

Broccoli ads make the case that TV still matters

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Viewers could be forgiven for thinking that a witty television campaign to promote the benefits of broccoli was intended to boost sales of the lowly vegetable. But, in fact, "[The Miracle Food](#)" campaign was designed to refute the belief that traditional television is no longer relevant as an advertising medium in the Internet age.

The Television Bureau of Canada says it proved that with an ad campaign that boosted broccoli sales by comparing the benefits of eating the vegetable to other miraculous events in life, such as surviving a fall from an airplane. Theresa Treutler, the bureau's president and chief executive officer, said it launched the initiative in 2009, at a time when "we were seeing many articles and opinions, all extremely negative, about television and television advertising." "It was a tough year for most businesses," she said. "I guess in that environment (people were) looking around for targets."

A report by Bensimon Byrne suggested that 29 per cent of TV viewers owned PVRs and nearly 80 per cent were fast-forwarding through the ads. A poll by Ipsos Reid found Canadians were spending 18 hours a week on average in front of their computers, versus 16.9 hours watching TV. Data on the bureau's website show online ads are rapidly gaining on traditional media. Television accounted for \$3.1 billion a year in Canadian advertising in 2009, for a 29.3-per-cent share of the total market. The Internet garnered \$1.8 billion, or 17.2 per cent of the market, more than radio. By comparison, daily newspapers accounted for \$2.03 billion in advertising in 2009, according to the Canadian Newspaper Association (with community papers accounting for \$1.16 billion and online newspaper advertising for another \$217 million, newspapers as a whole remain the biggest advertising medium with a total of \$3.4 billion in revenue and a 32.3 per cent share of the market, says the CNA).

The television bureau set out to change the dialogue about TV advertising. Its initial plan was to run ads touting the benefits of TV ads. It planned to use data showing that people spend 25 hours a week watching TV. Most people watch TV live, as opposed to pre-recorded versions, and the bureau argues that television has a unique ability to connect emotionally with audiences.

But when the bureau put its proposal out to five creative agencies, one came back with a radically different approach: Create an ad that proves TV is effective at selling products. Even a difficult one like broccoli. "Most people think of broccoli as a bit of a tough sell. Pre-campaign awareness studies and attitudinal research showed it was not viewed in the most positive light," Treutler said. Yet it would be easy to promote as having lots of health benefits. And the impact of the ads wouldn't be tainted by anyone else's campaign. After all, no one advertises broccoli.

The contract went to John St., an independent ad agency that has won kudos for its work helping the Hudson's Bay Company rebuild its waning brand and getting Maple Leaf Foods chief executive Michael McCain out in front during the company's listeria crisis in 2008. For the broccoli campaign, the agency created three cheeky spots that pitted the miraculous benefits of the humble vegetable against other miracles in life, such as surviving a fall out of an airplane, or the birth of octuplets. The ads aired for five weeks, starting Jan. 4.

Without additional promotion or support, they generated an 8 per cent increase in broccoli sales, beating the bureau's goal by three percentage points. It boosted from zero to second place the number of times broccoli was mentioned in the produce aisles. Awareness of the campaign was 90 per cent. The campaign also spawned more than a dozen spoofs on YouTube and a Facebook fan page with 17,000 followers.

Treutler said it is too early to tell whether the campaign's results are having an impact on advertisers' decisions where to spend their marketing dollars.