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MEDC 5310

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February 6, 2009

Answering “What’s G?” by Interpreting Media Messages

In December of 2008 the 44-year old Gatorade brand decided to change its logo and launch an advertising campaign to promote its new look. But, rather than using traditional television advertising methods, Gatorade chose to create a subtle, mysterious, black and white commercial that never says the name of the product or the brand its advertising. Instead it poses the question “What’s G?” and inundates its audience with images of sports stars. In an attempt to spur its viewers to solve the “What’s G?” mystery, Gatorade uses historical references, cultural messages and a variety of production elements to evoke an emotional response and move viewers to action. Art Silverblatt’s *Keys to Interpreting Media Messages* will be used to analyze the techniques embedded in the “What’s G?” commercial.

The “What’s G?” commercial opens with a black background and a solitary piano tune. Michael Jordan, shot from the bust up, appears on the right side of the screen as the narrator asks, “What’s G?” The camera pans to the right and down a line of sports stars Peyton Manning, Mia Hamm, NASCAR driver Jimmie Johnson, celebrated basketball coach John Wooden, snowboarder Terje Haakonsen, autistic high school basketball player Jason McElwain, Billy Jean King, skier Picabo Street, Jackie Joyner-Kersey, gymnast Nadia Comaneci, Jackie Robinson, Tiger Woods, and Usain Bolt. While the camera pans, the piano tune continues and a voice reads, “What’s G? It’s the emblem of a warrior. It’s the swagger of an athlete, a champion and a dynasty. It’s gifted genius, genuine, good seed, golden, and glorious. It is a lower case god. What’s G? It is the heart, hustle, and soul of the game. That’s G.” The last sports star in the line, Usain Bolt, points to the right, and a large letter G rolls into the screen as the narrator announces “That’s G” (SchwartzVideo).

Unlike most television commercials where the product is the star and revealed immediately, the “What’s G?” commercial never reveals to the audience who or what it’s advertising. The latent function of this ad is to pique the public’s curiosity and raise questions about exactly what product is being promoted, and ultimately, to prompt the audience to purchase Gatorade. The audience understands that this is an advertisement, and that it’s sports related since it stars sports figures and aired, at least initially, during the 2008 Rose Bowl. However, even with those clues, the audience is left asking not necessarily “What’s G?” but “What’s this commercial for?” According to Jimmy Smith, Gatorade’s account manager at ad agency TBWA/Chiat/Day, that was exactly the intent:

“We wanted people to be engaged and intrigued in the end. We wanted them to want to find out who it was; to ask, “Who is this?” And we did. At one point it

was the No. 1-searched item on Google trends the first day it ran... If we had just put Gatorade or just stuck the lightning bolt in there, a lot of people would have been like, "Oh, that's Gatorade" and been done. They would have talked about the people in the commercial, but the dialogue would not have continued. Now instead you have people still trying to figure out exactly what it is."
(Jackson)

Instead of making the product front and center, the advertisers created a mystery for viewers to solve. By engaging them in the process, the viewers take some ownership of the commercial and resolving the mystery. And, with the Internet as the ultimate mystery-solving tool, viewers were able to go online and search for exactly what product was being advertised.

Both obvious and subtle production elements used in the advertisement are successful in extracting an affective response from the viewers. To begin, the black-and-white commercial offers an obvious contrast to the majority of color commercials on the air today. This choice is a somewhat risky strategy when attempting to lure in consumers since, according to Silverblatt, "dead colors like gray or black, make us feel sad, alone or uncomfortable" (169). However, in the commercial the gray and black tones are well balanced with bright white in the athletes' clothing and a subtle white glow around the athletes themselves. According to Gerald Gorn, the technique of using different color values is capable of adding a sense of relaxation to the ad. Gorn defines value as "the degree of darkness or lightness of the color relative to a neutral scale that extends from pure black to pure white" (5). And, according to Gorn, ads containing colors with a higher level of value lead to greater liking for the ad, and this effect is mediated by the greater feelings of relaxation elicited by the higher value color" (4). With its unusually calming use of black and white, Gatorade achieves a striking but still warm commercial that is distinctly different from other color-laden television advertisements.

