

East Bay, RI

East Bay NewspapersWednesday, February 7,
2007

Beer ads broken down by media specialist for BHS underclassmen



BARRINGTON - In one commercial, aliens seemingly pulled straight from the Star Wars catalogue repeatedly spew a now infamous banal catchphrase. In another, a dog latches onto the crotch of a surprised yuppie, who emits a high-pitched squeal.

If you think that only a juvenile mind would respond to this type of slapstick, you'd be thinking just like the advertisers who created it, said Vermont-based media specialist Rob Williams. But they're not selling video games or hot pockets; they're working for Budweiser, and they're selling alcohol.

Last Friday morning, Mr. Williams talked to Barrington High School students about how beer companies like Budweiser have made a science out of targeting underage television viewers with aliens, dogs and, most famously, talking frogs. The beer industry spends about \$5 billion on advertising each year "desperately trying to get your attention," he told the assembly of freshmen and sophomores.

Mr. Williams's appearance was thanks to the Barrington Adult Youth (BAY) Team, formerly known as the Substance Abuse Task Force, a local organization that has increasingly sought to find new ways to educate teenagers about the dangers of drinking.

"Although [the alcohol industry] tries to maintain that it doesn't market to teenagers, it does," said BAY Team coordinator Kathleen Sullivan.

During a nationwide television event like the Super Bowl, a 30-second beer ad in which aliens shout "waaazaaap" may pass unnoticed amid the spectacle and pageantry. But it allegedly gets results: According to Mr. Williams, a recent survey revealed that 8-year-olds were more familiar with the Budweiser frogs than more traditional mascots like Tony the Tiger and Smokey the Bear.

Budweiser's intentions are not so much to get teenagers to start drinking, he explained, though that has been a consistent side effect, judging from a Columbia University study that showed that 17.5 percent of all alcohol consumers are under the age of 21. According to Mr. Williams, beer companies simply want to instill a brand loyalty early on that will influence a viewer's purchase when he or she does start buying alcohol.

Reaching the audience

In addition to a typically sophomoric brand of humor, beer advertisers employ more subtle techniques to entice underage viewers, Mr. Williams said.

Exhibiting random clips that appeared during recent Super Bowls, he attempted to point out how the ads promoted associations that most underage drinkers would understand.

For example, in many Budweiser ads, Mr. Williams observed, the theme often centers on concealing beer, either from greedy friends or a disapproving wife. In reality, however, Mr. Williams suggested that it may be two different groups — underage kids and alcoholics — who would relate more with secretive drinking.

In other ads, actors who at first appear to be of legal age are cast in the role of the rambunctious teenager, Mr. Williams said. For example, in an ad in which an adult man has installed a secret rotating wall to hide his ample beer stock, four younger looking males excitedly collect the bottles in the next apartment when the fridge "magically" appears. At the end of the spot, the four men prostrate themselves before the wall chanting "magic fridge," which Mr. Williams claimed is how Budweiser wants actual underage viewers to respond to their product.

A sampling from the audience appeared to prove Mr. Williams's point; Many students laughed at the punchlines of the featured commercials, and a smattering of girls let loose some "aws" when a particularly shabby-looking dog appeared in one ad. But he claimed he was not there to contest the entertainment or effectiveness of the ads. Mr. Williams said it wasn't even his intention to tell kids how to think about alcohol.

"All I hope to do is give them some questions and some information to think about," he said. "To get them to think about how the system works. The alcohol industry routinely denies it, but I think if you look at the messages being sent and where they're placed in magazines and television, it's pretty clear that of course they're targeting kids."

A teacher at Champlain College in Vermont, Mr. Williams said his interest in the connection between media and public health led him to the "rich topic" of beer ads. For 10 years, he has spoken to students across the country about the subject.

After the presentation ended Friday morning, students filtered out of the auditorium, many discussing the ads they now saw in a different light.

"It was a pretty good presentation," said sophomore Josh Zawatsky.

Budweiser responds

According to Anheuser-Busch Vice President of Consumer Affairs John Kaestner, Budweiser ads are not only not geared to underage viewers, but they don't even reach them: According to his statistics, more than 82 percent of Super Bowl viewers were over the age of 21 this past year.

"These [commercials] are just fun, almost ridiculous type things," he said. "Just because you're 21, you've lost your sense of humor? Adults love this kind of humor."

Mr. Kaestner added that he didn't see "kids going out and buying Aflac insurance" after seeing the Aflac duck ads, which he contended also showed during sporting events.

More importantly, he said, advertising had less to do with underage drinking and brand loyalty than people think. "That's a feel good gesture," he said of targeting beer advertising.

"Kids will drink whatever they can get their hands on," he continued. "We can turn off half the TVs in the U.S., and it won't affect one iota the occurrence of underage drinking."

The more important cause, he said, was targeting underage drinking where it mattered: Getting kids, parents, law enforcement officials, retailers and even beer companies working together to keep kids away from alcohol. According to Mr. Kaestner, some statistics show that underage drinking has actually decreased in the past few decades.

He also said that the Super Bowl ads may present a good opportunity to parents to talk to their kids about alcohol.

"Take the moment to say, these ads are directed at adults," Mr. Kaestner said. "This is something I've done with my own kids over the years."

This year's ads

This Sunday's Super Bowl beer ads featured dogs, gorillas, and slapstick, all elements that media specialist Rob Williams contends are used to target younger viewers.

* Budweiser: In one ad, a white dog roams through the streets, stopping to look longingly as a dalmation sits on a carriage leading a parade. Just then, a car goes by, splashing mud that leaves the dog with black spots. The dog then jumps next to the dalmation on the carriage to join in the revelry.

* Bud Light: In one of the first ads during the game, two men play rock paper scissors to claim the last Bud Light, ending in one man throwing an actual rock at the other. Later on, another commercial featured two gorillas at a zoo plotting to steal a Bud Light shipment until one becomes distracted by a woman taking his photo.

By Scott O'Connell

soconnell@eastbaynewspapers.com

Copyright © 2003, The East Bay Newspapers