

THIS IS WHAT HAPPENS
WHEN YOU CREATE

FUNNY

ADVERTISING

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book was edited and proofread by Jim Moore of [Word Jones](#). The only person I trust to fiddle with my prose, inject commas or strike really, super lame and redundant adjectives. Note: I didn't let him proofread this section.

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PREFACE

The funny thing about funny advertising is that it knows its job: to be funny. Leave it to other campaigns in the marketing funnel to explain all the features, benefits and other selling points. The job of comedy entails one thing and one thing only – the toughest job of all: grabbing the attention of consumers. And that’s why comedy is the most effective form of advertising: It earns attention.

Let’s face it; if you’re in advertising, you’re in the attention business. Consumers give attention in exchange for something valuable, so if the ad is funny, half the battle is already won. It breaks through the clutter. And that’s the reason funny

commercials make best-advertising lists every year. Oh, and for the record, the other half of the battle is remembering the brand without it being the butt of the joke.

I’ve heard comedy boiled down to two simple things: 1. Shining a light on a truth that no one is willing to talk about 2. Telling the story in the right order.

I’ve collected thousands of nuggets like these over the years while writing and directing commercials and videos. Whenever the joke stops working, I rummage through my tattered bag of tricks for the solution. It’s not magic. It’s



just finding the right tool for the job. Sometimes the mallet is what you need; other times the monkey wrench is funnier.

If you're reading this, you can probably turn a clever phrase, tell a joke or pen a funny line already, so we'll dispense with the basics. The following is a series of thoughts on humor in the world of advertising: how it works, why it works and how to make it work when it doesn't work.

Writing Killer Jokes for Commercials



Kick-start your comedic engine with some of these time-tested techniques for laughs.

Writing Killer Jokes for Commercials

1. Stalling.....stalling is funny. If it's a 30 or 60-second commercial, you need to get to the point, but some of the funniest moments can be literally hanging in the dead air while someone is stalling. Or, as in this example from [Nationwide Insurance](#), stalling is the entire point of the commercial.
2. Assumptions can make a situation funnier. A person making the correct assumption every time can be funny; however, a person making the wrong assumption every time can be equally as funny. Why? Because neither one is true. They're hyperbole. I prefer the antagonist to make assumptions, allowing the protagonist to react. Assumptions create delicious moments. In this example for [M&M'S](#), our protagonist has no idea what the villain is saying, but he's all in!
3. Don't be afraid to engage fear. Who are the truth-tellers in the situation, taking everyone out of their comfort zone? For example, an inmate who's told he's gonna be sharing a prison cell with his mother. Or, as in this example from [CareerBuilder.com](#), an employee who points out that the chart is upside down.
4. Be prepared to go to extremes. Exaggerate the situation, the location, the props or the stakes. For example, make the hat too big, too small, or resistant to staying on a person's head. If the reality in your script is perfectly balanced, then mix things up like in this example from [Audi](#). The concept combines big and small for an all-new hybrid dog in the commercial, "Dober-huahua."
5. Make the absurd serious, or vice versa. Picture a courtroom being run by dogs, or Barney the dinosaur running in the Olympics. Similarly, imagine members of the Spanish Inquisition arbitrating trivial, contemporary arguments – a running Monty Python skit. The serious becomes seriously absurd during an ultrasound screening in this example from [Doritos](#).
6. Take advantage of colliding contexts. Put the protagonist or the situation somewhere that creates the most conflict. There are many ways to do this; for example, a hot dog vendor at a wedding, or the fish-out-of-water character "Crocodile" Dundee traveling to Manhattan. Another example could be a clash of opposite opinions, like in [Miller Lite's](#) classic Tastes Great, Less Filling campaign.
7. An inappropriate response usually gets a big laugh, too. Have someone deny the obvious, like in the Snickers campaign You're Not Yourself. A football player (played by Betty White) is playing poorly but lashes out with an inappropriate response. Another example would be the [Budweiser](#) spot "Swear Jar," which features the office staff swearing.
8. Look for scenarios that play contrary to expectations. For example, a little kid defeats burglars in the movie "Home Alone." In this example from [Levi's](#), a woman undresses, thinking the man in the room is blind. Her expectation is that he can't see her. The reality is... different.
9. Create a runner or a callback. A runner is a line, situation or visual element that occurs repeatedly in a storyline or campaign. A callback is a line at the end of a commercial that refers to an earlier line. The trick is to put a new twist on a callback or runner each time it reappears, like in this example from [Energizer](#).

10. Telling the truth or stating the obvious is hilarious under the right circumstances. It's best to give these lines to an innocent or foolish character, as in this example, for [The Young Director Awards](#), when a little girl points out that the groom is already married.

11. In scenarios where everyone knows the truth, telling a lie is a guaranteed belly laugh. For example, having a character drop their phone in the toilet and then explain they did it on purpose. In this classic example from [Isuzu](#), a spokesperson stretches the truth way beyond the breaking point.

12. By definition, introducing a [non-sequitur](#) will take audiences off guard. I won't spoil it – just watch until the end.

13. Redefine the stakes. Raise the price of failure. Similarly, raise the reward for success. For example, make the couple on their first date older, so it implies this might be their last chance at love. Or, as in this example from [Pepsi](#), every sip pulls Justin Timberlake closer.

Whatever you come up with, you should never fall in love with your jokes. They can usually be funnier.



