

Is Television Worth Your Money?

Millions of checkoff dollars are spent on TV.
Here's what your money is buying.



About three years ago, we asked Robert Ross, formerly of the Leo Burnett Advertising Agency, to review the TV commercials paid for with farmers' checkoff money. (See "Rating Those Commodity TV Commercials," March 1990.)

Ross's experience includes developing successful campaigns such as the Jolly Green Giant, the Pillsbury Doughboy, and fly the friendly skies of United Airlines.

We asked Ross whether the commercials were good or bad, strong or weak, sharp or dull, and why. Were they worth the money?

With a few notable exceptions, he thought most of the promotions were weak, dull, or confusing.

We've asked Ross to review the commercials again. And this time, in addition to his review, the Price/McNabb Advertising Agency of Asheville, N.C., judged the current group of checkoff commercials independently. Ross didn't show them his reviews, and they didn't show him theirs.

Ross rated the commercials on a scale of 1 to 10 as he did in 1990 (see box).

Price/McNabb critiqued but didn't rate the commercials.



Beef Industry Council: Beef

Campaign theme: *Beef. It's what's for dinner.*

Ross: This group of four commercials is a great improvement over the "It's real food" campaign. Folks at home are given a sense of the versatility of beef, which is shown in quick and tasty-looking camera cuts, and of its popularity from Maine to Malibu, Chinatown to New Orleans: "All over the country, nothing satisfies so many people in so many ways. Beef. It's what's for dinner."

Rating: 6½ for the group of four commercials.

Price/McNabb: This campaign says you should eat beef because so many other people are eating it. The theme suggests that you don't have much choice in the matter. Images and music are appealing, but the message has no appeal. The old campaign, "Real Food," had some "damn the vegetables, beef tastes great" charm to it. There's just no meat to "It's what's for dinner."

California Raisin Advisory Board: Raisins

Campaign theme: *"Heard it through the grapevine..."*

Ross: Eight Claymation commercials continue to mine the gold. Kooky, hip, offbeat, oddball, and really bad. Now, a clay Ray Charles bangs at a clay piano, and a clay Michael Jackson sings the Grapevine song in con-



cert while a clay strawberry fan faints in ecstasy. There ain't nothing like this on the TV, and they do get noticed. And raisins are selling.

Rating: 7

Price/McNabb: Raisins are simple, a fun product. The campaign picks up on these fundamentals and does it perfectly. These are no pompous, hollow raisins. "It's what's for snacks" here.

Sunkist Growers, Inc: Oranges, Lemons

Campaign theme: *Sunkist. You have our word on it.*

Ross: The best of the three 30-second commercials that we reviewed feature the Sunkist lemon. Pictures accompanied by words show the lemon as it is held, sliced, twisted, squeezed, and squirted. The tone is tart — like a lemon. Very well done.

"Sunkist Promise" featured the orange as it was peeled, and an off-camera voice says, "To you, it's just a peel. To us, it's where promises are kept." Then comes the theme line. Not very impressive.

The third commercial, "Sunkist Swing," shows a mother recalling the backyard swing she had long ago





A Los Angeles company films a commercial for the Beef Industry Council's \$42 million campaign. PHOTO: NANCY DORRMAN-HICKSON

On a Scale of 1 to 10

- 10 is perfect in every way and, therefore, beyond the reach of mere human beings; probably never given.
- 9 is so good you can hardly wait to applaud; rarely given.
- 8 is to be proud of; not often given.
- 7 is better than many; superior work.
- 6 is as good as many and better than some.
- 5 is adequate.
- 4 is almost adequate.
- 3 is weak.
- 2 is terrible.
- 1 fails in every way, without a redeeming feature of any kind and thus is not realistic. Like a perfect 10, a 1 is rarely given.

when she was young. As she thinks of the past, the mother gives the child segments of an orange. The effort to let nostalgia sell oranges comes up empty.

Rating: 4 for the group of three commercials; 7 for the lemon commercial.

Price/McNabb: The lemon has good visual interest. It actually offers you reasons to use lemons. A good commercial. The orange has pretty pictures that say nothing. The swing has shallow sentimentality that doesn't work.

