



JC Penney's First Saatchi 'Lovemarks' Ads Are Magnificent

Gorgeous Music Attached to Gorgeous Video to Gorgeous Effect

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How can it be?

Eh? How can it be that our impression of a declassé American retail institution can be altered in the space of exactly

60 seconds? Not that we're exactly rushing into JC Penney to buy a shirt, much less a suit, but for the moment we are prepared to imagine that what we'll find there does not entirely conform with our preconceived notion of end-of-the-mall plasticity. Yesterday, we would not have been prepared to imagine that.

Thanks to one TV commercial.

Opening Lovemarks salvo

The spot, from Saatchi & Saatchi, New York, is the opening salvo in the agency's first campaign for Penney's, a piece of business it won after Saatchi CEO Kevin Roberts wooed the client with his notion of Lovemarks -- which is Roberts' term for establishing an emotional relationship between the consumer and the brand.

So far, so good, mate.

The commercial is called "Calendar," and it is magnificent -- for reasons that have very little to do with the selling proposition (such that it is) and everything to do with technique. It depicts a young family living life in an outsize music box, which revolves as they go about their dollhouse-perfect little day. This is a cool image to begin with, but then there's that music track, by Australian Melanie Horsnell.

*I say, and so say I
My morning thought
It knew itself just fine*

*Until across the room
It caught its first glimpse
Of my afternoon
How can it be
That these things live in me?*

Georgeous effect

You probably can't hear the song just by looking at those italicized lyrics, but take our word for it: It's spare and pretty and mesmerizing. The result is a spot that's affecting along the lines of two 2005 U.K. masterpieces, "Balls" for Sony Bravia TV and "Grrrr" for Honda, both of which had gorgeous pieces of music attached to gorgeous video to gorgeous effect.

The other spots are pretty impressive too. One, done just for the Academy Awards broadcast, shows ordinary people in little episodes duplicating famous screen moments. Our particular favorite bit was a woman screaming at a cabbie in a New York crosswalk, a la Ratso Rizzo in "Midnight Cowboy." The joke is that the cabbie wears a freaky mohawk, like Travis Bickle (Robert DeNiro) in "Taxi Driver."

There's a third spot, set in what looks like Washington's Union Station, in which a young couple can meet only when all the many bystanders have hidden from view. It's actually kind of hard to figure out what's happening, but once again, the action is engaging, and the music (the Zombies singing "The Way I Feel Inside") is simple and fetching.

So, as we were saying, Lovemarks fans, mark us down for loving it. How often does TV advertising make you go all gooey inside?

Now, the hard part

The thing is, though, as rare as that phenomenon might be, that's pretty much the easy part. The hard part is having customers walk into their Anytown Mall JC Penney stores and not feel as if they've been totally suckered. It's all well and good to mystify the relationship between consumers and goods with romantic imagery, but that all backfires if the mystique is instantly obliterated at point of sale. This requires more than upgrading the chain's merchandise; it means simultaneously softening and energizing the JC Penney shopping experience -- a miracle far beyond the capacity of an ad campaign.

That's kind of the problem with lovemarks. You blunder into an exciting romantic interlude, filled with emotion and joy, then you blunder right back into reality. There, someone shrieks at you: "What's that on your neck?!"