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If Consumer Is Your Agency, It's Time for a Review

In More and More Cases, Fan-Generated Ads Trend Toward Uninspired, Cynical and Just Downright Bad

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Published: May 17, 2010

NEW YORK (AdAge.com) -- Dear consumer,

Your 15 minutes are over. You suck.

While brands were once heralded as brilliant strategists as they handed over their marketing to John Q. Public -- he's produced content for Doritos, Peperami, CareerBuilder and Heinz that has appeared anywhere from dedicated websites to the marketing world's highest-profile platform, the Super Bowl -- lately he's jumped the shark. The results have often been forgettable, fashioned by someone already in the business, or both.



WAKE-UP CALL: Many of the entries for Folger's contest leave a lot to be desired.

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While Doritos and CareerBuilder produced some funny spots, Kraft Foods' invitation to the consumer to create a new name for its Australian favorite brand Vegemite yielded the ridiculous moniker iSnack2.0. Unilever's Peperami dumped Lowe for the wisdom of the crowds and ended up going with a "consumer" campaign that was created by two advertising professionals with a combined 50 years of experience. Heinz's call in 2008 for consumers to create a commercial for the ketchup brand was answered by Matt Cozza, an award-winning documentary filmmaker, but the premise was not exactly revolutionary: Man sits down at restaurant and finds his bottle of Heinz missing, so he steals one from another table, setting off a chain reaction of thefts.

Uninspired is one thing; bad is quite another. Currently, Folger's Coffee is running a contest asking the Average Joe to update its famous "Best Part of Wakin' Up" theme. The results have been downright painful in many cases, eliciting our sympathy for "American Idol" judge Kara DioGuardi, who gets to choose the winner from five online finalists in early June.

So much for Main Street running Madison Avenue out of business.

Novelty gone

"You're getting these very poor quality spots, and it's not even done in seriousness anymore. It's almost like a joke," said San Diego-based brand strategist Denise Lee Yohn. "It's almost like a parody, and it's being treated like a game. That's definitely affecting the quality of what we're seeing."

She remains adamant that "there's not a lot for a company to gain by doing this. There's not a novelty anymore, there's nothing to gain, and it lacks the authenticity. It's going to happen with a brand real soon where there will be a backlash against this."

The biggest flaw with the strategy isn't that it can produce crummy work, but that it sells short the idea of consumer-generated marketing. Making a spot is far less interesting and effective than engaging people with your brand and creating enthusiasts, said Jackie Huba, co-author of the book "Citizen Marketer," who writes the Church of the Customer blog. "These contests asking people to create commercials and jingles are contrived," said Ms. Huba. "Marketers should be leveraging word-of-mouth jet streams. It's all about creating a great service for their customers, not necessarily about their customers creating ads."

Pete Blackshaw, who writes the Consumer Generated Media blog, said social media is entering a new phase: "pause and introspection." And that's a good thing.

To him, the industry went through a period of extreme exuberance in all things consumer-generated, but two things have since happened.

"No. 1, the novelty has worn off," he said. "No. 2, brands are struggling with the harshness of the consumer voice. A lot of brands that jumped into CGA and the social-media conversation have found there are tradeoffs. I still believe consumers are better advertisers than the advertisers themselves, but that voice can spin off in another direction. Plus, so many brands have been around the block with these contests that they're losing effect."

Media hype

Ilya Vedrashko, who works in media design at Hill Holliday studying relationships marketers build with traditional and emerging media and writes the popular blog Advertising Lab, said, "It's not CGA necessarily that has jumped the shark, it's the media hype that drove it in the first place. CGA, when it's done well, is good. That doesn't happen often. CGA, when it isn't done well, is sloppy. That's more often than not. Most

times it's just brutal to look at, something an agency wouldn't even show the client."

That's not to say CGA doesn't occasionally work. Ad Age's curmudgeonly former ad critic Bob Garfield actually heaped praise on online consignment crafts marketplace/community Etsy.com, which asked its loyal users to create ads for the site. Mr. Garfield wrote last year, "For most of its brief history, CGA has consisted of shabbily produced, usually pointless and typically self-referential imitations of the very professional advertising it seeks to replace," he wrote. "But suddenly we are obliged to reevaluate, thanks to Etsy.com. ... The results are positively remarkable."

Todd Lieman, founder/co-president of Skadaddle Media, a Sausalito, Calif. content production company specializing in social media, says he still believes that good ideas can come from anywhere and that agency professionals are not the only ones who understand a brand. "Creatives sometimes have a way of doing things for the sake of creativity," he said. "I don't think consumer-generated advertising creative is bad; it's just the execution."

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