Cotton Incorporated: Cotton

Campaign theme: *The touch, the feel, the fabric of our lives . . .*

Ross: This group of three commercials shows folks living, touching, dancing, moving: street people, cops, a couple in the front seat of a car, folks waiting at the front door of a bank — the strands that form "the fabric of our lives." The cotton symbol is discreet.

CI also sponsored an Olympic team, and viewers see sprinters, divers, and proud winners with lots of U.S. flags, which presumably are made of cotton.



Rating: 3

This theme was given a rating of 3 back in March 1990, and we still contend that the images and music are nice.

But why this sells cotton is a mystery.

Price/McNabb: When you consider how little these commercials are trying to say (simply, that you can feel good about cotton), they work very well. Engaging lyrics, lovely music, distinctive voice, plus beautifully shot vignettes.

You see these commercials and say to yourself, "Gee, that's nice." If you're involved in marketing, you think, "Why do they go to such expense to say so little?"



National Pork Producers Council: Pork

Campaign theme: *The other white meat.*

Ross: Here's an attractive, well-produced group of commercials that invite

the folks at home to "taste what you've been missing," which turns out to be "the other white meat." Sounds pretty good, pork compared with chicken. The message says, "31% less fat and 14% less calories."

Less fat than chicken? Less calories than chicken? Not quite. Turns out that the little type on the bottom of the screen uses data from a 1983 composite USDA study that's compared with a 1990 study. Pork is compared with pork. Pork is good food, tasty, lean, versatile. There ought to be better ways of selling it.

Rating: 3

Price/McNabb: This kind of commercial often winds up giving advertising a bad name. Well shot. Clever tag line. Every message contains numbers such as "31% less fat." Less fat than the other white meats, chicken and turkey? That's a wonderful benefit.

But wait a second. If you're fast enough, you can catch the tiny type across the bottom that explains that pork has 31% less fat than it had 10 years ago. It's 3-D advertising, deceptive, destructive, dumb.

Florida Citrus Commission: Oranges, Grapefruit, Tangerines, Tangelos

Ross: This group had three 30-second commercials, for the Florida orange, the Florida grapefruit, and one for the honey tangerine and the tangelo. This is hard-working salesmanship.



The oranges sell a "difference." They're a little yellow and maybe a bit green on the outside but rich orange and ripe orange inside. And "this is as orange as it gets on the

inside" the commercial tells us.

The grapefruit sale invites you to try the fruit at other times of the day ("You don't just have to have it in the morning").

The tangerines and tangelos use the "Z" sound ("tantalizing, refreshing, energizing—every zing a snack should be!").

Rating: 6½

Price/McNabb: If only these commercials had the executive and creative polish of the other campaigns. The

spots look alike, sound alike, and have a 1975 style to them. And that's really too bad because these commercials bring up significant product differences and point out their benefits.

National Dairy Board: Milk Products



Ross: We looked at 13 commercials in this interesting group. Selling messages were offered for butter, milk, chocolate milk, American cheese, Cheddar cheese, and ice cream.

Butter cookies were a favorite when my own kids were growing up. This commercial sold cookies with butter in them rather than butter with cookies sort of added on. Well done. A little hokey, but it's a cookie, not the Magna Carta!

Milk had a "tastes great" theme that was ho-hum. The "does a body good" works well. The attempt to give milk high-potency, romantic sex appeal is false.

Chocolate milk uses a little alphabet recital to catch our attention and pays off with the unique discovery that chocolate is tasty.

Cheese sells taste and versatility and has wide appeal.

Ice cream says it "makes us feel like a kid again." Frankly, my dear, I just don't believe it.

Rating: 6 for the group.

Price/McNabb: We liked the "milk does a body good" commercial and the "pour on the cheddar and make it taste better" commercial. The rest of the group just didn't make it. ■

Behind the Scenes of a Beef Commercial

The same commuter train scene at Union Station in Los Angeles will be filmed over and over again, although only two or three seconds of footage will be used. Two 30-second commercials are being produced for the Beef Industry Council during these five days.