THE MOST AMAZING METHOD FOR FIXING JOKES

Whenever I have jokes that don't quite work or I know they could be improved, I hearken back to the rule of THREES in a book called "[Comedy Writing Secrets](#)" by Mel Helitzer with Mark Shatz. Many consider it the textbook for anyone who wants to write comedy.

Jokes are made up of six elemental components: threat, hostility, realism, exaggeration, emotion and surprise. I increase or decrease the intensity of one component and then ask myself if the joke is better, worse, or am I just playing with my food. I then repeat this exercise with each component until I've mined all the comedic gold out of the joke.

Writing Killer Jokes for Commercials

The following is the rule of THREES.

TARGET This is the person or thing the joke is directed at. It could be a person, a concept or an object. Always look for targets with universal appeal and then dive down into specific complaints. Some of the most common targets are yourself, sex, celebrities, places, products and ideas.

ADJUSTMENTS

- Does the target have broad appeal with your audience?
- Is the target well defined?
- Is there sufficient detail for the audience to relate to the target?

HOSTILITY The hostility is usually directed upward toward someone or something (like technology) that occupies a superior position. When directed downward, you need to put the object of the hostility in a superior position. For example, "It's not my house anymore. My 2-year-old runs the place." The set-up is from the father's perspective, but it puts the child in a superior position.

ADJUSTMENTS

- Change where the hostility is coming from.
- Decide how much hostility is enough and how much is too much.
- Acknowledge the audience if the hostility is unreasonable.

REALISM There should always be a nugget of truth in the joke, so the audience can associate with it. Humor is a paradox of exaggeration and truth. It becomes funny when the audience sees the contrast between how things are and how they should be.

ADJUSTMENTS

- If the joke involves fantasy, ground it in reality first.
- Will only a small group of people appreciate this truth? And if so, does it need clarification for a wider audience?
- Would it benefit from more detail rather than a nugget of truth?

EXAGGERATION A humorist's tradecraft is hyperbole and out-and-out distortion. The perfect blend of exaggeration and realism is what gives the writer license to create surprise in the punch line.

ADJUSTMENTS

- Is there too much or too little exaggeration?
- Does the exaggeration match the aesthetics of the humor?
- Is there something different that should be exaggerated instead?

EMOTION When working on commercials, a writer is forced to use the smallest units of comedy imaginable. It's why many commercials use parody, stereotypes or celebrities to communicate quickly and effectively. The same principle applies to emotion. You need to create emotion as economically as possible. One famous example is the pregnant pause employed by George Burns. He would take a puff off his cigar before the punch line to create tension, while audiences salivated with anticipation. Johnny Carson chose a different approach and asked rhetorical questions to get the audience visualizing the story. It immediately threw them into the experience.

ADJUSTMENTS

- Should I add an underdog?
- What are the best words to describe how someone is experiencing the emotion?
- What gesture or stage direction should I add for more emotion?

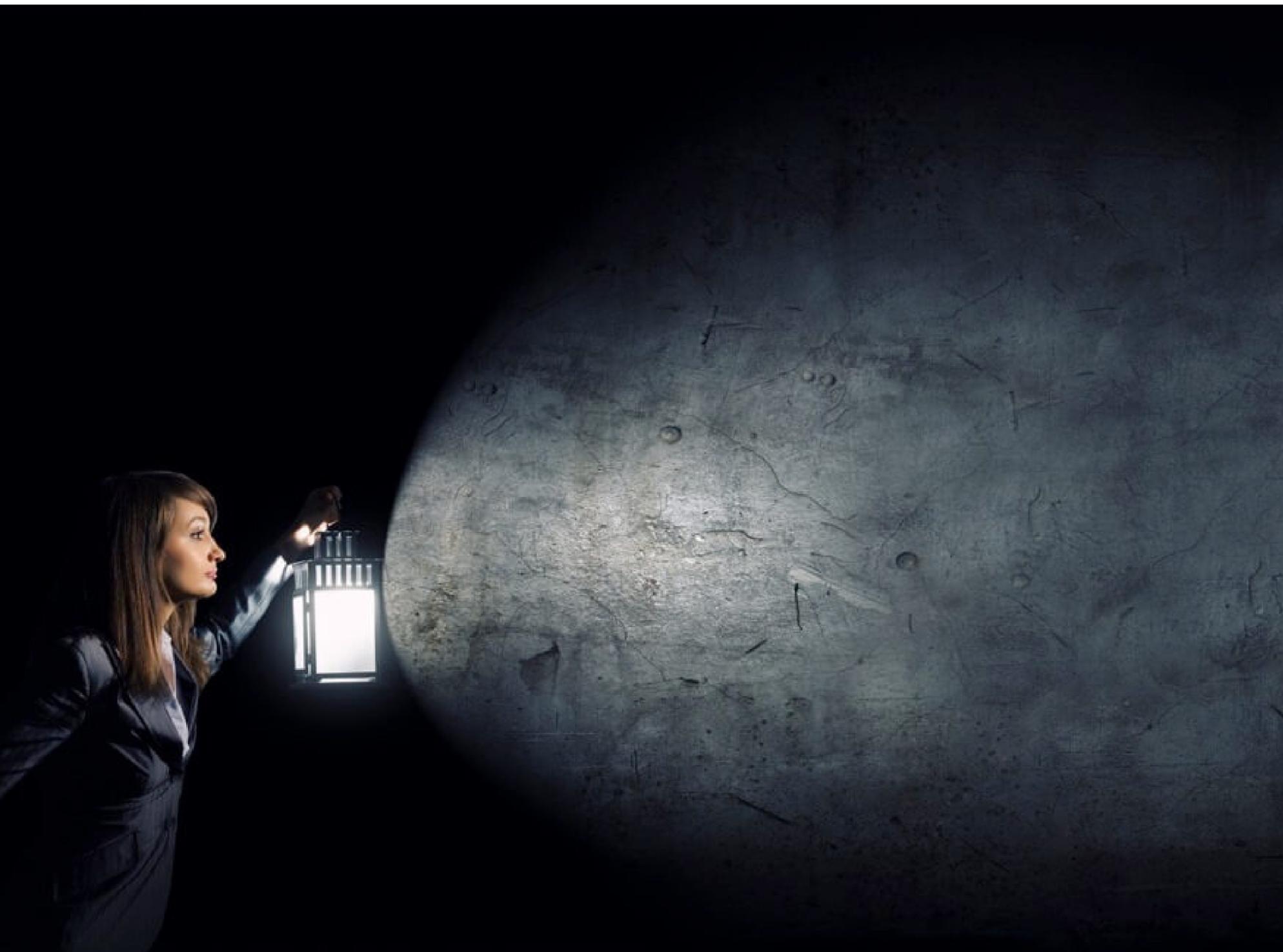
SURPRISE Remember, as soon as you give the audience the set-up, everyone is trying to work out the puzzle in their head, so you must ensure the joke takes them where they didn't expect to go. They can never see the punch line coming. And for bonus points, try to hide the set-up in an innocent moment that the audience will never suspect. The writers on the television show Seinfeld were particularly good at hiding set-ups.

