

Something Fishy This Way Comes

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Move over, cast of "Four Kings." Make way, Carrie, Samantha, Charlotte and Miranda. Step aside, Four Seasons. Here comes a quartet of snack-cracker characters to take center stage in a new campaign.



Brooke, Finn & Gilbert from the introductory 60 second spot in the new Goldfish campaign

The campaign, now under way, is for the Goldfish line of snacks sold by the Pepperidge Farm division of the Campbell Soup Company. The campaign, by Y&R in New York, part of the Young & Rubicam Brands unit of the WPP Group, expands on an animated effort aimed at

children, which began last year, featuring a fun-loving character named Finn that represents the popular cheddar Goldfish flavor.

The campaign, with a budget estimated at \$15 million to \$20 million, continues using the theme "The snack that smiles back," referring to the grins that appear on Goldfish. Three friends are joining Finn's posse, each standing for a different variety of Goldfish.

There is Brooke, a Parmesan Goldfish; Gilbert, a pretzel Goldfish; and X-Treme, from the Flavor Blasted line of Goldfish. Each character has its own distinctive personality that unfolds in the vignettes composing each of the commercials, which can be watched on TV, in movie theaters or online (at the Web sites meetfinn.com and pfgoldfish.com).

The commercials are written and produced to resemble episodes in a continuing series rather than stand-alone spots. They all take place under the bed in the room of a 10-year-old boy named Jamie, who like Charlie on "Charlie's Angels" or Carlton the doorman on "Rhoda" is never seen on screen. (After all, if Jamie was hungry, he could end the campaign before it started by eating the cast.)

The first commercial is 60 seconds long so Finn's friends can be properly introduced to viewers. It serves, in effect, as a pilot for the rest of the spots, each of which runs 30 seconds.

No jokes, please, about the characters as "pilot fish."

The Pepperidge Farm campaign is indicative of steps being taken by big advertisers and agencies to gain attention for commercials at a time when consumers can more readily skip or avoid spots by using digital video recorders and remote controls. Recent campaigns for the American Legacy Foundation, Sierra Mist soda and Verizon Communications all used continuing casts and serial plots to stand out amid the clutter.

The goal is to "develop a more loyal relationship, a more emotional relationship, with our core target of kids ages 8 to 10, and their moms," says Michael Simon, vice president and general manager for snacks at Pepperidge Farm in Norwalk, Conn.

Out of that came the decision to present "an episodic tale, a mini-saga with different plots, very much like a television series," Mr. Simon says, that would be centered on storytelling. By comparison, the campaign last year that introduced Finn, created by an agency in Atlanta called BrightHouse, "wasn't a story," he adds.

To develop the story that the new campaign would tell, Mr. Simon says, Pepperidge Farm worked with an agency in Portland, Ore., named Character, which specializes in creating and revitalizing brand characters for marketers, as well as with child psychologists. There was also research

among children ages 8 to 10 that included giving them journals and cameras.

All that led to plots for the commercials about the adventures of Finn and friends that reflect the life experiences of children in the target audience: meeting new people, exploring the world on their own, trying new things, striking a balance between the freedom of autonomy and the safety of home.

"Finn is seeking adventure, and there's an element of danger to that, but he encounters friends along the way," Mr. Simon says. "Brooke, the girl, is the smartest, the most mature. Gilbert is a bit more timid and cautious. X-Treme is the Goldfish pushing the limits."

And Finn "is the lead character, the glue," he adds, comparing Finn to Jerry Seinfeld in "Seinfeld" or Sam Malone in "Cheers."

The commercials are infused with jokes that, in the style of films like "Finding Nemo" and "The Incredibles," may be appreciated more by older children and adults than youngsters. In the first spot, Finn says, "It's time I start thinking outside the bag," and when Gilbert asks if Finn's name is Irish, Finn replies, "No, cheddar." There is also a pun based on the phrase "fish out of water."

In another commercial, the characters are exercising in a health club in which an old-fashioned radiator doubles as a steam room. When Brooke appears, this question is asked: "Since when did the radiator go co-ed?"

The playful personalities of the characters are brought out further by the outstanding animation used for the campaign, from Aardman Animations in Bristol, England, the creators of "Chicken Run" and the "Wallace & Gromit" films.

"It's more about storytelling than selling," says James Caporimo, executive vice president and executive creative director at Y&R New York, who worked on the campaign with Jordan Atlas, an art director, and Jeff Maerov, a copywriter.

"We want to get inside kids' heads and get them to fall in love with the brand as opposed to pitching them," Mr. Caporimo says. "It dawned on us there was a huge opportunity being missed."

Shelley Diamond, executive vice president and managing partner at Y&R New York, says the campaign is to be extended beyond the commercials: "We're going to take a page from the cereal book and have the stories continue on the packaging."

Plans also call for Finn to be joined by additional friends. "We've developed 9 or 10 different characters," Mr. Simon says. "It's sort of like 'Toy Story' meets 'Friends.' "

Hmmmm. Imagine a cross between Jessie the Cowgirl and Rachel Green, sporting fins and made from flour.