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Two New York ad men capture Boston's attention

Ad men's approach a challenge to local agencies

By Taryn Luna | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT SEPTEMBER 17, 2014



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JENNIFER TAYLOR FOR THE GLOBE

Ellis Verdi (left) and Sal DeVito are able to relax in a Japanese garden they created on a terrace at their offices on 5th Avenue in New York.

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Chances are you have never heard of Sal DeVito and Ellis Verdi, but you've probably been insulted or amused by their work.

The New York ad men have been the brains behind the controversial Legal Sea Foods advertisements — from the “fresh fish” that offended MBTA workers with snarky billboard comments, to a campaign that upset some Christians by adding the word “Legal” to the religious fish symbol.

Now their agency, DeVito/Verdi, is calling out pretentious colleges and pompous students in ads for Suffolk University. It took shots at Yankees fans in a recent spot for car dealer Herb Chambers.

The head-turning irreverence of the campaigns seems to appeal to Boston sensibilities. DeVito/Verdi now has more clients in Massachusetts than in New York. Besides Chambers and Suffolk, Fallon Health, Bernie and Phyl's, Tribe Hummus, and City Sports have all signed on since last summer.

“We’re raising the bar here,” Verdi said.

Mike Donahue, executive vice president of the American Association of Advertising Agencies, said DeVito/Verdi's growth in Boston is a “shot across the bow” to local agencies — and “will make agencies think about what they are doing and how they can get the same kind of ink.”

DeVito/Verdi competes with similar-sized Boston agencies such as Allen & Gerritsen, which represents Friendly's Ice Cream, and Connelly Partners, which counts the Massachusetts State Lottery among its clients. It also goes up against smaller local firms such as Conover Tuttle Pace, the agency for the Boston Red Sox, and Full Contact Advertising, which does work for Cumberland Farms.

So far no one is complaining, at least publicly, about all the Boston business pulled in by two guys from New York. While most restaurant ads feature diners and steaming hot plates of food, DeVito/Verdi's newest Legal commercial straps chief executive Roger Berkowitz to a lie detector machine. His answers suggest that anyone who calls Legal a chain of restaurants must be a "complete moron."

Conventional ads for auto dealerships tell viewers to "come on down" to the lot, promising rock-bottom prices and easy credit. The Chambers spots push the company's five-day money back guarantee on all used car purchases — featuring a baby who only cries in the new family car, a dog that refuses to get in, and an unimpressed teenager.

"They've broken out of that sea of sameness," said Judy Neer, chief executive of Pile and Company, a Boston firm that matches companies with marketing agencies.

DeVito and Verdi have been in business together since 1991. DeVito said they paid their first three employees in veal parmesan sandwiches. The firm's first office was the size of the bathroom in their current space on 5th Avenue.



A still shot of an ad for Legal Sea Foods has chief executive Roger Berkowitz strapped to a lie detector.

But their luck started to change later that year when a Daffy's discount clothing campaign in New York led to boycotts from a mental health advocacy group. The ad read: "If you're paying over \$100 for a dress shirt, may we suggest a jacket to go with it?" with the image of a straightjacket.

The ad controversy led to more retail clients. Over the years the agency has worked for everyone from New York magazine to the American Civil Liberties Union and Hillary Clinton during her first Senate run.

"The worst thing is to not get any reaction," Verdi said. "Tell me if you can find a better piece of advertising than a huge demonstration in front of the store. Our work has an emotional impact to it. Others don't."

Chambers, the car dealer, said he had grown tired of the nearly identical commercials from one dealership to the next. "They become a blur," Chambers said. "If they are a blur to me and I can't remember who is advertising what car at what price, what is the value of the advertising? I need advertising that cuts through the clutter."

He got that with the DeVito/Verdi ads that began running earlier this year. Much of the campaign casts Chambers as a straight-talking dealer who is not your typical car salesman. "Don't like car dealers?" he asks in one ad. "Great. Neither do I." In another Chambers says, "I don't want to sell you a car. I want to sell you your next three cars."

But some of the advertisements took the idea too far for the longtime Boston businessman. He pulled one ad that claimed the dealership gives everyone but Yankees fans great service after New Yorkers complained.

Nonetheless, Chambers likes that the spots got people talking. "They are making comments about it, which they had never done before," he said.

Others, like Berkowitz, seem to welcome criticism. The chief executive of Legal Sea Foods said he never intends to offend people but he likes "pushing things right to the very edge." As a result, Legal has become a creative outlet for the agency.

"He's not really afraid of doing anything," DeVito said. "Sometimes we get nervous of what he wants to do. That's not the way it's supposed to be. If he gets phone calls, he doesn't mind. I think he applauds it."