ADJUSTMENTS

- Is there too much or too little information before the punch line?
- Is it logical, or is there real surprise attached to it?
- Can the punch line be rewritten in a way that the audience gets the joke only in the last word or two?

Humor needs to contain each of these six elemental components to be successful, but the real magic is in the fine-tuning. Standup comedians will test new material night after night in front of live audiences – adjusting each of these components up or down to see what plays out best. They're always tinkering with the formula. Any voluble jokester can blurt out something funny, but professionals know how to work the craft. And if you work in comedy long enough, you'll pick up a few other pearls of wisdom along the way.

Tips, Tricks and Shortcuts



Over the years, I've been handed a lot of funny scripts that had weak set-ups. It's lazy writing. Make sure you mine every ounce of humor from your scripts.

A strong set-up can make a joke twice as funny. Okay, I have no real data to back that up. But here's a simple example. Stop me if you've heard this one: A priest, a rabbi and a duck walk into a bar. That's a decent set-up. A lot of comedy plays against the anticipated structure. If a priest, a rabbi and a monk walk into a bar, well, that just isn't as funny, is it?

In the original set-up, we started with two religious leaders in order to take the audience down a path, and then steered everyone in a different direction. Here's a simpler way to think about it. If I say "one," then "two," the next thing you'll expect is the number three. What's funny is if I say "one, two, four." What's funnier is if I say "one, two, banana." It plays against the structure. How far you go down that road comes down to the audience and, of course, your client.

Here are a few other comedy hacks I wish someone had told me earlier in my career.

1. As a warm-up, Hunter S. Thompson used to write an entire novel by one of his favorite authors before starting his own novel. So what you're gonna do is go to YouTube and find commercials you think are funny, and then write a script for those commercials. Do this over and over again. Describe the scene, the stage direction and the characters.
2. A strong comedic premise has both truth and pain. More truth equals more comedy. More pain equals more comedy. For example, a divorced man tries to fix up his best friend with his ex-wife so he can "keep tabs" on her. Truth. Pain.
3. Make the logo the punch line, like in this commercial from [Axe](#).



4. Words with the letter K are funny. I direct you to the hard sounds of the letters K, C and Qu.

- Candy corn is funnier than SweeTARTS
- Lamb chop is funnier than filet mignon

In fact, many hard consonants can be funny, especially if you really overemphasize the consonant. The letters T, P, G, D and B are also considered hard, but less effective than the hard K sound.

- Gummy bears is funnier than Lemonheads
- Banana is funnier than apple

5. Odd numbers are funnier than even numbers.

6. Drama does not tolerate coincidence. Comedy wraps its hairy meathooks around coincidence and squeezes it for every laugh it can wring out of it.

7. Ensure you make the brand memorable without making it the butt of the joke.

8. Be careful if you're going to make fun of the competition. Creating a straw man to beat up is too easy. Work harder for your money.

9. Always try to find the funniest perspective. The situation might be funnier if a different character tells the story. For example, a housewife trying to kill a spider in the bathroom is funny, but imagine it from the spider's point of view.

10. Never show blood, because it tells the audience that someone got hurt. If they're reminded of the pain, most people won't laugh.

11. Stereotypes can be used as shorthand, but clichés are considered lazy. A rich banker is a stereotype. A rich banker lighting a cigar with a \$100 bill is a cliché. Spin clichés in an unexpected way to make them funny. For example, while trying to light a cigar with a \$100 bill, a rich banker accidentally sets himself on fire. Now that's funny.

12. A "joke-oid" is not a joke. It's a potential joke, wordplay or a poorly written joke. Fix a joke-oid by evaluating whether there's too much or too little information given away before the punch line, and adjust accordingly.

