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THE MEDIA BUSINESS: Advertising; A new ranking of the '50 best' television commercials ever made.

By Stuart Elliott

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THE MEDIA BUSINESS

Advertising

A new ranking of the '50 best' television commercials ever made.

Standouts in a Half Century of Pitching

1940's

1950's

1960's

1970's

1980's

1990's

People weekly

"Only one book could roll out a chip this big."

Steve Sears, Marketing Director Frito-Lay

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IF there is something that Madison Avenue welcomes more than a big advertiser embarking on a search for a shop, it is an opportunity to debate the merits of the work that agencies have created through the decades. So, a list of the "50 best" commercials since television began will stir passionate discussion.

The list was compiled by the editors of the trade publication Advertising Age, for a special spring issue commemorating 50 years of television advertising. It also serves as the focus of an hourlong special program, "The Greatest Commercials Ever Made," which CBS will broadcast tomorrow at 9 P.M., Eastern and Pacific times.

And in an intriguing cyberspace version of vox populi, more than 11,000 subscribers to Prodigy, the on-line computer service, have voted on their favorite commercials in an interactive poll conducted by CBS.

"Any list like this will be subjective," said Robert Goldsborough, the corporate projects editor of Advertising Age in Chicago, who helped coordinate the issue. "I can imagine there will be people saying, 'What do you mean, you don't have blank in there?' "

"A lot of awfully good spots got left off," he added. "As we got down to 50, some of us said, 'Wouldn't it be nice to do 100?' "

Mr. Goldsborough was one of the six editors who "locked ourselves in a conference room for two days," as he said, and culled the spots to a final 50. The selection criteria included historic significance and whether the commercials represented advances in production methods.

"We had to work hard to look at spots and think how breakthrough they were, given the technology of the time" they were made, Mr. Goldsborough said. That is the reason the commercials featuring early animation techniques, for products like Gillette razors and Lucky Strike cigarettes, made the list, though they are primitive compared with contemporary spots.

The choice for the greatest commercial ever was the spectacular spot by Chiat/Day, evocative of the George Orwell novel "1984," that introduced the Apple Macintosh computer during Super Bowl XVIII in 1984.

"It's artistically incredible," said Stu Schreiberg, a television executive in Los Angeles who was an executive producer of the CBS special. "And you never see the product."

The special includes two runners-up for greatest commercials: the humorous "Spicy Meatball" spot for Alka-Seltzer by Doyle Dane Bernbach, which spoofed a problem-plagued commercial shoot, and the emotional Coca-Cola spot by McCann-Erickson New York in which the football player Mean Joe Greene tossed his jersey to a fan.

Though it is difficult to generalize about trends across a half century of commercials, "humor is an overwhelming influence in American advertising," Mr. Goldsborough said. "It seems to be the single overriding device." That is emphasized further in the CBS special, which devotes additional air time to humorous campaigns by Stan Freberg, the adman and comedian.

And the list underscores a significant shift in the way celebrities are used in advertising.

"In the old days, the celebrity was the person affirming the product," Mr. Goldsborough said, as when Dinah Shore belted out the Chevrolet jingle. "Now the star is a foil, a device," he added, as in the warmly humorous series of Polaroid camera commercials featuring Mariette Hartley and James Garner.

The on-line Prodigy poll, which continues through Thursday, asks subscribers to pick favorite commercials for every decade except the spot-sparse 1940's. The results through yesterday: 1950's, a Timex watch torture test; 1960's, "Spicy Meatball"; 1970's, a hilltop choir singing for Coca-Cola; 1980's, Mean Joe Greene and the "Where's the beef?" campaign for Wendy's International, and 1990's, the "Yes I am" imposter for Bud Light beer.

Here are several spots a columnist might place on his list of the 50 best, some of which were included elsewhere in the special issue of Advertising Age or mentioned during the CBS special: an elaborate production number starring the dancer Ann Miller for Heinz Great American Soups; a recreated "1949 Auto Show," promoting the Volkswagen Beetle; the Nike teaming of Michael Jordan and Bugs Bunny; the slowness of Heinz Ketchup, celebrated with the song "Anticipation," and the actress Betty Furness demonstrating Westinghouse appliances.

In addition, the animated pair of Bert and Harry Piel for Piel's beer, given voices by the comedians Bob Elliott and Ray Goulding; the white knight, white tornado and animated bathtub scrubbers for various Ajax cleaning products, Morris the finicky cat for 9-Lives cat food, and Charlie the eager tuna for Star-Kist canned tuna.

Needless to say, there are also more than enough candidates for a "50 worst" list.

"One thing I'd guarantee," Mr. Schreiberg said. "You'd be able to fill an hour."

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