

ADWEEK

Creative

Realistic or Offensive?

Advertising leans on stereotypes. When do they cross the line?

BY JOAN VOIGHT

Clicking through the TV channels at home one July evening, Howard Buford happened upon a Cadillac ad that shows people singing Led Zeppelin's "Rock & Roll" while driving. Most of the drivers are white, but one brief scene shows a middle-class black man singing along. That left Buford, who is black and makes his living analyzing African American consumers, shaking his head. "That scene was so wrong," says Buford, president of multicultural marketing agency Prime Access in New York. "It would never happen."

Across the country in San Francisco, Amazon Advertising president Millie Olson recalls a focus group of women in their 50s having trouble remaining ladylike when presented with healthcare ads from a variety of marketers showing older women taking walks, sitting around the house and engaging in other sedate activities. "Those women all

have gray hair. No way are they us.' 'They are nothing but caricatures,' " were among the nicer remarks, Olson says. In the next breath, Olson, who is 57, says she may soon begin taking arthritis medication herself and wants to see ads showing arthritis sufferers working out at the gym, not "silver-haired couples walking along the beach with a golden retriever."

These anecdotes hint at the difficulties of relying on stereotypes of consumer groups—of presenting depictions that are representative enough to resonate but not oversimplified to the point of being meaningless or insensitive. In Amazon's case, the "vehemence toward the typical stereotypes surprised us," says Olson. And yet going against stereotype, as Chemistri in Troy, Mich., does in the Cadillac ad, can bring charges of cultural blindness. As Buford says, the notion that upscale black consumers "behave just like whites"—i.e., that they prefer classic rock to hip-hop, R&B or jazz—just doesn't ring true.

The ad industry has come a long way since 1969, when complaints from Mexican



SISTER ACT: Is Diane Amos' character in Pine-Sol's advertising 'warm and real' or a walking, talking negative stereotype?

Americans forced Frito-Lay's animated Frito Bandito character off the air. But groups such as African Americans, Hispanics, aging baby boomers and gays say they still see depictions that are patronizing and negative, if less blatantly than in the past. Such stereotyping may pass largely unnoticed by young, straight, white consumers, but it can damage brands in a culture that is older, browner and less heterosexual than it used to be.

Clients rarely admit that ad stereotypes damage brands, but some are quietly shifting their strategies. Anheuser-Busch, for instance, has downplayed gay-themed humor in its Bud Light ads, focusing instead on relationship quirks between men and women. A few years ago, Detroit largely abandoned the concept of

showing Hispanic women in skimpy dresses dancing to salsa music.

Publicly, marketers and their agencies say their research shows the majority of consumers relate to the way these groups are portrayed in ads and that critics are overly sensitive. "Everything is too politically correct," says Jim Ferguson, chairman and chief creative officer at Temerlin McClain in Irving, Texas. "Humor is always at the expense of somebody, but the only groups you can make fun of anymore are Texans and Italians. Sure, you know when you step over the line and are being offensive. Problem is, the line is moving all the time."

Certainly, demographic changes are happening more quickly in the living rooms of America than in the creative departments of ad agencies. U.S. Census figures indicate that Hispanic, black and Asian consumers will make up about half of the customer base of most U.S. mass-market companies by 2050. At the same time, boomers are changing the perception of older Americans, and gays and lesbians are becoming pop culture trendsetters through TV hits such as *Queer Eye* for the Straight Guy.

"We aren't talking about the fringe audiences anymore," says Mike Wilke, ad consultant and executive director of Commercial Closet Association, which tracks gay-themed ads. Misuse of stereotypes in ads "can make a brand look dated overnight," he warns.

Yet advertising, which tells most of its stories in 30-second bursts, is an industry that trades on stereotypes. "Ads have to telegraphically sum up their characters in a few seconds, and stereotypes are the easiest way to do it," says Katherine Sender, assistant professor of communications at the University of Pennsylvania. Many recurring stereotypes seem harmless: the clumsy dad, the happy housewife, the handsome gay man, the African American basketball player or musician, the Hispanic soccer player. "What makes the stereotype turn negative is when it alienates the group being portrayed," Sender says. "Whether the portrayal is negative or positive is in the eye of the beholder. It can be really hard for an agency to know which is which."