13. Small jokes should have short set-ups. A long set-up sets expectations high for the audience and will require a big laugh at the punch line for it to be satisfying.

14. Rewrites are all about reorganizing information for clarity and impact.

15. Always underwrite comedy. It takes longer to play out on screen than most writers account for in the script.

16. Don't make the mistake of thinking you're special because you can write comedy. Writing is a craft, not a gift. Think of yourself as someone willing to do the hard work that others aren't willing to do.

There are plenty of other mistakes you could make too, for example...



A FATAL MISTAKE MADE BY MANY WRITERS

Not calling out the most important moment in the script is a fatal mistake made by many in comedy, drama and storytelling. I've lost count of how many times I've been handed a script and the punch line or moment of revelation doesn't have a description of what's happening for the protagonist. Aristotle referred to this moment as anagnorisis in his timeless work "Poetics." When it's missing, it's a recipe for disaster.

WHAT IS ANAGNORISIS?

Aristotle defined anagnorisis as "a change from ignorance to knowledge, producing love or hate between the persons destined by the poet for good or bad fortune." It's the reversal, the

punch line or a change of circumstances in the plot. It's the moment that fundamentally changes how the character is now going to relate to the new world or to other characters in the story. When the audience experiences this moment it makes them feel closer to the character. The following are three memorable reversals in movies.

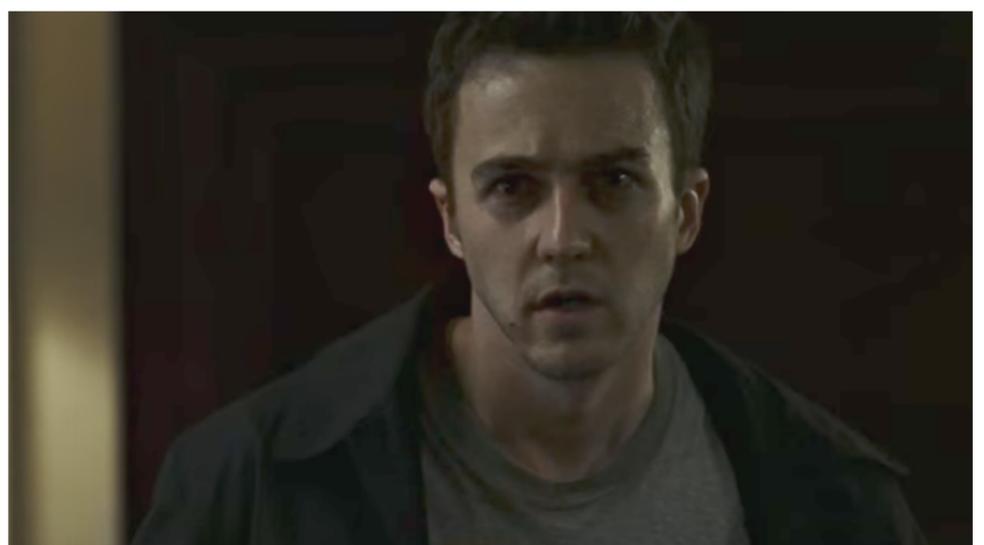
THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK



THE SIXTH SENSE



FIGHT CLUB



In comedy, anagnorisis is the moment immediately after the punch line – typically the reaction shot. As storytellers, we want to take a moment for the audience to appreciate what just happened. It’s also a critical shot that makes the audience empathize with the character. Together, it makes the audience feel something as much as the punch line does. Writers do this by describing how the character feels or what the character does immediately after the punch line. It’s a shot you’ll find in every **Doritos** commercial ever made.



WHY CALL IT OUT IN THE SCRIPT?

For all the people who refer to themselves as storytellers in this business, there are very few who actually understand story. The first red flag is when they say they’re “natural storytellers.” They’re not. (Rant over.) It’s important to describe this moment in the script so the director – who may or may not understand story – puts this important shot on their shot list. It’s important so the editor – who may or may not understand story – includes this important shot in the rough cut. If you’re a writer, you need to save the production from the “natural storytellers” in the process.

TIMING IS EVERYTHING IN COMEDY

In comedy, the presentation builds to the punch line. In a 30-second commercial, everything is extremely compressed, and the last thing you want to do is shortchange the anagnorisis. Always ensure there’s enough time for the moment to emotionally land with the audience before moving on to the logo. Therefore, if you don’t account for this shot in a 30-second commercial, you’ll cut the emotion from the punch line. In other words, you’ll undermine all the hard work you’ve done before that moment.

To borrow a phrase: It’s not the plot; it’s how the characters react to the plot. Always describe how the character reacts to the punch line. It’s the reason audiences feel a connection, and

making an emotional connection is the whole point of creating the ad. Anagnorisis is one of the important tools actual storytellers use to create emotion. Building memorable characters is another.

Creating Comedic Characters



The following is a playbook for creating characters that are so good, they'll write the jokes for you.

PERSPECTIVE

Create characters with a unique comedic perspective on the world. Make them see every situation through their warped sensibilities. The exaggeration of reality is the difference between drama and comedy. An exaggerated perspective flips everything from the real world into the comedic world, like in this [Friskies](#) campaign, Dear Kitten.

BACKSTORY

Characters always make good choices – from their point of view – and that’s what makes them funny. Invent a traumatic event in their life that gave the character their unique sensibilities. The audience doesn’t need to understand the backstory, but the writer, actor and director should know what’s driven the character to this obvious perspective. In the Mayhem campaign from [Allstate](#), the explanation for his actions is simple: He’s mayhem, and that’s all the audience really needs to know.

