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The New Ad Offense: Offensiveness

by Michael Levine

AS DOWNTRODDEN loser Al Bundy on television's "Married ... With Children," Ed O'Neill bemoans life's persistent woes as he muddles along in the mire of middle-class existence. That convincing cynicism has exalted him to hero status elsewhere as O'Neill takes on a formidable miniature dog while urging consumers to "save your hard-earned money" in a TV ad for cheaper collect calls.

The jury's in on former Hertz hero O.J. Simpson's relegation to joke-hotline status, while '80s greed god Donald Trump admitted during a recent Today interview that his name — once reviled for spelling wretched excess — is hotter than ever. He's even sliced a piece of his image to Pizza Hut for a recent hit TV spot, which is peppered with divorce-innuendo banter, co-starring salon creation ex-wife Ivana.

A year after his suicide, grungy Generation X spokesrocker Kurt Cobain is still mourned in fans' candlelight vigils and makeshift shrines, and one Seattle cemetery even refused to bury him for security reasons. (They feared crowds of admirers would disturb the peace.) Another memorial park offered Cobain's body haven, provided his wife tack on a tacky fee for extra security.

While the sunny rowdiness of infomercials and glitzy production-number cruise ship commercials still play for big profits, some advertisers have begun presenting their products on tarnished platters held by a new breed of sardonic icons whose sales offense can be downright offensive.

Crestfallen, vulgar or even villainous, many of today's corporate hawkers bring to life the new advertising credo that controversy — not sex — sells. Today's corporate heroes are often yesterday's anti-heroes, gritty and indignant. Moms and dads relate to their world weariness, while the kids relate by equating their rudeness with coolness.

Real-world experience's shifting the public's trust from vapid corporate masks hyping instantly smoother skin or fabulous taste to cynical, often crude lectures on bottom-line results and benefits. Controversy is reality. Reality bites; consumers are biting back and sinking in with their bucks.

Who's to say how to save money on collect phone calls? The guy who — at least on his popular sitcom — is most

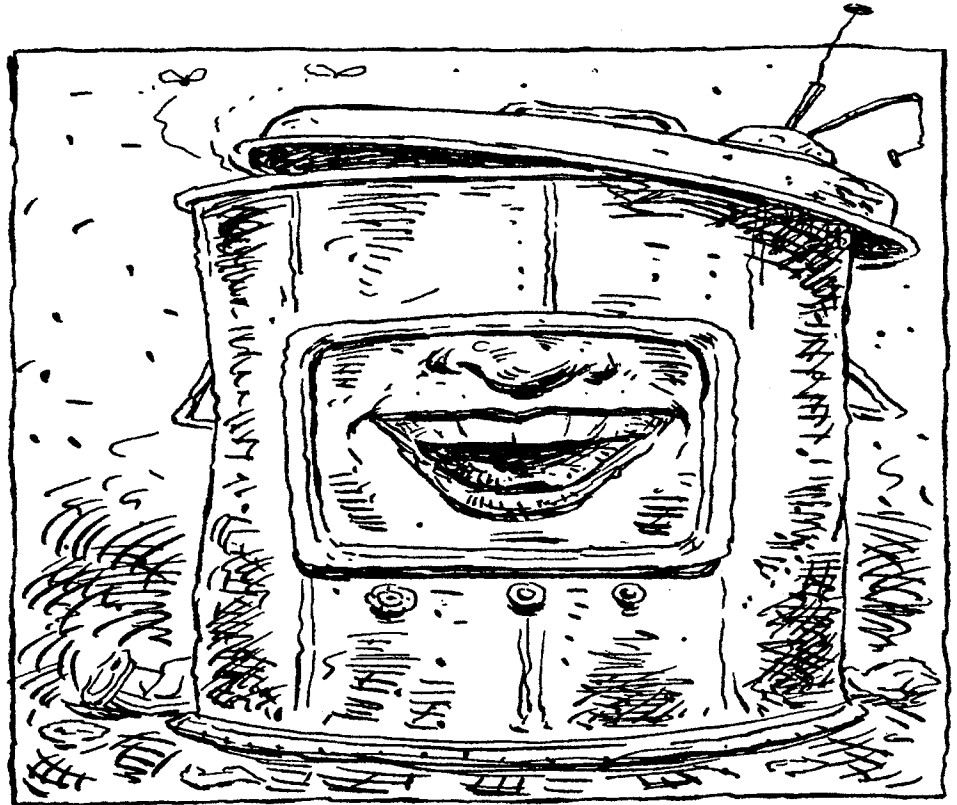


ILLUSTRATION BY TOM MURRAY/THE CHRONICLE

gullible to be their recipient. It may be a losing battle, but we know we're not the only losers, and are urged to join forces with the pathetic pitchman.

American society is no longer exclusively you and me against the world, but often you against me. Trust is something to be earned by taking life's punches on the chin as a member of a tag team. Generation X, in particular, has voiced despair in the fruitless struggles of its parent era and seems to have turned its collective back on past wasted efforts in its quest for a meaningful future. The twenty-somethings are heeding the voice of experience which builds character and shutting out the voice-over of overzealous caricature.

Young consumers celebrate unlikely role models such as Al Bundy, whose persona cuts deeper beneath the surface than those of the typically one-dimensional spokespersons. The messenger may be crudely dipped in sarcasm and defiance, but the message is clearly convincing. Faith (and dollars) are righteously placed on the side and in the pockets of the justified irreverent.

But neither the humor nor the mes-

sage is lost on older consumers. Lifetimes of broken campaign promises and shattered dreams have also instigated a more suspicious reception to advertising pitches by those members of society who have "been there and done that." At the risk of being fooled again, they are wary of soft enticements which lead to disappointingly hard pitfalls. More and more, they are mindful of difficult facts which prepare them to deal with cumbersome and often expensive tasks such as weeding, diet control and transmission troubles. The delivery of the humor — snide, wry or perhaps totally optimistic — is more ironclad a guarantee since it is based on genuine experience and emotion.

Spokespersons are now talking down with, not down to consumers. The success of products they pitch validates the effectiveness of their radical sales technique, erasing demographic lines and age boundaries. Consumers of all ages can identify with The Donald, or at least the pizza he dishes. Advertisers today are set to deliver the goods with a sneer and a nod, not a smile and a nudge.

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