Irreverent Bud Light ads by DDB, Chicago, reflect that conundrum. Putting men in women's clothes is a reliable source of

laughs for the brand's core target of beer-swilling young men. But a spot called "Maid" from late 2002 took the joke a step further. In it, a man dresses up in a maid's outfit to please his girlfriend, only to be rejected by her and ogled by a male neighbor in a red robe. The neighbor taps into the classic stereotype that gay men have a dark side and prey on straight strangers, says Sender, who is writing a book, *Business, Not Politics: The Making of the Gay Market*, due out next year.

Beer marketers are looking to tap into gay issues and humor in mainstream ads without seeming too gay, "so they use a put-down," says beer analyst Torn Pirko, president of Bevmark in Santa Barbara, Calif. "They are walking a tightrope—trying to attract one audience without insulting others. Our friends in St. Louis tend to be middle of the road, and

who has been pitching Clorox's Pine-Sol cleaner for eight years. Amos is a straight-talking, working-class woman who sports dreadlocks and nondescript clothes and calls everybody "honey" while offering practical cleaning advice. She is a walking, talking negative stereotype, says Buford, whose clients include Ford, JPMorgan Chase and Merck. "What is with the whole sassy attitude?" he asks.

"Diane was chosen because she appeals to everyone," says Ken Dudwick, executive creative director on Pine-Sol at DDB, San Francisco. "Consumers respond best when we just let her be herself. She talks to them in a warm and real way."

Over the years, consumer testing of general-market consumers, including African Americans, has shown that Amos brings the



'Everything is too politically correct. Humor is always at the expense of somebody, but the only groups you can make fun of anymore are Texans and Italians.'

—JIM FERGUSON, TEMERLIN McCLAIN

so they are apt to take half measures, which can make gays feel demeaned or looked down upon.

Mike Oberman, who handled Bud Light ads at DDB and continues to work on the brand as president of Fusion Idea Lab in Chicago, says the character in "Maid" is a nonissue. "He's just a gook guy in the hallway," he says. DDB referred calls about the ad to the client. Executives at A-B declined to comment.

Confounding the issue is someone like Diane Amos, the African American comic

brand "a huge level of credibility," says Mary O'Connell, a Clorox spokeswoman. "She is seen as likable, hard-working, assertive and witty. We strongly disagree that she is in any way stereotypical."

Like O'Connell and Cadillac spokesman Jeffrey Kulman, clients are generally taken aback to hear the suggestion that they may be negatively stereotyping. The problem, multicultural experts say, is less blatantly offensive stereotypes and more the lack of a nuanced, sophisticated understanding of minority groups, with insights that are as



CAUGHT IN THE MIDDLE: A Bud Light ad used what some saw as offensive gay stereotyping to get laughs. Yet Cadillac, which went against stereotype in showing a black man listening to Led Zeppelin, was criticized for being culturally blind.

refined as those about young, white, heterosexual characters.

'She is seen as likable, hard-working, assertive and witty. We strongly disagree that she is in any way stereotypical.'

—MARY O'CONNELL OF CLOROX ON DIANE AMOS' PINE-SOL CHARACTER

agency Images USA in Atlanta, suggested to a client that an ad show a black family at a ski resort, the client asked if African Americans ski. Marketers don't know the habits and lifestyles of affluent African Americans, says McNeil. "We are portrayed in the same [lower middle class], urban box," he says.

Many agency executives counter that they are sensitive to negative racial stereotypes. Jeff Goodby, principal of Goodby, Silverstein & Partners, San Francisco, says that if a storyline makes fun of a character, an agency will typically be wary of casting a minority actor in the role or fear of being disrespectful. For a Dreyer's Ice Cream ad that aired last spring and centered on a father and son, Goodby says he directed the actors, who were black, a little differently than he would have if they were white. He and other creative directors say they are careful not to reinforce the negative stereotype of the African American father who can't support his family and is a weak authority figure.

