

ADVERTISING AT THE ACADEMY AWARDS

Same Cast of Blue Chip Marketers Returns to a Tame Event

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LOS ANGELES (AdAge.com) -- Marketers may not have been able to point out Sophie Okonedo or Catalina Sandino Moreno, but they certainly wanted to rub elbows in the same TV venue where the two actresses vied for Oscar statues last night.



Photo: AP

Director Clint Eastwood is congratulated by presenter Julia Roberts after winning the Oscar for best director for his work on 'Million Dollar Baby.'

Speculation leading up to the 77th Annual Academy Awards had been that ratings would be less than stellar, even with changes to the somewhat staid program and the addition of volatile comedian Chris Rock as a first-time host.

Smaller audience

The nominated movies weren't the biggest blockbusters of last year, and some of the actors in them, such as Ms. Okonedo (*Hotel Rwanda*) and Thomas Haden Church (*Sideways*) aren't household names. Those factors lead to smaller audiences, as opposed to years when major moneymakers like *The Lord of the Rings* and beloved actors like Tom Hanks are in the contest.

Record ad rate

Even so, blue chip advertisers such as McDonald's Corp., American Express, Microsoft Corp., Procter & Gamble Co., L'Oreal, Home Depot, General Motors corp., Pepsi-Cola North America and Anheuser-Busch paid an average \$1.6 million per 30-second spot, the highest ever charged for an Oscar telecast.

The show, which has a significant female audience, is the second highest-rated program of the season next to the Super Bowl. Its ad time has been sold out for weeks. The majority of its advertisers are repeat customers to ABC, which recently sealed a deal to continue airing the Academy Awards through 2014. L'Oreal is a new advertiser this year.

"It's a better buy than the Super Bowl," said Peter Sealey, a marketing professor at University of California-Berkeley and former marketing president at Coca-Cola. He's currently a Coke consultant. "All you'd have to do is compare the blood-alcohol content of Super Bowl audiences with that of Academy Awards audience to know that people likely will be paying more attention to the ads and appreciating them more in the Oscars."

McDonald's dilemma

McDonald's, a loyal Oscar advertiser for at least five years, remained onboard despite an awkward dilemma when Morgan Spurlock's *Super Size Me* was nominated for a Best Documentary award.

"It was not going to keep us away from an opportunity to reach our audience in a very engaging manner," said Peter Sterling, McDonald's vice president of marketing in charge of media. "We don't know who's going to win ... but we thought it would not be wise for us to be in the pod either before or after the award so we stayed away from that part of the show."

The film, written, directed and starring Mr. Spurlock, chronicles his health decline after eating nothing but McDonald's food for a month and has created a firestorm of negative publicity for the chain in every country it has been shown.

Nor did the controversy surrounding host Chris Rock scare away the chain. "We have no issue with Chris Rock," said Mr. Sterling, acknowledging that the producers likely tapped him to lure younger viewers and "we encourage that."

The Golden Arches used the star-studded event to showcase two spots that have had limited airtime. Although "First Fry" and "She's Mine" fit well with the female audience, the fast-food giant is loyal to the event for its large audience.

Pepsi-Cola is using three minutes of airtime to show four new and two existing spots.

Pepsi's Spartacus

Pepsi-Cola took a *Forrest Gump*-like approach in splicing new footage into the 1960 Oscar-winning classic *Spartacus* to create a humorous reprise of a famous scene from that classic.

"The Academy Awards provides a great stage to try new things, such as showcasing a big-event commercial or launching a new campaign," said Dave Burwick, senior vice president and chief marketing officer for Pepsi-Cola North America.

To that end, Pepsi also used the Oscars to launch fresh creative for its Sierra Mist lemon-lime brand with two new spots that showed comedians in *Curb Your Enthusiasm*-style improv skits. Pepsi used five comedians (Michael Ian Black, Debra Wilson, Nicole Sullivan, Jim Gaffigan and Aries Spears) to create an ensemble it calls the Mist-Takes.

In one spot, two guests are caught taking back the bottle of Sierra Mist they brought to a party. Another spot showed two men at an office party playing a game of "rock, paper, scissors" to decide who gets the last Mist. There will be 10 spots total in the series.

Sierra Mist tagline change

The effort softens the tagline from "It's shockingly refreshing" to "It's That Refreshing." Supporting the effort is a campaign site at www.mist-takes.com that includes behind-the-scenes footage, outtakes and alternative versions of the spots. The site launched immediately after the Oscars.

A Diet Pepsi spot called "Guy Watcher" featuring *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* fashion maven Carson Kressley and supermodel Cindy Crawford aired for the second time. Its first showing was on the Super Bowl. Pepsi also ran an existing Aquafina spot.

Pepsi unveiled a new spot called "After Hours" from Omnicom Group's DDB Worldwide, New York. The spot showed animated soft-drink cans in a convenience store refrigerator coming to life after closing time. As cans of Diet Coke grouched about the loud music left on by a clerk, Diet Pepsi cans partied and danced like teenagers.

BBDO, New York

Omnicom's BBDO Worldwide, New York, created the Pepsi, Sierra Mist and Aquafina spots.

"The idea was to move increasingly towards comedy with this improv comedy troupe we've created, with the comedy platform we've created and traditional advertising," Russ Findlay, senior marketing manager for Sierra Mist, told Adage.com. He said the marketer is exploring ways to evolve the troupe as branded content.

"The opportunity is out there to take advantage of [troupe members] individually or together," he said. "Integrated content and integrated media, any marketer would love to have that in their toolkit. We're working on a couple of things, but it's so fresh, nothing's locked down yet."

Anheuser-Busch's Clydesdales

Anheuser-Busch, with agency DDB Chicago, launched three new commercials and repeated an existing spot. Among the new: the Budweiser Clydesdales in a snowball fight, a talking cockatoo spot and buff beach volleyballers playing for Michelob Ultra.

"The Oscars is one of the most popular television events each year, and our advertising allows us to reach a wide audience of adult consumers with a variety of creative messages about our brands," said Bob Lachky, Anheuser-Busch's vice president for brand management and director for global creative.