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Hertz Uses Mascot in Effort to Make Rental Cars Cool

By [TANZINA VEGA](#)

WHEN it comes to car rental, most people expect the basics — cleanliness and functionality. They do not expect cool.

But Hertz has a new ad campaign that oozes coolness. The initiative, which begins this week, features a mascot named Horatio brought to life by the actor [Owen Wilson](#), whose voice is featured in the coming animated film “Cars 2.” The mascot will appear in a series of commercials directed by Tucker Gates, whose directorial credits include “The Office,” “Parks and Recreation” and “Weeds.” The campaign represents Mr. Wilson’s first commercial work.

The new mascot, an animated yellow dashboard figurine with a football-shaped head and a permanent wink, aims to help refresh Hertz’s image and “help us re-establish ourselves as a culture brand,” said Catherine East, group account director for DDB New York, the agency that worked on the campaign.

Horatio will help make the brand more approachable and friendly to new consumers, especially the 20-somethings who are the targets of the campaign, Ms. East said. Mark P. Frissora, the chief executive for Hertz, named the mascot after Horatio Nelson Jackson, a physician who was one of the first people to drive a car across the United States.

DDB, of the [Omnicom Group](#), worked with the digital agency G2 Worldwide on the campaign, the cost of which is estimated at considerably more than \$10 million.

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While talking mascots like the [Aflac](#) duck have caused some marketers headaches recently, Hertz representatives say Mr. Wilson was an ideal choice for the job. “He’s got a lot of warmth and charm, and a voice that’s approachable and friendly,” said Michael Senackerib, the chief marketing officer for Hertz. “Star power is not a bad thing.”

Advertisers in the car rental industry are trying to differentiate themselves from the pack, said Robert Passikoff, the president of Brand Keys in New York, a brand and customer-loyalty

consulting company. Having a clean car and a Web site are no longer enough for consumers, he said. Instead, they are looking to be delighted, which is where the unusual step of creating a mascot comes in.

“The category does not tend toward mascots like this,” Mr. Passikoff said.

Horatio will not be alone in the new Hertz campaign. Two real-life travel personalities are also being introduced — Gas and Brake.

Gas, played by the comedian and actress Rebecca Corry, is a freewheeling personality; Brake, played by the actor Deren Gilly, is much more rigid.

Three commercials that will be introduced over the next four weeks are intended to be episodic and will feature Gas and Brake in various situations. One spot shows their very different personalities from youth to adulthood. A second shows the couple in a broken-down bus in Mexico where Brake uses the Hertz mobile application to rent a car and Gas ends up playing strip poker with a group of unsavory characters.

A third spot, intended to highlight the range of cars in the Hertz fleet, shows Gas fantasizing about being things as diverse as a superhero driving a [Cadillac Escalade](#) and a socialite driving a [Dodge Challenger](#). The 30- and 60-second ads will run on network and cable television during shows like “Glee,” “The Office,” “Mad Men” and “Parks and Recreation” and on [ESPN](#), TBS and Comedy Central.

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The television spots also highlight Hertz’s nonairport rental car outlets, a \$1 billion-a-year business for the company, Mr. Senackerib said. The company has approximately 2,000 off-airport locations in the United States. The tag line, delivered by Mr. Wilson, says, “Hertz, we’re at the airport and in your neighborhood.”

Hertz’s most recent branding campaign, announced last spring, was called “Journey On” and focused on making travel a smooth experience. The Gas and Brake campaign is intended to be an extension of that.

The campaign will feature a microsite, [Gasorbrake.hertz.com](#), where visitors can watch outtakes from the commercial shoots and interviews with Gas and Brake. They can also take a quiz to determine whether they are Gas or Brake personalities and they will be able to share the results on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).

On the microsite, visitors can also use a Facebook game called “The Decider” to determine which

of their friends is Gas or Brake.

At a separate site, hertzgiveaway.com, visitors will be able to enter a contest to win one of 100 free weekend car rentals and a chance to win a Chevy Camaro SS.

Hertz will also take Horatio out of the country with a campaign aimed at markets in Britain, Italy, France, Germany, Spain and the Netherlands with print and digital ads already in the works.