"While making beef the 'hero' of the commercial, we're also trying to touch a core of reality that most people can relate to, like coming home," says Steve Fortier, the writer who worked on the commercial. "Selling is too hard a word, but by 'selling' dinner, we're selling beef. It's more of a reminder—'Beef. It's what's for dinner.'"

That's the catchphrase for the new



Kevin Kecklesen (left) probably prefers strained carrots to steak. Trainer David McMillan (center) says Maxx loves a beefy reward. Penny Johnson stir-fries beef for the TV cameras.

\$42 million national beef promotional campaign.

"Tomorrow, we're shooting with kids, dogs, and steaks," laughs director Danny Ducovny. He rolls his eyes at all that could go wrong.

Ten trucks crammed with wardrobe, makeup, lighting, camera, and other equipment are parked in front of the set the next day.

Every object in the house rented

for the day's filming has been moved to make room for Hollywood.

When all is in place, Ducovny says the magic word: "Action."

Wearing an oversized, red flannel shirt, which is buttoned wrong, a diapered toddler wanders through the hallway. He stumbles over and around a lump of a dog.

A blonde-haired girl comes in hopping on one foot and artfully

dogging both the baby and dog.

"Hey, where's my backpack?" she asks, then spots the bag and continues.

Dad comes in from another entrance, and asks, "Has anyone seen my shoes?" He, too, adeptly avoids the baby and the family pet.

Next to enter is a teenaged boy bouncing a basketball and asking, "Hey, who's going to take me to the ball game tonight? Mom? Dad?"

Now, holding one shoe in his hand, Dad answers, "I will, if you're ready to go when I am." He sighs. "Has anyone seen my shoe?"

In the background, Mom is seen calmly preparing the evening meal — a quick and delicious beef dish, of course.

Off camera, two toddlers, dressed identically to the baby in the hallway, are on standby. "This baby is good, but I've worked with babies where we had to completely scrap the shoot because of crying," confides Dean Briggs, the actor playing the father.

David McMillan, the trainer of

Maxx the dog, stands off camera, just inches away from his charge.

At one point, Josh Levey, the actor with the bouncing ball, accidentally treads on the dog, who responds by scrambling out of position.

"Hey, leave it!" the trainer barks. Maxx obediently falls into a lifeless lump again.

"Each photography shoot is different," says Marlys Bielunski. She is the director of test kitchens and editorial services with the National Live Stock and Meat Board and works with the food stylists on the set.

"Our goal is to make sure the food is enticing to the consumer but not [so perfect] the consumer can't do it on her own," she explains.

The meat "dies" under the lights very quickly, so freshly cooked beef must constantly be prepared.

"Some people will cook the meat with a blowtorch, which cooks the meat on the outside only," explains Bielunski. "They think they have more control with the color."

"Now, the only thing we can re-touch [food] with is oil or dashes of color," notes Penny Johnson. Today, she is stir-frying for the hungry TV camera in a strange kitchen — the back of two trucks parked together out front.

The director wants some color added to the stir-fry shot and asks if salt and pepper shakers shaped like bell peppers are available. A Beef Council representative gently suggests that salt shakers are not appropriate props.

Left unspoken is the idea that linking salt and beef would contradict the message that beef is a healthy food. The salt shaker isn't mentioned again.

Everyone here is giving his all to promote beef. But wait a minute. Surely some among these L.A. residents are vegetarians?

The director grins. "I bet there are," Ducovny concedes. "But I doubt that they'd admit it this week."

Article and photos by NANCY DORMAN-HICKSON

I discovered America in 1990.

Dane Mercer — Dairyman, Sweetwater, TN

"I like grazing my dairy cows on **Alfagraze** pasture because it's more efficient than harvesting. The cows do the grazing — they do the work, and I like that.

With intensive grazing on **Alfagraze** pasture, I can produce milk cheaper than I can with conventional harvesting. During a five-month period in 1991, we reduced our feeding costs from \$3.00 per cow per day to \$1.50 and upheld our 20,500 lb. rolling herd average for our 120-cow herd. Also, it's a lot healthier on the cows — the grazing gets them off the concrete.

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