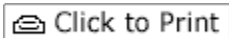


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Creative: Best Spots Ring In the Season

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By Eleftheria Parpis

NEW YORK It's the most wonderful time of the year and that means the Christmas classics are back on TV—A Charlie Brown Christmas, It's a Wonderful Life and Frosty the Snowman, to name a few. Those classics still manage to give my aging heart that warm and fuzzy feeling, usually providing just the right tonic to restore my holiday spirit after the shopping frenzy has taken its toll. Advertisers often borrow from these treasures this time of year and, if done right, manage to do so without annoying fans like me.

This year, Aflac produced a commercial featuring characters from Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer. Santa's lead reindeer is under the weather, wrapped in the big guy's robe and sniffing into a tissue. The elf who wants to be a dentist and his girlfriend huddle around him as he wonders whether he'll be able to work this Christmas. His friends worriedly ask him how he'll be able to pay for things like food and electricity. Santa comes in with the answer: "Aflac"—the line uttered by the duck mascot in previous spots. The duck does play a role here, though, popping up in Rudolph's daydream as the lead "reindeer" pulling Santa's sleigh.

Appropriating the Christmas special might create some ill will between the insurance company and the public. But just seeing Hermey the Misfit Elf, Yukon, the Abominable Snowman (who is decorating the tree) and even the talking jack-in-the-box from the Island of Misfit Toys actually makes me like Aflac for giving me more time with those stop-motion holiday favorites. That it decided to go with the original characters instead of just spoofing the show makes all the difference.

Another Christmas-inspired execution came from JC Penney, but this one reminds me of A Christmas Story, a different kind of holiday movie altogether. About 20 years younger than most of the classics I love, the live-action film is about a bespectacled little blond boy named Ralphie who dreams of getting a BB gun for Christmas. The first thing that grabbed my attention in this spot, which also ran in a delightfully longer cinema version, is John Lennon's "Real Love." I know fans are outraged over the commercial use of the master recording (remember the controversy over the use of the Beatles "Revolution" in a 1987 Nike spot?), but if you don't mind hearing your favorite songs on the soundtrack of a movie, why not on a commercial you enjoy?

Featuring a blonde, bespectacled girl who visits the local junk man to gather material for "a secret," it's one of those rare, well-executed, heart-warmers that doesn't make me choke on sentiment. The young actress in the spot is wonderful to watch (she has virtually no dialog), her expression subtly changing from passive to confident as she wins the envy of the neighborhood bullies, thanks to a rocket she's built to visit the North Pole.

I do have to say, though, that although I loved the lingering shots of the girl's Big Wheel back-and-forth trip as she gathered her building materials, perhaps a better length would have been somewhere in between the 30-second broadcast spot and the two-minute movie theater version.

Another holiday effort that ruffled some feathers came from "Pass the Cheer," Starbucks' first national TV advertising campaign. I don't know what all the fuss is about. Why would any Starbucks customer, no matter how devoted, object

to the chain's decision to finally advertise to the masses when they have stores on every block in most cities?

The animated ads feature stories about "passing the cheer" between humans and animals living like humans. A girl gives a bear a hug. A man shares his coffee with a shivering elk. And in another spot, a penguin couple pass a cup of coffee to a window washer doing his job outside their apartment.

Each execution makes me smile. The spots are simple and, yes, cheerful, and just offbeat enough to make even an ubiquitous retailer like Starbucks feel a little special. The company, which some analysts believe is suffering the effects of too much growth and market saturation, can use all the good cheer it can get.

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