Continuing the examination of production elements, the use of a simple piano tune to accompany the image and voiceover serves to raise viewers' level of excitement and prepare them for the expected reveal at the commercial's end. According to Silverblatt, "music is frequently used to manipulate attitudes and behaviors," "convey subtle cues to the audience about the narrative," and "articulate themes in media presentation" (199-200). The music's repetition, as well as its synchronization with the pace of speaking and the pace of the images, offers the viewer a sense of comfort. At the same time the simple and repetitive score in its simplicity and the tone is reminiscent of the score used in many suspense movies. This simple tune doesn't overwhelm the narrator's message but raises the audience's awareness and expectations. Since there is no change in the tune at the end of the advertisement and no real reveal, viewers are left with that high level of anticipation. Interestingly, the music is in the key of G, something most viewers would never know just by listening, but that attention to detail serves to reinforce the "G" concept in viewers' minds.

The exclusive use of athletes in the "What's G?" advertisement presents a strong clue toward the audience Gatorade is seeking to attract: athletes. As the fourteen sports celebrities float across the screen they each make eye contact with the viewer and nod, smile, or make a gesture toward the audience. The choice of shooting the athletes from the bust up puts them at about eye level with seated television viewers. These elements signal equality and acceptance,

indicating that the viewer is being welcomed into this elite group of athletes. Even though the viewer may not recognize every person in the ad, they can infer that they are part of this select group. According to Silverblatt, making the consumer feel accepted is key in advertising, “A persistent latent message in advertising is that people can satisfy their need for acceptance through their consumer behavior” (299). By using the athletes in this way Gatorade uses the promise of acceptance to convince viewers to buy this product, as soon as they find out exactly what this product is.

Though athletes are the primary targets of this advertisement, the latent target is members of hip hop culture. The narrator, rapper Lil’ Wayne, and director, Spike Lee are prominent figures in the hip-hop community. Gatorade leaves Lil’ Wayne and Spike Lee literally in the background and out of sight of the viewers, but many members of the hip hop culture would be able to identify Lil’ Wayne’s voice or identify Spike Lee’s cinematic style. A more overt appeal to the hip-hop culture resides in the product name, “G.” In hip hop culture “g” is a common abbreviation for gangster and part of a common greeting “What’s up g?” which is very close to the ad’s tagline, “What’s G?” Additionally, by having the athletes nod their heads and gesture to the audience they are acknowledging what the narrator, Lil’ Wayne, is saying and therein hip-hop.

The advertisement sends a strong message of inclusiveness by using historical and recent sports stars from a variety of sports and ethnic backgrounds. As Peyton Manning appears on screen, the narrator says “warrior;” for Jimmy Johnson, the narrator says “Champion;” for John Wooden, “dynasty”. There is an adjective and clue to the athletic achievements of each athlete as they appear on screen. Athletes from professional sports such as football and basketball receive a prominent role, but equally placed are lesser-known stars from sports such as snowboarding, skiing and track. Athletes range in age range from John Wooden, who is 98, to high-schooler Jason McElwin. The ethnic diversity in the advertisement is obvious to viewers, as is the representation of both males and females. By including such a wide array of people Gatorade created an advertisement that nearly any television viewer could watch and identify with the characters.

The messages embedded in the “What’s G?” advertisement reflect and reinforce existing cultural ideals. The use of athletes to attract attention and interest demonstrates that this is a revered group in American culture. The use of a rapper to do the voice over is not only a nod to the hip-hop community but also exemplifies the role of both musicians and sports stars as celebrities. The acknowledging nods and eye-level presentation play on the aspirations of Americans to be at the top in their field, whether it’s soccer or business, just like the stars of the ad. Lil’ Wayne even says “G” is a “lower case god” when Jackie Robinson’s image rolls onto the screen, indicating American’s reverence for these sports figures and tendency to idolize them and their achievements. Additionally, without the Internet and its role as a defining force in American Culture this advertisement could have never been successful. Gatorade would have asked the question, and no one would have been able to answer.

By withholding the product name and any recognizable brand imagery from the advertisement, Gatorade was intentionally piquing viewers’ curiosity and attempting to solicit a response from its target demographics: athletes and members of the hip hop culture. The

emotional production values paired with historic and famous figures communicate to the audience that they can become a member of the elite group through using the product advertised. But, without knowing what the product is, viewers would have to research, most likely online, and Gatorade hopes that once viewers discover “G” for themselves, they’ll follow through on their desire to become a top athlete by drinking their beverage. And Gatorade hopes customers do that before realizing that being a top athlete actually takes years of dedication--not just a sports drink.

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