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How the Amish Helped Make the Heat Surge Hot

Direct Response's Newest -- and Quietest -- Spokesfolk Have Help Drive Sales of Fireplace

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NEW YORK (AdAge.com) -- When Becky Sheetz-Runkle was 13, she broke her femur sledding on a farm owned by her Amish neighbor, Jonas Stoltzfus. Upon discovering the injured teenager, Mr. Stoltzfus waited with her for 45 minutes -- the time it took in winter for an ambulance to reach her in Pennsylvania's remote Lancaster County.



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"Jonas was a class act," said Ms. Sheetz-Runkle, an executive at a Fairfax, Va., marketing firm. "He and his wife visited me in the hospital, and she made me a pillow. You wouldn't see them in a cheesy ad selling fireplaces."

New ad stars

Other Amish, apparently, aren't so finicky. They are the stars of print ads in Parade and Rolling Stone and in direct-response ads on TV, pitching those Heat Surge Roll-n-Glow electric fireplaces. You can hardly miss them; the company behind Heat Surge spent some \$44.2 million on advertising last year, according to TNS Media Intelligence, a more than eight-fold increase from the year before.

No doubt, some Amish never imagined that one day a few of their number would be the stuff of unadulterated hype with copy like this: "Amish craftsmen are working their fingers to the bone to be sure everyone gets their delivery in time to save a lot of money."

DIRECT RESPONSE TV

In this recessionary environment, DRTV players are increasingly gaining respect -- [and ground](#).

But it certainly has captivated people's imaginations. Andrew Robertson, president-CEO of Omnicom Group's BBDO Worldwide, said in a recent post on Facebook that he "has read every single word of the 'Amish mantle and miracle invention' ad" he spotted in a recent edition of USA Today's sports section.

The ads "follow all of the best practices of direct response," said Beth Vendice, divisional president at Mercury Media Holdings, a marketing company that specializes in direct-response advertising. "The spots are not necessarily high quality, but it's also not screaming, yell-and-sell. The whole Amish twist is providing something that catches the attention of people."

Started with a friendship

How did even a select number of Amish come to enter the often overblown world of advertising? "A company representative responsible for developing the Heat Surge Roll-n-Glow fireplace had a friendship with the owner of an Amish carpentry company," said Chris Pugh, a Heat Surge spokesman. "This is not uncommon, since our Canton, Ohio, headquarters is located within an hour's drive of a large Amish community.

"We have a relationship that's been mutually beneficial to the Amish and us. The individuals pictured are from a local community near our headquarters in Ohio. They agreed to the photographs under the condition that the pictures focus on the quality of the product, and not on the individuals themselves. You will notice that the individuals do not face the camera directly for pictures."

What's even stranger is that the heater itself is actually a "work of engineering genius from the China coast" that comes encased in "real wood" Amish mantles, according to the advertising. Some ads claim that the heaters are free, and that customers are paying only for the carpentry. Heat Surge won't comment on sales, but it must be selling plenty to spend nearly \$45 million on advertising, up from \$4.7 million in 2007.

The ads are getting noticed on other fronts, too, such as the Better Business Bureau. Since June 7, 2007, the BBB has processed 246 complaints about Heat Surge, most of them regarding customer-service issues and advertising claims. Of those complaints, 165 have been resolved in the past 12 months, and Heat Surge has substantiated or modified some of the statements made in its advertising.

BBB's resolution

"About 80% of the complaints filed with the Better Business Bureau reflect concerns of more than a year ago with customer service when Heat Surge began and does not accurately reflect the excellent customer-service programs which are now in place," said Mr. Pugh, the company's spokesman. The BBB even ascertained that "the Amish-made mantel represented in the ad is crafted and assembled by local craftsman from Holmes and Geauga counties in Ohio," and said that the "improvements put in place by the company have resulted in a significant reduction in the number of complaints the BBB has received."

Heat Surge's inclusion of the Amish, while potentially off-putting, may be key to the company's image. The Amish "are representative of the value shift happening in the world," said Jon Bond, co-chairman of Kirshenbaum Bond & Partners, who said he senses renewed focus "on family and relationships vs. superficiality and mega-consumerism."

Even Ms. Sheetz-Runkle, the woman whose Amish neighbor soothed her during a frightening injury, acknowledged that the Amish spark associations with strong work ethic and low cost. "We've got so many ways to communicate and so many things to do that the idea of buying something as comforting as a fireplace/heater contraption from hardworking, novel, simple, plain people is appealing," she said. "I suppose it makes for a good conversation piece as well."