FLAWS AND HUMANITY

Traits or flaws are required to create an emotional distance between a comedic character and reality. This distance is one of the reasons we laugh. For example, physical flaws in a clown create distance, as do traits in characters like greed, selfishness or ignorance.

The second part draws the character back to the audience by giving them humanity, making them sympathetic (I know that guy) or empathetic (I am that guy). If the character is terribly flawed, the fastest way to give them humanity is to surround them with fools or a world that has turned on them.

A good example of this duality is the main character in any spot for the [Snickers](#) campaign You’re Not You. The flaw is that the person is irritable (personified by a celebrity, moving the character even further from themselves and the audience) when they get hungry. The humanity is that everyone has experienced being unreasonable – or knows someone who has been unreasonable – when they’re hungry.

SUPPORTING CHARACTERS

The single dominant trait or flaw in the protagonist dictates the characteristics of all the other characters. Draw all the minor characters in conflict with the protagonist. All characters need to be in conflict with each other as well. Let the minor characters weigh the pros and cons of the situation for the protagonist. We don’t need to agree with the characters; we only need to understand their objectives – e.g., what drives them? What’s their agenda? If you have two characters that are similar or agree with each other, cut one of them out.

Even ensemble characters need to clash with one another. Give them different points of view. Make sure someone is having fun and someone is having a terrible time, as in this example from [FedEx](#), “Hot Shots.”

While creating an ensemble cast, look ahead to the common enemy the ensemble will

battle. Decide which characters will be best for comedic impact. Consider whether the character should be a man or a woman. A female character could intensify a situation; a woman at risk is more intense than a man at risk, whereas having children at risk ratchets up the intensity even more.

Give your characters different voices. If one is witty, keep their dialogue consistently sparkling and make other characters' more clinical in tone. Women build rapport while talking; men report. Reverse these two speaking styles for a more interesting dialogue – or, as in this example, a more interesting character for [JBS Men's Underwear](#).

Humor comes from how your characters react to the situation. So, if you create a great character, you can extend the life of a campaign by simply throwing them into different situations. Think long-term and spend the proper time considering every aspect of a well-designed character.

THREE-DIMENSIONAL CHARACTERS

If you thoroughly understand the three dimensions of your characters, they will act, feel and speak consistently. The bone structure of your characters needs these three dimensions.

- Physical – deformity, height, beauty, disability, sex, age, weight, hair, skin, eyes, posture, appearance, defects, heredity.
- Sociology – social status, income, environment, friends, class, occupation, education, home life, religion, race, place in community, political affiliations, hobbies.
- Psychology (a combination of physical and sociology) – frustration, attitude toward life, ambitions, moral standards, obsessions, talents, temperament, qualities, I.Q.

Contradictions and pressure create drama. The exaggeration of these contradictions and pressure creates great comedy. There should be conflicts in the character's traits. Focus on one dominant trait that you can exploit for laughs. In this example, "First Date" from [Hyundai](#), the father (played by Kevin Hart) is willing to accept that his daughter is old enough to date, but doesn't trust the young man she's dating. The conflict drives him to extremes.

CHARACTER KEYS

Character keys or touches are fine points that reveal the true nature of the character through action or dialogue. They both underline a character's motivation. Stopping to straighten the rug tells us volumes about the character without saying a word. This example from [Axe](#), "Find Your Magic," is a laundry list of character keys.

Charlie Chaplin selected clothes that didn't fit (or match) for the character The Little Tramp. The pants were baggy and the jacket too tight. He was a man struggling to just make it work no matter what life threw at him. Use your wardrobe description to reveal insights into the character.

ADDING LAYERS

Make sure each character brings their day with them. Understand what happened to the character earlier in the day or immediately leading up to this point. Give each character layers the actor can play. For example, each of the condiment characters has a different, subtle way of reacting to the hot dogs in the [Heinz](#) commercial “Meet the Ketchups.”

When you put characters in conflict with their environment, this instantly gives the character comedic tension. For example, in the [Oreo](#) Super Bowl commercial “Cream Cookie,” the firemen and police speak in a whisper because they’re in a library.

Putting in the time and hard work it takes to understand your characters, and then adding layers to them, makes everyone’s job easier. Audiences don’t always call out these small, important points, but everyone from the actors and the crew to the audience and client will admire you for it.

When you’re pitching an extremely odd concept, you’d better know your characters better than you know the inside of your mouth. Because someone is definitely gonna start asking questions.

What the Hell is Oddvertising?



Sometimes advertising can get pretty odd; sometimes odd is funny, and other times it's just plain odd. It's referred to as "Oddvertising," and it's a concept that has been around for a while now.

THE GENEALOGY OF ODDVERTISING

Just before the original dot-com bubble burst all over the economy, some marketers started pushing the boundaries of advertising. Most were startups and brands trying to grab attention with unconventional work like firing gerbils into the company logo, or sock puppets. What emerged was something even more unusual in tone, later dubbed Oddvertising. Eager to reach younger audiences with discretionary income, the ads became more risky and offbeat. Marketers grew fascinated with exploring how weird they could get before crossing a line. And more than a decade later, we're still defining that line.

