

ITALIAN AMERICAN STEREOTYPES IN U.S. ADVERTISING

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BACKGROUND:

- **A recent Zogby poll of American teenagers 13 to 18 years old revealed that 78% associate Italian Americans with either criminal activities or blue-collar work.**
- **An earlier poll by the Princeton-based Response Analysis Corporation revealed that 74% of adult Americans believe most Italian Americans have some connection to organized crime.**

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THE PROBLEM

Advertising campaigns that feature Italian Americans use stereotypes that present an unbalanced portrayal of people of Italian heritage.

- The men are uneducated, dishonest and/or violent.
- The women are elderly, overweight housewives and grandmothers wearing black dresses, housecoats or aprons.
- Thanks to the popularity of “The Sopranos” and entertainment like it, most advertising that uses Italian Americans portrays them as gangsters.
- Even Mafia-themed advertising that may not include specific references to Italian Americans are perceived by the general public to be about Italian Americans.

THE FACTS

- The U.S. Department of Justice estimates that less than .0025 percent of the **26 million Americans of Italian descent** are involved in organized crime.
- The U.S. Census Bureau reports that two-thirds of the Italian Americans in the work force are in white-collar jobs as executives, physicians, teachers, attorneys, administrators, etc.
- Italian Americans are the nation’s fifth largest ethnic group, according to the Year 2000 Census.

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The following is a random sampling of commercials and print ads featuring Italian American characters, or Mafia-related themes, that were seen nationally between 1999 and 2003.

- **LYCOS INTERNET SEARCH ENGINE TV COMMERCIAL**

As a mandolin plays Italian music in the background, an older man carries furniture up the steps of a brownstone apartment while his dark-haired daughter and grandchild look on. He tells his daughter that the furniture “fell off a truck.”

In the next scene, more furniture is being moved in, but the daughter holds up a bill of sale so that FBI agents in a parked car nearby can see that she bought it on the Internet, using Lycos.

- **RAGU RICH & MEATY MEAT SAUCE PRINT AD**

Graphic shows three butchers with olive complexions scowling into the camera. Behind them hang sausages and a salami. “We asked these butchers what they thought of our new meat sauce,” the ad reads. “They beat us up.”

- **UNCLE BEN’S PASTA BOWL PRINT AD**

“If you eat an Uncle Ben’s pasta bowl,” the ad reads, “don’t be surprised ifa youa starta talking likea this afterwards.”

- **BUDWEISER BEER TV COMMERCIAL**

Several swarthy men in an Italian restaurant ask each other “Howya doin’?” and “Didcha take care a dat ting?”

- **OPTIMUM ONLINE COMMERCIAL**

An African American woman is having her refrigerator repaired by a dark, hairy, white man named “Joe.” The woman asks how much the job will cost. “Two hundred dollars,” he replies. When she checks on Optimum Online, she learns it only costs \$25.

- **THE INTERNATIONAL DAIRY FOOD TV COMMERCIAL**

“Vinny” and a friend try to break the bones of a man who owes them money, but since the intended victim drinks milk, they can't hurt him.

- **THE INTERNATIONAL DAIRY FOOD TV COMMERCIAL**

Four dark, heavy, hairy young men wearing gold chains menace a group of senior citizen men in a diner. The elderly men route the bullies because milk makes them strong.

- **STACKER 2 DIET PILLS TV COMMERCIAL**

As an Italian melody plays, a man enters a store with two bodyguards and a buxom blonde. Peppering his speech with “*capisci*,” he strong-arms another customer and the store clerk.

- **RAGU PASTA SAUCE TV COMMERCIAL**

Several elderly, overweight Italian American women in housedresses are so delighted with Ragu’s meat sauce that they turn somersaults and play leapfrog in a meadow. The camera zooms in on the generous proportions of one woman's rear quarters and the bloomers of another.

- **BITONI PASTA TV COMMERCIAL**

A very old, very wrinkled woman, dressed in black, drags her overweight adult son by the ear through the streets to a supermarket where she berates him in English and Italian for selling the secret family pasta recipe to Buitoni.

- **RUBBERMAID TV COMMERCIAL**

Five older women dressed in black with their hair in buns dance a Tarantella because the new Rubbermaid containers do not stain when they put tomato sauce in them.

- **TODAY’S MAN TV COMMERCIAL**

An Italian woman goes through her husband’s closet, yelling at him about the state of his wardrobe. The husband, who is supposed to be Michael Corleone of “The Godfather,” stares coldly at her as she rants.

- **AT&T BROADBAND TV COMMERCIAL**

A teacher warns a student that he will fail her class because his assignment is late. Two characters from “The Sopranos” appear and threaten the teacher if the student doesn’t receive an “A.”

- **BLISTEX TV COMMERCIAL**

A swarthy man in a black suit asks another man if he took care of “that thing.” The lackey pulls out a tube of lip balm, but his boss tells him only Blistex supplies the protection he needs. “Believe me, I know about protection,” he says.

