enables it to quickly identify the product being promoted, leaving more time for creative entertainment and image reinforcement, according to Hooper.

One-shot commercials, however enjoyable, do not constitute a true show of imagination. They are flukes. So Wendy's "Where's the beef?" ad is disqualified.

2. **The formula, if any, is broad and flexible** — "There are different views on why commercials work," UF advertising Professor Jon Morres said. "Some agencies think that all they have to do is show the product and hammer home their message. I don't agree with this. A simple, basic approach will not work every time."

3. **They provoke a strong response** — Think about it. How many times, after seeing one of these ads, have you walked up to a friend and said something similar to "Have you seen the new commercial where . . . ?"

"The viewers' strong response is an acceptance of the product and its image," Morres said.

Propelled by a huge media blitz during the Olympics (the price tag was an estimated \$50 million according to *Time*), the Levi's 501 button-fly jeans ads have become recognized by many as the most creative spots in the current crop of

## Commercials

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commercials. All of them showcase people in their early twenties. Every scene is tinged in blue, giving the urban settings an inviting look. They are visually arresting, intriguing and extremely inventive, especially considering the fact that 501 jeans already are Levi's best seller and that companies rarely experiment with success.

Morres said these commercials are intelligent because of their subtlety.

Obviously, some commercials always have been well done. A spokesman for Mirror Images, a local advertising agency, said, "Creativity has always been there. Commercials aren't necessarily getting better. Rather, the production values are getting slicker."

Diet Pepsi has utilized slick production values to market their "Taste by Diet Pepsi" slogan. They employ a quick-cut, MTV-influenced camera method called "New Wave."

According to B. Kanner, of the *New Yorker* and a noted advertising expert, "New Wave" is "... a world of spacey advertising, of 2001 effects, of flying veils and bright red lips pursed to fill a screen. Cuts occur rapidly and when least expected. Few words are used and maximal music blares, sometimes hard rock, often intense and moody."

The result of this method is that viewer attention is grabbed. To follow the story, we're almost forced to watch. We pay close attention because every shot is bursting with information. Ergo, this fast pace guarantees that our attention level will be much higher than usual when the product is shown.

"Many commercials have an MTV look, due to the nature of the sets, the atmosphere created and the quick-cut method used to film the advertisements," Hooper said. "This is not new. These

techniques have been used before. Up-and-coming directors who wanted to be considered avant-garde often employed the quick-cut method."

Less flashy, but equally inventive, are the ads by a conglomerate called Beatrice. Its slice-of-life commercials show people



from all walks of life holding up different products, such as Peter Pan peanut butter, and saying, "Beatrice." The announcer informs us that, "You've been enjoying our products all along."

Francis Houghton of *Nation's Business* writes that the purpose of this type of ad, known as a corporation ad, is to "... help diversified companies establish an identity for the parent firm, rather than relying solely on brand names."

"Their ultimate goal is to have someone see an item that they've never tried and say, 'Oh, that's Beatrice. It must be good,'" Hooper said.

Another popular series of commercials are the ones by Lite beer. They make creative use of their celebrities by utilizing their personalities, rather than just shoving them in front of a camera to say, "This is great!"

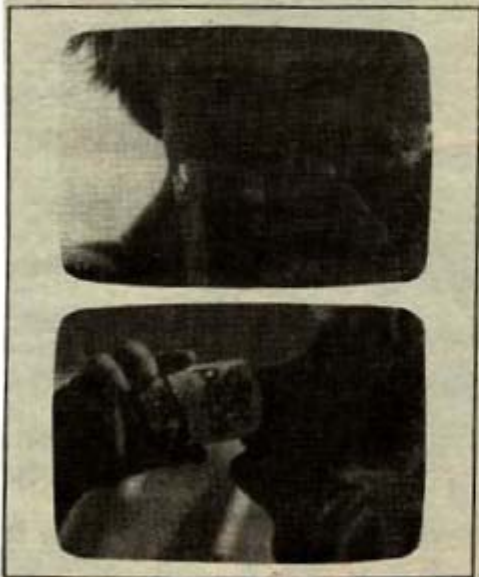
The ad agency for Lite beer was

initially casting around trying to think of a way to distinguish its campaign. The marketing problem it faced was how to get people who wouldn't normally buy a light beer to buy one.

The agency set Lite beer apart when it hit upon the idea of using ex-athletes, such as Bubba Smith, in the ads. It was another stroke of genius to use the same people over and over again, though not every person in every commercial. Thus, no one became essential to the success of a spot, but everyone was able to develop an identifiable on-screen personality.

Another beer company that's making its mark in advertising is Strohs.

"Strohs has given itself the image of a



literate, thinking man's beer and their ads are favorably regarded," Hooper said.

Still, no matter how well-crafted, intelligent and entertaining a commercial is, the bottom line is how well it works. The predecessor to all the ads mentioned above, as well as being a convincing argument for the production of positive and creative advertisements, is the "Do you know me?" campaign from American Express. They began running the ads 10 years ago and American Express since has become a major powerhouse in the credit

card business. According to *Time*, the company readily attributes much of its success to the ad campaign.

The commercials, in which famous people with not-so-famous faces pitched the American Express card, were always interesting. We rarely knew who the person was until his or her name flashed across the screen. Moreover, American Express always tacked on a sly joke intrinsically connected with the celebrity.

Mr. Schwinn, after claiming to be a "big wheel" yet never getting recognized, is driven away on a two-seater bicycle by his chauffeur. Stephen King asks if we know him from deep inside a haunted mansion. And, perhaps best of all, an English lord drives away from his estate in a Rolls and says, "The American Express card. Don't leave your castle without it."

Well-executed commercials indeed are a pleasure to watch. Hirschberg of *Esquire* writes that "... these days it is more exciting to watch New Wave Diet Pepsi commercials... than almost anything else on television."

There are so many enjoyable commercials to watch that it probably has given someone an idea. With a little financial backing, they could start a 24-hour, all-commercial channel. Predictably, it would be called CTV. CJs (commercial jockeys) would introduce the ads and give viewers the commercial news. Certain hours of the day would be devoted to beer commercials, car commercials, jean commercials, etc... Disbursed among the latest advertising offerings would be "Closet Classics," such as Alka Seltzer's "I can't believe I ate the whole thing!" ad.

Of course, no one would expect people to watch more than a few minutes a day. But, soon enough, the Nielsen ratings would show that a world-premiere commercial from Coke drew a larger audience than the latest episode of *Dallas*. Think about it. Isn't a good commercial infinitely preferable to a rerun of *Knight Rider*?

Not such a bad idea, is it? Well, call your local cable company. Tell them, "I want my CTV!"