However, when it's just odd for odd's sake, that doesn't always translate into good attention. For example, the Crispin Porter + Bogusky version of **Burger King's** The King was retired in 2011 because of soft sales. The King garnered headlines for being strange, but was often described by the media and on the web as creepy – not very flattering for a company mascot.

This type of advertising is a little tricky to explain. Some of it's funny. Some of it's just strange. But you know it when you see it. And when it's off the mark, it looks pretty bad. Here are a handful of winners from the past.



Emerald Nuts, "Robert Goulet"



Edeka, "Supergeil"



Sprite, "Sublymonal"

DEFINING ODD

Some of the hallmarks of Oddvertising can be seen in the following commercials.

- They often have a deadpan tone
- The characters are acting like the alternative reality is normal

There are a couple other important points to consider. The subject of the commercial must be relevant to the brand and be appropriate for the target demographic. No Baby Boomer has ever jumped off the couch and yelled, "Grab my car keys! I need a bag of **Skittles!**" after seeing the commercial "Sheep Boy." However, Boomers are not the target audience here.

Other broad generalities can be made about Oddvertising. Let's break down a classic commercial from **Old Spice**, "The Man Your Man Could Smell Like," featuring Isaiah Mustafa.

The structure isn't the classic set-up and then a punch line, but it has structure nonetheless. The commercial introduces a bizarre world where Mustafa can seamlessly wander from one fantasy to another in one unbroken shot. We try to work out what will happen next, but unsurprisingly we aren't even close. It's visually amusing all the way up to the point when we get the product benefit line, "...anything is possible when your man smells like Old Spice and

What the Hell is Oddvertising?

not a lady.” We think that’s the end and we let down our guard. Then Mustafa throws us a non sequitur, “I’m on a horse,” the funniest line in the commercial. Why? It’s a topper. And we never saw it coming. Weird? Yes. Funny? Very.

WHY IT WORKS AND WHY IT DOESN'T

Many Oddvertising commercials borrow a similar structure, with mixed results. They unfold something like this: There’s an amusing situation that’s visually interesting; a new, bizarre variation is added; and finally, an even more bizarre variation is added. Adding these layers of oddity makes the situation more and more absurd, and the commercial more appealing. However, what many marketers forget to do is add a topper at the end – or their topper isn’t really a topper. It comes in just under the quality of the previous gags, like the unsatisfying ending of this spot from [Realtor.com](#), “Dream Bathroom.”



The more outlandish and absurd the ideas become, the better and more satisfying the commercials are to the audience. In the latest campaign for KFC, a different person is cast as the Colonel every time their agency creates a new ad. It’s a strange choice, but it keeps the audience wondering who’s playing the Colonel next. [KFC](#) ratchets up the absurdity in this commercial, “Fun in the Sun,” as more and more arms appear in each subsequent shot.

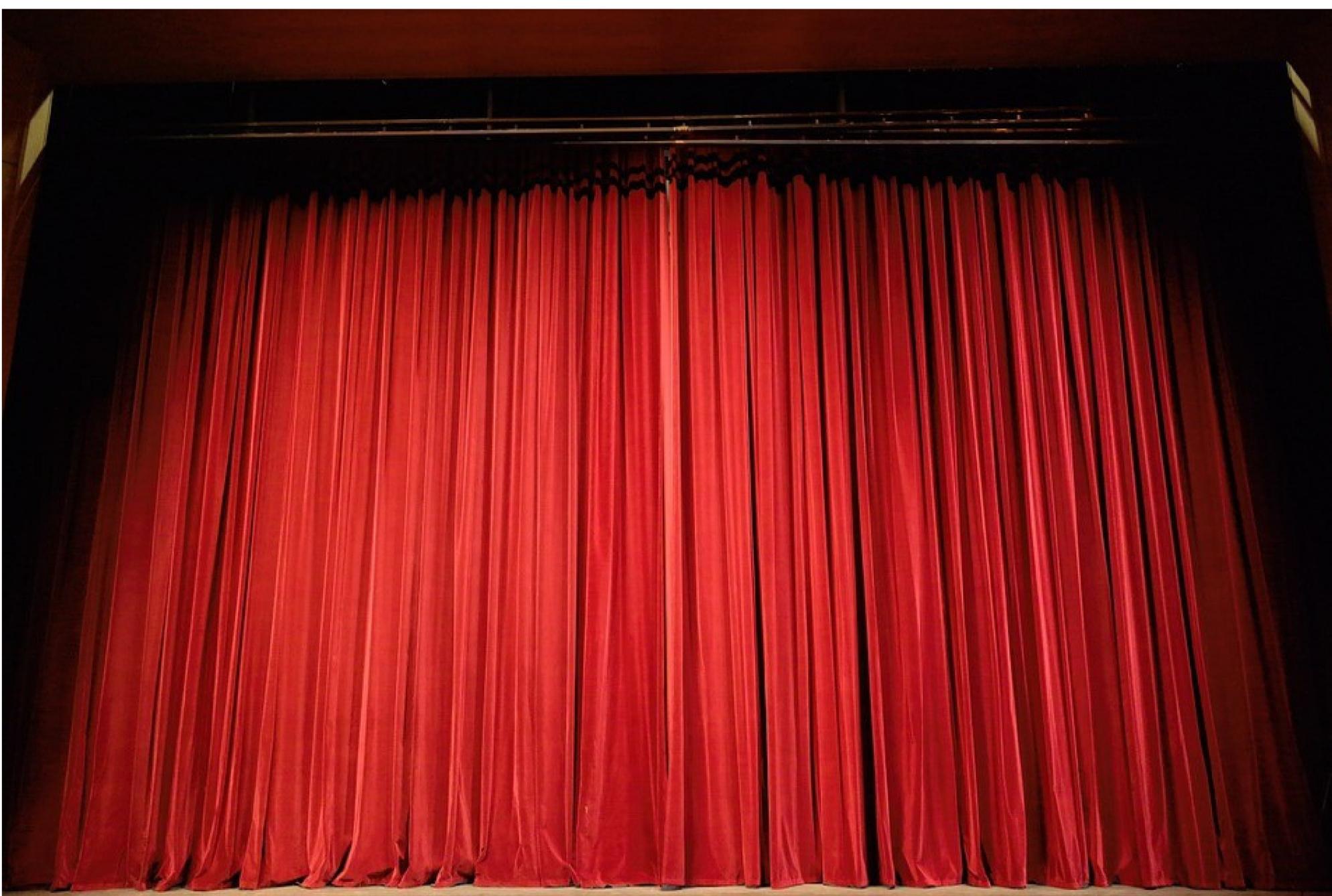
Marketers have been exploring the idea of odd for a very long time, and it’s becoming more and more of a challenge to find imaginative scenarios – so, unfortunately, many have dipped into vulgar or uninspired situations, like in this example from [Loctite](#), “Positive Feelings.” And not to pile on, but the topper is weak.

