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From the Baltimore Sun

Fear factor

Volkswagen takes a risky approach with TV ad vividly depicting crash

By Dan Thanh Dang
Sun reporter

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Flipping through television channels at her Belcamp home on a recent evening, Hattye Knight wasn't sure what caught her attention first: the sickening crunch of metal and shattering glass as an SUV slammed into a smaller sedan, or the jarring visual of the car's occupants smashing into inflated air bags.

Either way, Knight said, she was transfixed, catching her breath as the sedan spun around and exhaling only when the two couples inside, who had been bantering about a movie they had just seen, emerged shaken but OK - and the words "Safe happens" flashed over the scene.

It was only a commercial, viewers such as Knight were relieved to discover, but a shocking one.

The ad is one of two that began airing last month, featuring graphic crash scenes as a way of trumpeting the Volkswagen Jetta's 4-star safety rating. The ads have grabbed attention - not all of it positive.

"It was kind of scary," said Knight, who works for Harford County schools. "It was a little violent. I thought it was live."

"Our patients are very upset about those commercials," said J. Gayle Beck, professor of psychology at the Motor Vehicle Accident Research Clinic at the University at Buffalo, State University of New York. "I've heard everything from 'I cried for an hour after I saw the commercial' to 'I'm never buying a Volkswagen.'"

"I'm not in sales or marketing," said Beck, whose center treats car-accident victims for post-traumatic stress disorder, "but I'm sure that was not the intended effect [Volkswagen] wanted."

Not all reactions have been that negative - Knight said the ad made her consider buying the Jetta - but message boards on car Web sites and Web blogs have denounced VW for using scare tactics to sell cars.

The Wall Street Journal reported recently that viewers, concerned about occupants of the Jettas in the commercials, called Volkswagen to check on their condition.

The German auto company has a long history of catchy commercials, but they have tended to take a cool, ironic tone - think Fahrvergnügen, or the two guys cruising to the "Da Da Da" song.

Its two new spots are a sharp departure from the norm for auto ads, which more commonly feature sleek cars hugging the curves on a road or rolling luxuriously up to a restaurant or resort.

Power of shock

Shocking images have a history of turning up in commercials, particularly in public service ads against smoking or drugs, or for political campaigns - perhaps the most famous being the 1964 commercial that Lyndon B. Johnson ran against Barry Goldwater, showing a little girl counting as she picks petals off a daisy until she is interrupted after "nine" by an exploding atomic bomb.

Advertising experts say most automobile commercials tend to veer away from using crashes to sell cars.

Instead, if the company wants to make a point about safety, it will use warm scenes of children and families that drivers imagine they are protecting by picking such a sturdy, reliable vehicle.

And when crashes are shown, companies such as Mercedes and Volvo have used crash-test dummies rather than humans to demonstrate how safe their cars are.

In its current campaign, Volkswagen used stunt drivers in the crashes, said Karen Marderosian, director of marketing at Volkswagen.

"It causes people to stop and watch and then watch them again," Marderosian said. "I think that what it has done is make people stop and think about what can happen.

"The fact is, [car crashes] happen to people every day. We're telling people that we think about crashes every day and that you need to prepare for it."

In the glut of TV images that bombard viewers nowadays, companies are searching for new ways to make their product commercials stand out from all the clutter.

Volkswagen's use of such graphic images of real people in a realistic crash, however, could backfire.

Shaking things up

"Fear typically doesn't work in advertising," said Bruce Vanden Berg, a professor of advertising at Michigan State University. "But at the same time, is this fear or is it shock? Volkswagen sales are down in recent years, the brand is in trouble, they score low on reliability studies and they know they're in trouble.

"They have to shake things up," Vanden Berg said. "They are trying to do something to jolt you. So they're using a taboo in car advertising: don't show crashes and don't use fear. Will it work? That remains to be seen, but it's a risk."

Marderosian said the crash commercials will continue running through next week, and then the next phase of commercials, which depict the type of people who drive Jettas, will follow.

Mixed messages

One might think Volkswagen is suffering from an identity crisis when comparing some of its recent ad campaigns for different car models, experts say.

Are they saying Volkswagen drivers embrace speed? In a recent commercial, the Volkswagen GTI's spokesdemon, which urges a guy to tell his girlfriend to stop yakking so he can hear the sound of his car engine, seems to say so. "Make friends with your fast," the commercial urges.

Are they saying Volkswagen drivers are cooler than cool? That seems to be the case in the "Unpimp your ride" ads, where two zany German engineers in lab coats drop new Golf GTI cars on overdone, tricked-out autos.

Or are they saying Volkswagen drivers care about safety? In the second "Safe happens" commercial, two guys in a car are talking about one's penchant for using the word "like" when their Jetta suddenly rams into a red truck backing into the road.

"I don't think people think of safety as one of Volkswagen's main brand values," said Jean Halliday, Detroit bureau chief for Advertising Age magazine. "So many car companies are chasing safety these days that people get confused as to which car company is saying it.

"This 'Safe happens' ad gets that point across, but it's completely opposite of their 'Get to know your fast' ads. Do you want people to speed or do you want to be safe? It's really confusing."

Credit Miami's Crispin Porter + Bogusky agency, which won Volkswagen's ad business in September of last year.

The agency has moved the company in a very different direction from its previous, feel-good commercials in which drivers rode around on moonlit nights or aimless afternoons in their Volkswagens.

CP+B was not available for comment.

Volkswagen has no sales numbers to support how well the crash commercials are working, but the company said requests for brochures are up 37 percent at call centers and 56 percent on the Web.

Internet requests for dealer price quotes are also up 58 percent, Marderosian says.

"I think Volkswagen has lost some of that luster of being a hip, cool car to have," Halliday said. "I think this [Safe happens] commercial is giving them a lot of public relations. They say even negative PR is good PR, but not if people say they don't want to buy the car.

"Is this a publicity stunt?" Halliday asked. "I don't know. Will it sell Jettas? I don't think so."

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To see the Jetta commercials, go to baltimoresun.com/jetta.

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