

Characters Welcome to Cut a Rug (or Clean One)

Campaign Spotlight Stuart Elliott

The USA cable channel, in promoting series like “Burn Notice,” “Psych” and “White Collar,” proclaims, “Characters welcome.” That could be a motto for Madison Avenue, too, as more commercials feature recurring characters who can help spots stand out amid the clutter.

Examples of characters who emote 30 seconds at a time include the Postal Service employee extolling the virtues of Priority Mail flat-rate boxes (“If it fits, it ships”), the lonely Maytag repairman, the three amigos whose ardor for Kellogg’s Raisin Bran Crunch and Raisin Bran Extra cereals gets them into comic predicaments and the over-enthusiastic pitchwoman for Orbit gum.

Now, Stanley Steemer, the company that cleans carpets, floors, furniture, air ducts and other things around the house, is joining the ranks of marketers that use commercial characters to peddle their wares. A humorous campaign now under way nationally introduces two employees — known as technicians in company parlance — who drive to service calls in the familiar Stanley Steemer yellow van.

One employee, played by David Theune, is chatty, recounting his experiences in the field to his co-worker, played by Ernie Macias, who silently takes it all in. The talkative technician is a bit of a know-it-all, but he is genuinely interested in imparting his wisdom to his colleague, who seems new on the job.

The new characters are accompanied by a new version of the vintage Stanley Steemer jingle, “Go 1-800-STEEMER,” which now also touts the company’s Web site (1-800-Steemer.com).

The new characters are appearing in television commercials, which are running in both 15-second and 30-second versions, as well as in video clips that can be watched on the Stanley Steemer channel on YouTube. Stanley Steemer spends an estimated \$50 million to \$60 million each year on advertising.

The campaign is the first work from the new Stanley Steemer creative agency, Young & Laramore in Indianapolis, whose hiring was announced in February. It is a homecoming for the creative account, which Young & Laramore had handled from 2003 to 2005 before losing it to the Loomis Agency in Dallas.

Five years later, the assignment boomeranged back to Young & Laramore, which scrambled to come up with a new campaign in time for spring.

“Young & Laramore worked in a relatively short time frame,” says Justin Bates, president at Stanley Steemer International in Dublin, Ohio.

“We had a very good experience with Young & Laramore” the first time around, he adds, “and with everything that had gone on with the economy we realized it was very important to have the right creative going into 2010.”

Typically, an economic downturn can benefit the carpet-cleaning business, Mr. Bates says, as people who are loath to buy new carpeting decide to clean their existing carpets.

But early last year, “a lot of people stopped spending money altogether,” he adds, which hurt the company’s results.

“It wasn’t our best year,” Mr. Bates says of 2009, but there was hope for an upturn because carpets were “still getting dirty.”

The state of the housing market also affects Stanley Steemer, he adds, because when homes are moving carpets can get cleaned twice: Once when the owners prepare to sell and again by the buyers after they move in.

The new campaign was developed by Young & Laramore after discussions with some of the technicians who work in Indianapolis, Mr. Bates says, which reinforced a belief that “to our customers, Stanley Steemer is two uniformed technicians who show up at their house in the yellow Stanley Steemer van and do a great job for them.”

“Our technicians, and our vans, are our brand,” he adds.

That approach helps differentiate Stanley Steemer, Mr. Bates says, because most of the work in the category is centered on testimonials or demonstrations.

“It seems like every carpet-cleaning company in the country has the shot with the wand,” he adds, referring



An image from a new ad campaign from Stanley Steemer.

to a piece of equipment, next to a section of carpet that is “clean on one side and dirty on the other.”

By comparison, the new Stanley Steemer commercials offer “a little bit of humor, a little bit of information and shots of the van,” Mr. Bates says.

“If you’re fast-forwarding,” he adds, laughing, describing TV viewers who use TiVo or DVRs to zip through commercials rather than watching them, “you see two shots of the van, at least.”

Viewers who do that, however, will miss out on some funny advertising as Mr. Theune, an improvisational comedian, and Mr. Macias give excellent performances that bring their parts to life.

