

The Competitive and Combative Toilet Tissue Campaign

Topic: Critical Advertising of Competitor

Characters: Clyde, Product manager for Wonderwipe toilet tissue
Peg, Copywriter for Finch & Ascher (F&A) Advertising Agency
Ray, Art director for F&A Advertising Agency

Peg has been doing packaged goods copywriting for Finch & Ascher (F&A) Advertising since graduating with a B.A. in Communications from General University three years ago. She has just been assigned to a new account for the agency, Wonderwipe toilet tissue. In her initial meeting with the client product manager, Clyde, she is briefed on the product, market, and competition. Clyde explains that toilet paper (always euphemistically called “toilet tissue” in advertising) is generally purchased on the basis of one or more criteria: brand name, price, package size (sheets per roll), texture, design (color/graphics), and strength. He explains that the Wonderwipe name is unknown since it is a new brand. It is to be a premium-priced brand and will be positioned against the market leader, Myrtle’s, as superior along the color/graphics dimension. The brand comes in five never-before-used shades which studies show blend best with the most typical bathroom decors in the U.S., and the product sports graphics preferred by consumers two to one over those of any toilet tissue currently on the market.

Clyde tells Peg that Wonderwipe’s print and television advertising is to spoof the Myrtle brand as being plain and boring in appearance—the type of toilet tissue you’d be embarrassed to have guests see in your bathroom now that there is the aesthetically pleasing Wonderwipe. The mood is to be one of light humor, yet the message should be bashing in nature: Myrtle’s is now definitely inferior and old-fashioned. Clyde does not want the ads to discuss package size because Wonderwipe will actually contain 25 fewer sheets per roll than Myrtle’s (research show that this will not be noticed by 90 percent of buyers and users), nor are ads to mention texture (Wonderwipe is slightly less soft and squeezable than Myrtle’s, but use tests suggest that 85 percent of customers won’t notice this difference). The advertising also will not describe strength (Wonderwipe is 20 percent thinner than Myrtle’s, yet 80 percent of customers fail to detect this difference).

After her meeting with Clyde, Peg starts to wonder whether she should bow to the client’s wishes. To date she had been thankful that she hasn’t had to do head-to-head comparison advertising (making comparisons to a named competitor). As a consumer, she detests this form of advertising. In her mind, it is nasty and unprofessional. She personally has a lower opinion of brands that do comparison advertising, and she suspects that other consumers might feel this way too. She also feels that the incomplete and possibly irrelevant comparison suggested by Clyde would unjustly malign Myrtle’s and would constitute misrepresentation. She recalls reading that research studies on comparative advertising are equivocal regarding effectiveness of this approach: there is some evidence that comparison advertising is frequently confusing to consumers in that they forget who was compared to whom.

In order to check her assumptions, Peg discusses her meeting with Clyde over lunch with Ray, her best friend at F&A. Ray tells Peg that as art director he has worked on quite a few comparative campaigns over the years and has no misgivings about them. He explains that

comparison advertising is fairly popular, and so it must work. Ray reminds Peg that the FTC supports comparative advertising as a way of helping consumers to make informed purchasing decisions. The commission does require that comparative claims be substantiated, and this is clearly no problem for Wonderwipes. Comparison ads are especially believed to be beneficial to marketers of new and little-known brands who are competing against better-known brands. Furthermore, Ray insists that such advertising encourages competition and might even force Myrtle's to improve the design of their toilet tissue, thus benefiting more customers.

Peg still feels uneasy. She thinks that just focusing on the positive quality of Wonderwipes would be more effective. However, Peg isn't even sure if this would be aboveboard; after all, ignoring the design attribute, Wonderwipes is basically an inferior toilet tissue. She wonders whether she should share some of her concerns with Clyde.

Author: Geoffrey P. Lantos, Associate Professor of Marketing, Stonehill College.