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Old Notions Put Aside, Penney Takes Aim at the Heartstrings

By [MICHAEL BARBARO](#)

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J. C. Penney is emphasizing storytelling in new spots like this one, "Doodle Heart," which deals with a girl's feelings about a secret crush. Saatchi & Saatchi is handling the campaign.

TALK about a change in tone.

For six years, when it worked with DDB Worldwide, [J. C. Penney](#) pumped out a steady stream of innocuous — at times, overlookable — television spots that showcased summer dresses and down pillows under the tagline "It's all inside."

But since abruptly ditching DDB in favor of Saatchi & Saatchi in September, Penney has introduced a series of campaigns that above all tell stories — heartstring-tugging, even tear-jerking tales that look very little like anything a department store has done before in the advertising realm.

Its new slogan could be "It's all emotion." (In fact, the new slogan is "Every day matters.")

And the message is resonating: one of Saatchi & Saatchi's first television commercial for Penney, a series of fast-moving domestic vignettes that celebrate family moments big and small, has won praise from critics and

viewers. The original song in the ad, “So Say I,” has been downloaded 75,000 times on iTunes.

For its back-to-school shopping campaign, set to start on Friday, Penney is pushing the envelope further. It is combining several poignant spots (a Saatchi & Saatchi signature) with a reality TV series available on the Web that represents Penney’s foray into the world of Webisodes.

The new ads are sophisticated, entertaining and memorable — and also risky. They largely gloss right over the products, if they mention them at all.

“Everybody out there is doing product-focused advertising,” said Mike Boylson, the chief marketing officer at J. C. Penney. “What we learned is that no matter how well you do that, it does not break through the clutter.”

Of course, not everyone thinks the approach is a wonderful idea. “Even inside of our own company,” Mr. Boylson said, “there are people that question whether that’s the right thing to do.”

Penney, a midprice department store shopped by middle America, is not known for brilliant advertising. Few stores of its ilk are — with the exception of [Target](#), which has served as a role model in how to make a downscale brand seem hip.

Kevin Roberts, the chief executive of Saatchi & Saatchi, a division of the [Publicis Groupe](#), wooed Penney with his theory of “lovemark” brands. Such brands, he contends, “inspire loyalty beyond reason” — in other words, they earn customers’ affection, not just their business. Examples include [Apple](#) or [Starbucks](#), brands powerful enough to inspire lifetime faithfulness and the patience to wait in very long lines for coffee or an [iPhone](#).

Penney, which lost more than \$900 million in 2003, is on a tear these days. Under the stewardship of Myron E. Ullman, who once ran the luxury conglomerate [LVMH Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton](#), it has become a force in fashion, earning nearly \$1.2 billion last year.

But with their old marketing approach under DDB, part of the [Omnicom Group](#), Penney executives feared they were not earning love. For one thing, the message “It’s all inside” confused customers. It was supposed to have two meanings: first, that shoppers could find lots of what they needed in the store, and, second, that everything they needed was inside of themselves. The second message, unfortunately, never reached customers.

The new overarching campaign, “Every day matters,” is about creating an emotional connection between Penney and its shoppers — and so the ads feel as if they are more about shoppers (and what matters to them) than about Penney. A popular Penney Mother’s Day commercial, which ran in May, featured a mother and daughter waking down a sidewalk to the tune of “Only You,” the daughter rapidly aging into adulthood until a grandmotherly figure appears and restores her back to childhood. The spot closed with a Mother’s Day greeting, and no mention of products or prices.

The back-to-school campaign starting this week aims the Saatchi & Saatchi storytelling approach at a younger audience, though parents are paid their due. One commercial features a young girl sitting in a classroom whose romantic scribbles leap off her notebook and onto walls and lockers throughout the school, threatening to expose her crush on a boy. Another follows a pack of students as they are chased around school by headless (though very well-dressed) zombies who, it turns out, want to impart fashion advice. Both spots will run on major networks like CW and MTV.

But the boldest part of the campaign are eight online shows, or Webisodes. The hosts of them are the clothing designers and twin brothers, Chip and Pepper Foster, who are developing a line for Penney. Saatchi & Saatchi taped the series at a public school in New Jersey, using real students rather than actors.

Called “Flipped,” the Webisodes challenge students to leave the comfort of their self-assigned cliques and join an unlikely social circle for a few days. A jock is paired with the black-clad skaters, a fashion-obsessed diva with the retro-dressing girls. Conflict is kept to a minimum and everyone seems poised to learn from the experience. (The company provided only two preview episodes, in which various cliques are introduced. One retro girl derides the dress worn by a diva as “so bright — I don’t like it.”)

Penney will be host of the series on its Web site (jcpenney.com) and will tease teenagers with an extended commercial, to be shown at 1,400 movie theaters. (It will play before “Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix” and “The Simpsons Movie,” among others.) Fliers to be handed out at the theaters allow teenage shoppers to receive content on their cellphones, like style advice and reminders to watch the Webisodes.

The goal, of course, is for the videos to become a YouTube hit — much like the song “So Say I” became an iTunes success. So the Penney Web site will encourage teenagers to e-mail episodes of “Flipped” to their friends. For those who skip the Webisodes, print ads with the tagline “Mix it up” (that is, mix and match expensive and cheap, retro and modern and so on) will run in the August issues of Seventeen, CosmoGirl and Teen Vogue.

Michael Zuna, an executive vice president at Saatchi & Saatchi who handles the Penney account, called the series “very brave marketing by our friends at J. C. Penney.”

Mr. Boylson of Penney said the new campaign had people at the company a little nervous but added that “we are learning to trust these guys” at the agency.

“Sometimes we run ads that we don’t totally understand, and they have been home runs with the customer,” he said. “There is one thing I have learned. If you are doing the same old warmed-over product-based stuff that everyone else is doing, you are wasting your money.”