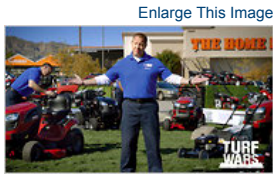


ADVERTISING

In a Battle for Turf, Sears Revs Up the Riding Mower

By STUART ELLIOTT Published: March 17, 2011

A RETAILER struggling to fend off increasing competition is borrowing a page from the marketing playbook of products like soft drinks and soup by naming its rivals in aggressive advertising.



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A Sears campaign takes a competitive approach by naming garden equipment rivals like the Home Depot.

Sears, in a campaign scheduled to begin on Sunday, will urge consumers to shop for lawn and garden products at Sears rather than Home Depot or Lowe's. A description of the campaign on a section of the Sears Web site (sears.com/turf wars) underlines its tough-talking nature: "Sears Turf Wars, fighting the Home Depot and Lowe's for the right to be on your lawn."

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than using coy terms like "Brand X" or "another leading brand." Such direct campaigns are known in the industry as comparative advertising, but they amount to the Madison Avenue equivalent of the negative advertising that is prevalent in politics.

Comparative ads typically become more commonplace when the economy is weak, on the theory that when times are tough it may pay to hit your rival harder.

"We wanted to create disruptive advertising," Mr. Lee said. "The brief to the agency was 'shock and shatter.'"

Among brands that have been naming names in pointed ads are Pepsi Max and Sierra Mist Natural sodas, citing, respectively, Coke Zero and Sprite; Campbell's Select Harvest soups, tackling Progresso, which soon counterattacked; Dunkin' Donuts, taking on the coffee sold by Starbucks; and the Chevrolet Cruze, proclaiming its superiority to the Honda Civic and the Toyota Corolla.

Comparative advertising is not without its risks. One is that the intended audience may be turned off by the tactic, flagging the sponsor for unnecessary roughness. Another risk is that the novelty of hearing or seeing names of other products in ads may prevent consumers from recalling who the sponsor actually was.

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And comparative advertising requires “a high degree of believability about the message,” said Robert Passikoff, president of Brand Keys in New York, a brand and customer-loyalty consulting company.

For instance, “if I tell you Kia is a match for Mercedes,” he added, “you’d be laughing your head off.”

In the Brand Keys rankings of sellers of merchandise in the categories of garden care and home repair, Sears is fifth among five retailers, Mr. Passikoff said, trailing, in order, Ace, True Value, Home Depot and Lowe’s.

However, the Craftsman brand, which is a focus of the new Sears campaign, does resonate with consumers on attributes like quality and value, he added.

The initial television commercial in the campaign features an assertive, gravelly voiced actor named John Lacy, who has appeared in films like “Live Free or Die Hard” and “Zodiac.” He comes across more like a pitchman in a truck ad than a retail spot.

Indeed, Mr. Lacy is first glimpsed inside the cab of a truck, part of a caravan delivering Sears lawn and garden products. The trucks drive past a Lowe’s store before setting up the merchandise in a parking lot near a Home Depot.

“There’s a lot of home improvement centers out there,” he says, “but does paying more for less mower really improve anything? You deserve better.”

Sears will “put our money where our mouth is,” Mr. Lacy says, by offering a lowest-price guarantee,” adding, “You won’t find a better deal there or there,” pointing to the Lowe’s and Home Depot stores.

“It’s a turf war, ’cause your lawn is worth fighting for,” he concludes.

The campaign is “purposely aggressive and provocative,” said Bob Winter, chief creative officer at Y&R Chicago, part of the Y&R unit of Young & Rubicam Brands, owned by WPP.

“It’s definitely got a little bit of bravado,” Mr. Winter said, because Sears executives “feel it’s time to show bravado.”

But it does not go too far, he added: “It’s a war. But it’s a war waged with riding mowers that max out at seven miles an hour.”

The tone should appeal to potential customers, Mr. Winter said, describing them as “middle-aged suburban dudes” for whom “their lawn is their ultimate form of self-expression.”

The campaign is arriving as Y&R Chicago takes part in a review for the Sears creative account, with spending last year, according to Kantar Media, of \$459.4 million, of which \$12.3 million was devoted to lawn and garden products.

Asked what it was like to produce the campaign at such a precarious time, Mr. Winter replied: “We’re focused on the future, and doing the right thing for our client, no matter what. The review aside, our challenge is to provide them with innovative creative solutions to their problems, and we’re going to continue to do that.”

Mr. Lee declined to discuss the review but said, “Y&R really did a great job for us on this.”

The Turf Wars do not seem to be prompting Sears’s rivals to wave white flags. For example, Home Depot and a company called Scanbuy are introducing a print campaign using mobile bar codes, or QR codes, to provide information about [Martha Stewart Living](#) merchandise.

A version of this article appeared in print on March 18, 2011, on page B3 of the New York edition.

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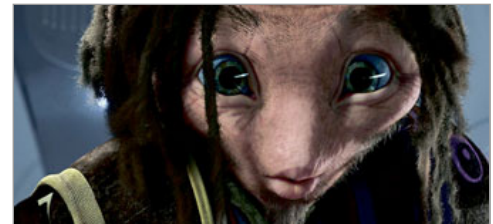
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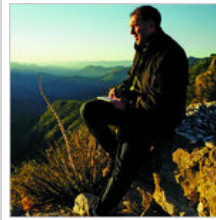
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