



EX

ITEM 7.13 ■ “HeadOn: Apply directly to the forehead.”

If you watched television during summer 2006, you probably recall the first time you saw the original advertisement for headache product HeadOn. The pitch was simple, direct, and, most people thought, a bit crude.

CONSIDER

Head Case

The Mesmerizing Ad for Headache Gel

Seth Stevenson

(2006)

FYI

We're accustomed to movie, restaurant, and product reviews, so why not reviews of commercials? They are, after all, carefully crafted appeals to our minds and pocketbooks—and often more stylish than the products they represent. In a nod to their cultural significance, Slate.com runs a regular feature called “Ad Report Card” analyzing some of the more popular or controversial television advertisements. Here, media critic Seth Stevenson examines what some regard as the mind-numbing TV spots for a product called HeadOn. The review appeared on Slate.com on July 24, 2006.

The Spot: A woman rubs what appears to be a glue stick across her forehead. The voice-over repeats one sentence in triplicate: “HeadOn: Apply directly to the forehead. HeadOn: Apply directly to the forehead. HeadOn: Apply directly to the forehead.” We cut to an image of the product in its packaging, while the voice-over tells us that “HeadOn is available without a prescription at retailers nationwide.”

When I first saw this ad, I was convinced it was a viral prank. Everything about it—the woman serenely rubbing stuff on her forehead; the lack of explanation as to what this stuff is; and, of course, the mind-numbing repetition of that weird catchphrase—just seemed too bizarre to be an actual commercial for an actual product. When I logged on to HeadOn.com, I expected a jokey Web site that would eventually redirect me to a promotion for Burger King or Axe deodorant or something.

But no, it turns out HeadOn is for real. (That is, the product does exist. I'm not sure I can use the word “real” in any reference to a topical homeopathic health remedy.) HeadOn is meant to treat headaches and is a gel suffused with various plant extracts that you apply—say it with me—directly to the forehead. I am told that doing so creates a cooling sensation. HeadOn is available at Wal-Mart for \$5.24 if you care to check it out for yourself. Caveat emptor.

As for this ad campaign, it is utter genius. With this one 10-second spot, the makers of HeadOn have torn down all the pretenses that have gummed up the advertising industry for years. Production values? Persuasion? Emotion? Humor (of the intentional kind)? These are stalwarts of the old, outmoded advertising paradigm. The new, head-on (or HeadOn) approach holds that advertising is about blunt force.

It really is sad when you think about the hard work that gets done inside advertising agencies. All the writing and rewriting, the late-night brainstorming, the mining of creativity from the deepest recesses of one's cortex. And then there's the casting, the directing, the high-budget locations. The question we must now ask is: Why bother with any of this? The HeadOn ad is more effective at reaching its goals than 99 percent of the ads on television. And it succeeds on the strength of a few, bare-bones tactics that most advertisers carefully shun:

Repetition: According to Dan Charron, VP of sales and marketing for HeadOn, the company used focus groups to test all sorts of marketing tacks. One experimental approach maxed out on repetition, and the results were incredible. The focus groups' recollection of the ad, and of the product, was light-years better than with any other method. Which, of course, seems completely obvious—how can we forget

something when it's being jammed into our brains? And yet I've never seen an ad embrace this insight with so much gusto.

I suspect most advertisers avoid the broken-record technique out of fear that it will annoy people. Which it does. But so what? Maybe a small percentage of us will snootily refrain from buying HeadOn—as an act of protest against an ad we find irritating—but this is a small price to pay when millions of other folks are now familiar with HeadOn, curious about it, and unlikely ever to forget its name. The repetition method serves no purpose for a well-established brand (“Coca-Cola: Pour it down your esophagus. Coca-Cola: Pour it down your esophagus”), but for a new product fighting to get noticed, it makes a lot of sense.

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Kitsch: This ad was made in-house by HeadOn, and it boasts production values so bad they may seem intentional. (They're not.) That green, graph-paper background. The way the volume fades and surges on the voice-over loop. The big, yellow-arrow graphic in the middle of the screen. And above all, the very image of this chick rubbing goop back and forth across her noggin. It's mesmerizing in its cheesiness and also eye-catching because it looks and sounds like nothing else on television. (Though a past ad for Overstock.com similarly benefited from low production values.)

Mystery: We all know how to use the product. (My understanding is that it's meant to be applied to the forehead. In a direct manner.) But the ad never tells us just what HeadOn is for. I had assumed this was in compliance with some kind of FDA regulation, the way pharmaceutical ads never say just what a pill does. But in fact, according to Charron, HeadOn (being an over-the-counter product) is not even subject to these regulations. The omission of a key detail here is a purposeful marketing technique.

“A good way to get attention,” says Charron, “is to not say what the product does. It touches on people's curiosity.” Indeed—curiosity is what sent me to the HeadOn Web site, and it no doubt sent millions of other people there, as well. If some percentage of those people are headache sufferers, and also gullible, they might well be moved to buy some HeadOn.

Ubiquity: Charron says they've spent “tens of millions of dollars” on this HeadOn campaign. “If you watch any TV at all,” he says, “chances are you've seen the ad in the last three weeks.” It's airing on networks, on cable, and

in syndication. During the day, prime time, and late night. It won't stop airing until mid-August, so you'd better get used to it.

If repetition within the ad is effective, why not extend this insight to repetition of the ad? Just keep airing it so often that it can't be escaped and can't be ignored. The ad is already generating tons of talk on the Web and has inspired a parody involving rapper Lil Jon. It's everywhere.

Grade: A+. And I haven't even touched on yet another powerful theory: These ads give viewers headaches, thus spurring demand.

CONSIDER

- 1 Stevenson's analysis of the HeadOn ad is highly subjective and personal, given from a first-person or "I" point of view. What are the advantages and risks of using this strategy in an evaluation?
- 2 Stevenson's first impression of a HeadOn ad is that it must be a "viral prank." Searching the term on the Internet or drawing on your own experiences (perhaps at a concert), define "viral marketing." How does it differ from traditional marketing approaches? (For more about viral marketing, see Beau Faulkner's essay "Year Zero: A Viral Marketing Promotion" on pages 389-393.)
- 3 Does Stevenson provide sufficient evidence to convince you of his claim that the HeadOn spots are "utter genius"? How seriously do you take such a claim? What was your own reaction to the campaign?

COMPOSE

- 4 Stevenson claims that most advertisers shun the four tactics that he believes account for the success of the HeadOn advertisements: repetition, kitsch, mystery, and ubiquity. In a short essay, try to apply these principles to other advertising campaigns that you regard as successful. Are these techniques as rare as Stevenson claims?
- 5 Pick a television commercial and analyze it, modeling your evaluation directly on the formula "Ad Report Card" uses. Be sure that you describe the ad briefly ("The Spot") and then conclude the analysis with a grade for the ad and a few pithy remarks. For assistance, see "Writing an Ad Analysis" on pages 72-73.