- **EVEREADY BATTERY TV COMMERCIAL**

A photographer’s camera battery dies during the birthday party of a mobster’s child. The photographer is stuffed into a tuba.

- **GODFATHER’S PIZZA PRINT AD**

Ad presents a man dressed in a pinstripe suit, black shirt, white tie and a fedora. Ad reads: “Stay home with da family” in large letters and features a coupon for a pizza dubbed “the Mob Pleaser.”

- **INFOSEEK TV COMMERCIAL**

To promote Infoseek’s Internet services, commercial presents a mini-drama in which mobsters accuse a man of being part of the CIA.

- **JERRY’S SUBS & PIZZA RADIO COMMERCIAL**

An actor impersonating Tony Soprano threatens a Jerry Subs storeowner who is competing with a pizzeria owned by the gangster’s friend. After tasting Jerry’s pizza, the gangster offers to take the owner for a ride on his boat.

- **NETFLIX.COM TV COMMERCIAL**

Mobsters conspire to discuss what to do with a dead body. The commercial is promoting DVD rentals.

- **ROUND-UP HERBICIDE TV COMMERCIAL**

Voice-over announces that the product will “kill off the Weed Family.” The Weed mobsters, speaking with exaggerated New York accents, air their fears of being killed.

- **SHOPPERS DRUG MART TV COMMERCIAL**

A man refuses to shake hands with a sick Mafia “Godfather.”

- **SUPERIOR QUICK DRY CEMENT TV COMMERCIAL**

“Jack gets a permanent vacation” during a boat ride with mobsters who use the cement product to “bury” Jack at sea.

- **TCI/AT&T TV COMMERCIAL**

To promote its digital cable service, advertiser presents a Mafia boss questioning a “not so Wiseguy.”

- **VANILLA COKE TV COMMERCIAL**

Actor Chazz Palminteri, reprising his role as mob boss Sonny in “A Bronx Tale,” threatens a nosy young man, who has peeked behind a fence. The gangster rewards the young man’s curiosity, however, with a can of the new Vanilla Coke.

- **VERMONT TEDDY BEAR PRINT AD**

For Valentine’s Day, the company offers a “Gangster of Love” bear, wearing spats, a fedora and carrying a violin case. Ad reads: “Be a goodfella. Send her this bear and she’ll be singing like a soprano.”

- **VITAMIN SHOPPE TV COMMERCIAL**

As gangsters “sell” products, a voice over warns, “Make sure you know who you’re dealing with online.”

- **WRIGLEY’S ECLIPSE TV COMMERCIAL**

Men burst into an Italian restaurant, shouting, “Die, bad breath!”

APPENDIX I: Ragu response to a consumer complaining about the Ragu commercial featuring elderly Italian American women turning somersaults.

-----Original Message-----

From:xxxx

Sent: Tuesday, June 10, 2003 4:35 AM

To: ddesanctis@osia.org

Subject: Response from Ragu

I have attached the response that I rec'd back from Ragu, for your review and perusal, after I e-mailed them my thoughts and comments on their commercials. It seems to be a general form letter.

Dear Ms. xxx:

Thank you for taking the time to contact us about our Ragú Rich & Meaty advertising. As one of the country's largest advertisers, we take seriously our responsibility to meet our consumer's needs while maintaining the highest standards in our business practices. Let us provide you with some background on our Rich & Meaty products and advertising.

Ragú cooks one-half pound of meat and combines it with the perfect amount of Italian seasonings for a taste that is reminiscent of the homemade meat sauce our grandmothers used to make.

At www.ragu.com you can see how the Ragú brand uses the fictional character "Mama", an Italian-American grandmother, as a trusted symbol of high-quality and great taste. The Rich & Meaty experience is meant to take us back to the days when grandmothers spent hours in the kitchen preparing their special meat sauce. Because Rich & Meaty does the work for you and it is such a great-tasting, high-quality product, we feel that even "Mama" would approve.

The Ragú Rich & Meaty ad was designed to appeal to a diverse group of consumers, and underwent rigorous testing to evaluate consumer reaction. This ad was previewed among a wide range of consumers from different parts of the country, including Italian-Americans.

The commercial was intended to portray a humorous celebration of how the quality of Rich & Meaty has freed the grandmothers from their kitchens, and reflect the Ragú Rich & Meaty brand image of a high-quality, great-tasting meat sauce. In fact, we have received many calls and e-mails complimenting the ad for its entertaining, comical depiction of women being liberated from the drudgery of cooking pasta sauce. When it comes to brand communications, we work hard to match our message with the right medium, using extensive insights from our consumers, but recognize that not everyone will be satisfied with the outcome.

We highly value your feedback as a part of the market research we conduct routinely about consumers' attitudes and preferences. You can be assured that your comments are appreciated and will be shared with appropriate staff.

