

How punching an old lady in the face can reinforce brand

When could a video of a bunch of old ladies getting punched in the face be funny? More so, when could that same clip actually reinforce some of the best qualities of your brand?

When you are Comedy Central.

The U.S. comedy net recently ran a promo for an upcoming *Joan Rivers Roast* with what would normally be the unthinkable—by having a young person go around punching old ladies in the face. Beyond the obvious outrageous shock value, what made this particular promo so memorable was the tag about “nobody wanting to see an old lady get taken down—until now,” and the subsequent call to action to watch the *Joan Rivers Roast*.

“We strive to communicate in a way so that there is a comedic message that has a strong call to action,” says Peter Risafi, SVP Brand Marketing/Executive Creative Director, Comedy Central. “We try to make it as funny as we can, but remind (the viewer) that there’s more of that when they show up for the program itself.”

The “more of where this came from” aspect of the spot is what makes it such a great promo. Not that there was going to be more actual punching in the face—and Risafi is quick to point out that no old people were hurt during the making of the spot—but in a Comedy Central roast there are going to be many put downs.

“Roast is our biggest event franchise,” Risafi explains. “We always try to tailor (roast promotions) to the personality of

whoever we are roasting, but Joan sort of posed a different kind of creative challenge for us. We knew that Joan would have a big resonance with the upper edge of our demo, but we weren’t quite sure how, say, young men 18-34 would respond to her. They would probably recognize her as an icon, but they may not have known much about her stand-up background. With the exception of Hugh Hefner, she’s probably the oldest person we’ve ever roasted.”

“So we wanted to put her out there and tackle the big issue—that she’s an old lady. We wanted to let people know that just because she was a woman and she was older, that it was not going to be a safe roast. Our roasts can get pretty out of hand.”

Risafi knows his audience and they do not want a safe roast. The spot clearly sent the message that this roast, like all others in the series, was not going to be safe. In fact, the message was more that this roast was going to be outrageous.

“That’s what I loved about that spot,” says Risafi. “It was funny, but ultimately it got you to know that there was this roast of Joan Rivers coming.”

But if you’re not Comedy Central could you still get away with such a spot? Probably not—at least not to that degree.

Unless, like Comedy Central, it perfectly matches the content. Comedy is a great tool in promos, but for comedy to work well it has to support your brand and the program being promoted.



“We try to make sure that we aren’t doing anything gratuitous,” says Risafi. “We try to make sure that the humour, however far out it is, is anchored in a place that is relevant for our viewers. Our mantra is that we have to be funny first. Everything we do has to be funny, but it has to tie in to the message that we need to communicate. You can’t just be funny for funny sake. We have to excite viewers.”

Viewers were apparently excited. The network received tonnes of positive feedback on the spot and the overall campaign helped drive viewers to the roasting of Joan Rivers, who, for the record, is said to be 76 years old.

For producers looking at injecting some humour into their campaigns, Risafi advises: “In the world of promo, (the message) has to be the combination of art and commerce. The messaging has to be as important as the comedy (you) put into the spot. You have to tie the funny to a call to action.”

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