

SUNDAY FEATURES

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An Oscars billboard outside of the Kodak Theater, venue for the Academy Awards ceremony, is seen in Los Angeles on Monday. PHOTO: AFP
 Right: Richard Jenkins poses for photographers at the annual luncheon for Oscar nominees at the Beverly Hilton in Beverly Hills, on Feb. 2. Jenkins was nominated for best actor for his role in *The Visitor*. PHOTO: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE



BY STUART ELLIOTT
 NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

They gave out Oscars during previous recessions. Heck, they even gave out Academy Awards during each year of the Great Depression.

But the way Madison Avenue is behaving toward the 81st annual Academy Awards, to be broadcast by ABC today [tomorrow Taiwan time], one could be excused for believing that the ceremony was actually for the Razzie Awards, which mock the worst Hollywood movies.

Several Oscar sponsors from last year — among them General Motors, L'Oreal and the Bertolli food line sold by Unilever — are forgoing the program.

Other brands like Philadelphia cream cheese, sold by Kraft Foods, and the Culver's fast-food chain are running commercials in shows before the ceremony, some on networks like E! rather than ABC.

And many marketers that bought commercial time during the Oscars are behaving as if they had been placed in the witness protection program, declining to identify themselves or discuss their ad plans before the show.

That behavior is of course related to the economy, as consumers change their attitude toward conspicuous displays of spending. Something similar happened before Super Bowl XLIII on Feb. 1 as several sponsors of the NBC coverage toned down or eliminated the pregame publicity for their commercials.

Executives at ABC, part of Walt Disney Co, are taking a cue from the silent sponsors. In recent years, network officials talked to reporters before each show to discuss demand and rates for commercial time. This week, no one from ABC was available for such interviews.

Trade publications have reported that ABC was cutting prices as a result of reduced demand. The sluggishness was partly because of the economy and partly because of the record low ratings for the show last year.

It is estimated that ABC is charging about US\$1.4 million to US\$1.7 million for each 30 seconds of commercial time on Sunday, or as much as 20 percent less than last year. By comparison, the most recent rates were estimated at US\$1.8 million for 2008 and US\$1.7 million for 2007.

Still, do not expect to see many public service announcements during the show. The Academy Awards is still prized by many marketers for several reasons, including:

The show is one of the few so-called big TV events each year that viewers still prefer to watch live — commercials and all.

"It's awards. It's the red carpet; we're absolutely happy we're there," said Carolyn Resar, vice president for marketing at TTI Floor Care North America in Glenwillow, Ohio, part of Techtronic Industries.

The company's Hoover brand will make its first Oscar appearance with a spot by the Martin Agency in Richmond, Virginia, part of the Interpublic Group of Companies. The humorous spot promotes a line of six new products called the Hoover Platinum Collection.

As more of the prime-time TV schedule is turned over to reality series, which many advertisers disdain for their questionable or even sketchy content, the Academy Awards remains an appealing venue for blue-chip brands that want to be associated with programming they consider prestigious.

"It's a great environment for us," said Kevin McKeon, partner and executive creative director at the New York office of StrawberryFrog. The agency produced three commercials for the show for the True North line of nuts sold by the Frito-Lay division of PepsiCo.

"When people watch the Oscars, they're watching the best films of the year, the best stories of the year, the most inspiring," McKeon said. "It's the right place for this brand to be."

The True North commercials present everyday Americans who, according to Regan Ebert, a vice president and general manager at Frito-Lay North America in Plano, Texas, "have found their true north, their true passion, and inspire others."

One spot will reveal the winner of an essay contest sponsored by True North, which Ebert said had drawn 2,300 entries. The spot was directed by the actress (and Oscar winner) Helen Hunt.

The show is an effective way to reach female consumers. It is often referred to as "the Super Bowl for women" because in many years, more women watch the Academy Awards than the Super Bowl.

"The audience is a good fit with our target," said Caren Pasquale Seckler, group director for low-calorie colas at the Coca-Cola North America unit of the Coca-Cola company in Atlanta, which will advertise the female-friendly brand Diet Coke with commercials from Wieden & Kennedy in Portland, Oregon.

One Diet Coke spot, featuring the supermodel Heidi Klum, promotes heart health for women. The other features Tom Colicchio of the reality series *Top Chef*. The spots bring back the slogan "Just for the taste of it," which helped introduce Diet Coke in 1982.

In addition to the spots for Diet Coke, there will be three commercials for Coca-Cola, also by Wieden & Kennedy.

Hoover, too, is counting on the large female audience to respond to the Platinum Collection line, said Danny Robinson, senior vice president and creative director at Martin. "This is a big launch," he added. "We needed to find a big venue."

All six commercials that J.C. Penney Co intends to run during the Oscars will be for new clothing lines aimed at women.

The spots, by Saatchi & Saatchi in New York, part of the Publicis Groupe, promote labels that include Allen B., from Allen B. Schwartz; Fabulosity, from Kimora Lee Simmons; and Nicole, from Nicole Miller.

In a nod to the economy, the spots will play up the prices for the clothing lines, which Mike Boylson, chief marketing officer at Penney in Plano, described as affordable.

The Oscar show attracts more educated, affluent viewers than most television programs.

"It gets us to an audience we've been trying to get to for some time," said Joel Ewanick, vice president for marketing at Hyundai Motor America in Fountain Valley, California, part of the Hyundai Motor Co.

To appeal to those viewers, one of the eight commercials for Hyundai Motor America — the sole automotive sponsor during the broadcast — will feature the cellist Yo-Yo Ma (馬友友). The spot promotes the 2010 Hyundai Genesis coupe.

Among the other Hyundai commercials is one, which runs 60 seconds, that is centered on Hyundai Motor's operations in the US and, in another nod to the economy, discusses the company's employment of tens of thousands of Americans.

The Hyundai commercials were created by Goodby, Silverstein & Partners in San Francisco, part of the Omnicom Group.

For the first time, movie studios are being allowed to run commercials during the Oscars after the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences changed its policy that banned such spots.

Among the studios buying commercials are Paramount, for *The Soloist*, and Touchstone, part of Disney, for *The Proposal*.

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Less ado for Oscars, but advertisers won't skip the show

Years of declining viewing figures haven't put many companies off from shelling out for access to highly prized demographics

Large Oscar statues stand in a tent as preparations continue for the 81st Academy Awards in Hollywood on Wednesday. PHOTO: REUTERS



Chocolate Oscars covered with edible 24 karat gold are displayed at the Oscar Food and Wine Preview on Thursday, in Los Angeles. PHOTO: AP