However, if you do it well, like in this [Mountain Dew](#) commercial, “Freak Chain,” and write an excellent topper, you get a strong sequel to their Super Bowl commercial, “PuppyMonkeyBaby.”

Today, as marketers strive for more traffic and buzz on the internet, contemporary Oddvertising has become so strange that if you’re not dabbling with some form of weirdness in your advertising – or, heaven forbid, get caught “selling” in a commercial – your efforts are going to be little more than white noise. If no one is talking about your Oddvertising, you’re clearly not pushing far enough.

But if you do, and you do it right, you might end up having one of the most successful campaigns in history.

The Best Campaigns in History



Being funny is one thing. Being a classic... well, there's real magic to that. Let's pull back the curtain to investigate how these wonderful campaigns became some of the best in advertising history.

THE DIFFERENCE THAT MADE PEOPLE GET A MAC

It's one of the oldest writing structures in the book: comedic opposites. But it's a little trickier than turning dogs and cats loose in a phone booth. A terrific example of comedic opposites is the 2013 [Samsung](#) Super Bowl commercial that brought together Seth Rogen and Paul Rudd in "The Next Big Thing."

Comedic opposites always work better when the characters are lashed together with an emotional bond or similar goal. For example, Rogen and Rudd are vying for the same job. Other examples could include two characters trying to get the same girl or struggling against loneliness in the world. In both of these scenarios, each person is trying to do the same thing, but in radically different ways as they filter information through their own unique prism.

Possibly the most revered campaign featuring comedic opposites is the Get a Mac campaign for [Apple](#).

The original versions starred Justin Long (Mac) and John Hodgman (PC), and were directed by Phil Morrison. The campaign was so popular it was translated into other languages and recast for [Japanese](#) and [British](#) audiences.

Long forgotten is the preceding Apple campaign, [Switch](#), which had a lot of similarities to the Get a Mac campaign.

- Each person was filmed in front of a white background.
- They explained the benefits of the product.
- All the people filmed identified themselves as once being a PC person.
- All the people filmed identified themselves as now being a Mac person.

The Get a Mac campaign evolved the Switch idea by casting personifications of a Mac and PC, who each debated the pros and cons of a specific product feature. It wasn't a giant leap, but using comedic opposites made all the difference to this campaign. [This article](#) from Campaign details the epic struggle at TBWA/Media Arts Lab to develop the iconic concept.

According to [financial reporting](#), sales were slowing during the Switch campaign. However, after the launch of Get a Mac in 2006, sales increased by 39 percent.

Below are a few tips you can use to take your commercials to the next level when working with comedic opposites.

- Start the conflict at a global scale (the larger issue), but then quickly make it personal (about each other).
- Move from outer to inner desires.
- Begin subdued but end physical.

- Both characters start out trying to complete a similar task, but the objective quickly becomes defeating the other character.
- The reaction shot is always gold (this applies to most comedy).
- End by pulling back to reveal a fact that has been hidden from the audience (or the characters).
- Breaking the fourth wall (talking to the camera or the narrator) helps the audience identify with that character.
- We don't have to like either character (just understand their objective) unless they are a personification of the product.
- If the battle becomes ridiculous, have someone else speak the truth at the end (the narrator, a new character or a title).

One last thought: The audience needs to quickly recognize each character's objective. If you're dealing with well-known characters or stereotypes, the audience will immediately understand. But if you're using characters the audience doesn't know, you need to immediately establish that these are two people with conflicting agendas.

SKITTLES: EXPERIENCE BETTER CLIENTS

Some of the highest-paid people in this business sell, pitch or generally convince clients not only that the creative work is good – but also why it's going to work. Comedy is a risk for many clients, for a variety of reasons, and overcoming these objections sometimes takes time, patience and being willing to go the extra mile. Take, for example, one of the longest-running and strangest campaigns in advertising's history.