"Rarely in an ad do you see an African American dad being the goofball or the butt of the joke," he says. "We paid more attention to showing that while the son was embarrassed by his wacky inventor dad, he clearly loved his father. We had to make sure the kid did not seem too critical," because that would seem inappropriate in a black family.

Faithfully representing older people in ads is also tricky, given that boomers are revamping the meaning of retirement. For example, John Killpack, brand management director at AARP (formerly the American Association of Retired Persons) declines

frequent requests to sponsor golf tournaments because, he says, so few AARP members play golf. (Only 11-12 percent of people 45-64 are golfers, according to the National Sporting Goods Association. Even fewer people 65 and older play golf.)

Another common stereotype is that of the elderly bingo player, a character that North Castle Partners in Stamford, Conn., used in a TV ad for Icebreakers gum last spring. Steve Garbett, creative director and partner, says the bingo parlor was useful as "a very low-energy setting" that could be enlivened by the breath-freshening gum into "a high-energy place where people make amorous social connections." The client asked whether the ad might be offensive, but the creatives said it would be empowering for seniors to see their peers acting young, says Garbett. Still, specialists in marketing to seniors question the wisdom of putting them anywhere near a bingo parlor.

The most common and offensive stereotypes of seniors are that of the frail, scared victim, followed by that of the happy, carefree older person made up to look younger, says Rene Huey-Lipton, planning director at GSD&M in Austin, Texas, which handles the AARP. In fact, seniors tend to be "whip-smart, informed and opinionated—far from passive and on the edges of society," she says.

In AARP work that broke early this year, the agency featured ordinary, casually dressed people in their 50s and 60s telling insurance, healthcare and government executives what to do. By showing AARP members exerting authority over leaders, "we are turning the passive stereotype on its ear," says Killpack.

When Hispanics appear in general-market ads, they are usually in the kitchen, dancing to salsa music, playing soccer or living in modest neighborhoods, which is a highly narrow view of the Hispanic culture, says Global/Works' Ortiz. In addition, says marketing consultant Filipe Korzenny, principal of Cheskin in Redwood Shores, Calif., Hispanic actors are usually chosen according to Caucasian standards of beauty: They are typically tall, with light brown skin and sharp noses and lips.

"When do you see shorten, darker Hispanics of Mayan or Aztec descent in ads? You see them all the time on the street," says Korzenny. "And how about Latino men

drinking beer and reminiscing about their homeland, which is a common cultural phenomenon? Or where are the Hispanic professional women who don't cook all day?"

To get in step culturally and avoid offensive stereotyping, some agencies and clients are turning to formal or informal advisers for help. Some are consulting with minority agencies. Others are reaching out to recruit more minority staffers. But for many shops, such steps are an added bureaucratic layer and an empty exercise in political correctness.

One simple opportunity for improvement is right under agencies' noses, say GSD&M's Huey-Lipton and Amazon's Olson: Planners and creatives can try to set aside their assumptions and use consumer sessions and research tools to understand these groups on an emotional level. "We've all participated in focus groups where agency people eat M&M's and make wisecracks for four hours about the people in the session," says Olson.

"We can be less lazy" agrees Huey-Lipton. "When you study the depth of these consumer segments, you uncover naked emotions you don't expect," which offer raw material for good creative work, she says. Laughing, the planner recalls an older consumer's comment about ads filled with kind-hearted ladies taking care of their loved ones. "When are you people going to get that this is what I do, it is not who I am? I'm not Florence fucking Nightingale," the woman told her.

The fact is, advertising and marketing will probably always lean on stereotypes as cultural benchmarks and shorthand devices to get emotional messages across. But they are getting more challenging to employ. It's easy to see how Frito Bandito and Aunt Jemima would be offensive, but what creative team would worry about showing a prosperous young black man singing Led Zeppelin or an attractive retired couple taking a stroll?

The answer: maybe your rival's. This year, Jaguar is consulting with minority advisers, and Procter & Gamble is conducting research on seniors, say sources. Miller Lite and Amstel Light—yes, beer brands—were lauded by gay critics last year for bar ads showing straight and gay people hanging out together.

Soon agencies could find that dodging negative stereotypes is more a matter of economic than political correctness. ■