For instance, in one commercial, the van is driving along a street when the chatty technician, who is driving, stops when he sees a roll of stained carpeting discarded with the trash in front of a house.

“No!” he shouts, adding a plaintive, “Why?”

“I could have saved this one,” he says twice, shouting it the second time toward the house. The spot ends with him weeping.

In a second commercial, the talkative technician is recalling “those challenge jobs” that “keep me coming back for more,” including one, shown in a flashback, with goats in a living room.

“Don’t tell me about a dog,” he says to his silent partner. “Tell me about four dogs, an exploding crock pot. How ’bout a couple of free-ranging house chickens? Now that’s what I call a day’s work.”

A third commercial presents the chatty technician conveying a pearl of wisdom to his colleague: “You know, I always say, know the species, know the stain.”

Cut to them seated in a living room as a large beast walks about. “See, based on size, lanolin-free coat and his ear shape,” the talker says, “I know it’s an alpaca.”

He contrasts that with someone else, presumably a rival carpet cleaner, who “doesn’t think and says, ‘Hey, look, it’s a llama,’” and erroneously treats the mess as if it were llama stains.

The intent is to represent the employees, when it comes to their jobs, as “fanatics” who have “done it all,” says Tom Denari, president at Young & Laramore.

The idea that a technician would know that “an alpaca is different than a llama,” he adds, gives the campaign a way to humorously detail the distinctions between Stanley Steemer and its rivals.

“You don’t want to get caught at a party” with the talkative employee, Mr. Denari says, laughing, because his work is so important that “it’s all he’ll ever talk about.”

“But if you have a carpet problem, you want this guy,” he adds, “because he’ll get it right for you.”

The scripts for the commercials are “based on loose reality,” Mr. Denari says, derived from the information gathered during the time the agency employees spent in the field with the technicians.

“Before they all go out for the day” the technicians meet to discuss work situations, he adds, likening it to the trademark scene during episodes of the police series “Hill Street Blues” when the sergeant, played by Michael Conrad, ended his briefings with the words “Let’s be careful out there.”

In addition to the three commercials about cleaning carpets, there are two others that are focused on other services provided by Stanley Steemer.

In one spot, for water removal, the technicians are in their van, on their way to deal with a flood — or, as the chatty one puts it, “All is know is we’ve got a floor in trouble.”

Cut to them inside a home, standing in the living room, looking at a large aquarium that has been shattered by a baseball bat. All around are drinking glasses and plastic containers with rescued fish inside, swimming around.

Neither technician says a word as their shoes make squishing sounds in the soaked carpet. These words appear on screen: “24-hour water emergency service available.”

In a second spot, for air duct cleaning, the technicians are inside a home with surgical masks around their necks.

“I like to think of the duct system as the lungs of the house,” the talkative one says to his quiet co-worker, and they are “helping the house to breathe.”

“Now, I know I wouldn’t say I’m a doctor,” he adds, “but I wouldn’t say I’m not a doctor, either.” The words “\$50 off air duct cleaning” appear on screen as the commercial ends.

The spots for the services other than carpet cleaning will be mixed in with those for carpet cleaning in different proportions in different markets, Mr. Bates says, to “see what happens.”

For example, in some markets as many as 30 percent of the commercials that run will be for air duct cleaning, he adds.

The 15-second versions of the spots will run nationally on broadcast networks and cable channels. The 30-second versions will run in local markets on broadcast stations and cable systems.

Stanley Steemer handles local media buying internally, Mr. Denari says, while national buying and planning are handled by Starcom in Chicago, part of the Starcom MediaVest Group division of the Publicis Group.

On the Stanley Steemer YouTube channel, visitors can watch the commercials as well as extended versions of some and outtakes from others.

There are also plans for print advertisements and online ads, Mr. Denari says.



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Stuart Elliott has been the advertising columnist of The New York Times since May 1991, writing the weekday advertising report as well as other news articles and features. He also writes a weekly e-mail newsletter, *In Advertising*, for The New York Times on the Web and previously produced radio reports and podcasts for the Times on advertising and marketing topics.