Dubbed by Adweek and other trade publications as the poster child for Oddvertising, the Skittles Experience the Rainbow campaign pushed the limits of strangeness. The primary consumer for Skittles was (and still is) young males, a notoriously difficult group to reach. Their solution was to concoct ideas so outrageous they demanded attention. See three examples below.



Haven't we all lamented, "If only our clients gave us that kind of creative freedom?" It would make our jobs a lot easier. Well, during an interview on the podcast "Don't Get Me Started," the former creative executive director on the storied Skittles campaign, Gerry Graf, revealed that their client initially (and emphatically) rejected the work. It took eight months of dedicated effort to convince them. In the end, what finally turned them around was showing the campaign to teenagers in a shopping mall and recording their reactions. You can listen

to the entire interview [here](#).

Comedy works because it touches an emotion, making a deeper connection in the minds of the audience. Whether you use data, cite audience research or videotape teenagers outside a Foot Locker, the ability to convince a client that comedy is the right approach is often challenging. Just give it time. Sometimes it's really worth it.

VOLKSWAGEN WINS THE SUPER BOWL OF COMMERCIALS

Not everyone can create memorable Super Bowl commercials. Deutsche L.A. obviously can. And the commercial "The Force" for [Volkswagen](#) proves it.

The issue with most Super Bowl commercials is that audiences remember the joke, but not the brand. So, when people on the web started referring to the Volkswagen commercial as the "Little Darth Vader" spot, there could have been a problem. However, in this case, the ad transcended popular culture and became the most shared Super Bowl commercial in history. It's pretty safe to say everyone saw it enough to remember the name Volkswagen. And here's why...

The set-up with the kid in the Darth Vader costume, played by Max Page, was excellent. It told us the commercial is set in the real world, where the child has no actual mystical powers. Using the "Imperial March" (Darth Vader's theme song) reinforced the character's intent to be like Darth Vader. Clearly understanding the character's intent is important to making the punch line pay off.

The ending could have gone many directions. Darth Vader could actually be his father, for instance. The way Deutsch decided to end it was perfect. Volkswagen wasn't trying to sell the key fob starting feature. What they were really selling was a fun moment between father and son. It's an example of values marketing. In values marketing, the advertiser is trying to say that they understand what the consumer values in life. Volkswagen is saying that they're just like you (the consumer). They get you. The final title card says the Volkswagen Passat is priced at \$20,000, a good price for a young family, just like the one featured in the commercial.

In a great commercial, we need to enjoy the set-up as well as the punch line, so the agency shot many different scenarios for the set-up and picked only the ones that worked well. All of them had funny little moments to help us enjoy the ride. The set-up signaled that there wasn't going to be a big belly laugh at the end, just a little smile. When the car turns over, we clearly see how this impacts Little Darth and how the moment impacts the parents. Restarting the muscular opening bars of the "Imperial March" after the car starts is inspired. Structurally, this is textbook joke telling.

HOW GEICO MADE YOU LOVE PRE-ROLL COMMERCIALS

Pre-roll ads are some of the most reviled dreck in advertising. People loathe them. Unless, of course, it's a Geico pre-roll ad. In 2015, The Martin Agency was awarded two gold CLIO Awards for the Unskippable campaign. The Cannes film jury singled out the spot "Family" as a

Grand Prix winner. It was also named #1 in TV/Film by Creativity. They're some of the most loved, celebrated and effective pre-roll ads in the short history of YouTube advertising. Why?

The answer is commitment. Someone at the agency thought about where the commercial was being served up and how that environment could be leveraged for humor. Here is a link to the [Unskippable](#) campaign. In 2016, The Martin Agency followed it up with an equally clever campaign, [Fast Forward](#).

Again, the creative team was thinking about how to use the online medium to their advantage. The spots are self-aware; they understand they're pre-roll ads. They're almost winking at the audience. Rather than phoning it in and repurposing a television commercial like many brands do, the creative team embraced the fact that they're pre-roll ads and made it a core strength. They committed.

In the Unskippable campaign, viewers were rewarded for sticking around longer than the required five seconds, to see what happens after the commercial ends. In the Fast Forward campaign, viewers got one clearly stated benefit in the first few seconds, and then they're fast-forwarded to the end of the commercial. There's a link to the full-length versions at the end of the 15-second spots, and the number of clicks is staggering. Millions of people have watched the extended versions of the pre-roll commercials – you know, the thing people typically skip after five seconds. Let that really sink in for a minute.

Here's a [link](#) to the full-length versions.

LAST THOUGHTS

If you're creating funny commercials, work with people who do more than churn out clever stuff. Hire people who understand comedy – the last thing you want to do is have to teach them the basics of creating great comedy.

- Create rich situations and the perfect characters to exploit them.
- Pen well-defined intentions and obstacles.
- Understand the subtleties of comedic timing, through lines and adjustments.
- Draw a line under important moments.
- Leave room for the talent to play.

People who work with comedy are not super-human. They're not special. They're simply the people who put in the time and effort it takes to do one of the most difficult and rewarding things in the world: making people laugh.

CONTACT

Mike's worked with some of the biggest brands in the world, writing and directing for agencies and production companies. His background spans traditional marketing, digital marketing and business strategy.

Based in Seattle, his company, Family, uses a simple formula for success: They show people how their advertising can work better by combining smart data with irresistible creative.

Subscribe to his weekly blog [here](#).

Contact Mike Johnston at the links below with any questions. He's always available to discuss consulting, speaking engagements and new business.

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