Regards,
Your friends at Ragu

APPENDIX II: *Matthew Kauffman, who writes a business column for the Hartford Courant, criticizes the advertising world's stereotyping of Italian Americans in this column, which ran in the Hartford Courant on May 28, 2003.*

RUB OUT THOSE ADS THAT SPOOF THE MOB

Matthew Kauffman - May 28, 2003

There's a new TV ad for Prestone that features a timid man innocently washing his car until he is confronted by two imposing Italian Mafiosi in dark suits.

In Gag No. 1, one of the mobsters clicks open a briefcase - and here we're supposed to fear that the timid man is about to be shot to death in his driveway. But, big relief, the briefcase merely holds some Prestone tire cleaner.

In Gag No. 2, a dog briefly considers urinating on the timid man's wheels, but turns tail and runs when the hit men reach menacingly into their suit jackets.

"Smart dog," one mobster says.

"Lucky dog," the other replies.

Ah, the Italian mobster motif. How original.

Madison Avenue tolerates a dwindling number of stereotypes. Gays are still fair game. Blondes rarely stand a chance. And then there are Italians, and the seemingly irresistible desire to paint them as silk-suit-wearing, pinky-ring-waving, New Joisey-talking galoots with a penchant for violence.

"It's horrible," says Roy L. De Barbieri, a lawyer in New Haven and the Connecticut area coordinator for the National Italian American Foundation. "In 2003, it's absolutely incredible that people have such low ideas about an ethnic group."

But those ideas are rampant in the ad world. Coca-Cola introduced Vanilla Coke with a creepy ad campaign in which a mobster snatches curious people off the street - and then rewards them for their curiosity with a bottle of pop. It's irrelevant to the brand, but how 'bout that Italian accent!

A few years back, a Diet Dr Pepper spot featured wiseguys in a game show parody called "Crime Family Feud." "Name a popular family activity," the host intones. And the No. 1 answer? "Racketeering."

The examples run on and on. Eclipse gum used hit men and the tagline "Die, bad breath. Die." Red Lobster ordered up a spot with mobsters titled "Breakin' Legs." A national driving school ran with a gag about a hooked-up instructor asking his young charge for help with a body in the trunk.

[MORE]

And AT&T ran a spot featuring an actor from “The Sopranos” who threatens a high school teacher on behalf of a kid who failed to turn in a science project.

That last one was an especially sore point with some Italian Americans, who blame “The Sopranos” for the latest run of mobbed-up commercials. Although most critics and viewers adore the HBO series, a number of Italian American groups just despise it.

In Chicago, a group even filed a novel lawsuit seeking a declaration that the show violates the state constitution’s “Individual Dignity Clause,” which condemns the portrayal of particular groups as criminals.

The suit went nowhere. But it was always a symbolic act, more likely to generate publicity than a favorable ruling. Still, it’s a message worth hearing: that cheap shots in entertainment and advertising are just that – cheap.

This is not a plea for runaway political correctness and the blandness it engenders. More than a decade ago, Adweek magazine lamented that creativity in advertising was being jeopardized by a paralyzing fear of hurting somebody’s feelings. Honda, the magazine noted, was trying to keep humans out of its ads altogether rather than risk offending some group.

That’s silly. But the fact that it may be difficult to navigate the sensitivities of consumers doesn’t mean advertisers shouldn’t try.

Setting the bar can, indeed, be tough. De Barbieri hates the Alka-Seltzer ad in which a television pitchman keeps flubbing his line, “Mama Mia! That’s a spicy meatball!” (The ad’s a classic, but it didn’t run long, pulled off the air after Italian Americans complained.) He’s horrified by another ad featuring “ill-kempt and fat” Italian women doing cartwheels over Ragu’s spaghetti sauce. And don’t get him started on the accents in the Olive Garden restaurant ads.

Me, I’m not especially bothered by those. All three certainly supersize the clichés, but, to me, there’s nothing particularly mean-spirited or demeaning about, say, the stereotype of Italian grandmothers as whizzes in the kitchen.

But wrestling over the propriety of those iffy portrayals is a far cry from routinely endorsing the image of Italian Americans as violent gangsters.

“Could you imagine anyone opening a ‘Black Sambo’s Chicken Shack?’” De Barbieri asks. “You couldn’t get away with that for one day. But everyone thinks it’s OK to use Italian American negative stereotypes.”

Society is astonishingly adept at doling out offensive stereotypes: the lazy Mexican, the cheap Jew, the drunk Irishman, the dangerous African American. They are broad-brush depictions that make decent people shudder. And you’re not likely to find them in mainstream ads.

[MORE]

So what is it that makes the stereotype of the violent Italian so embraceable?

Note to marketers: Next time you're tempted to reach for the well worn image of the Italian mobster, think about the message you're sending to customers. Think about the reception that ad may get from Italian American consumers.

And then fuhgeddaboutit.

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SOURCE:

This survey of recent advertising campaigns using Italian American characters was prepared by the Order Sons of Italy in America (OSIA), the largest and longest established national organization in the United States for people of Italian descent.

We are grateful for assistance from OSIA's Commission for Social Justice, UNICO National, the Italian American One Voice Coalition and Italian American Pride.

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