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Why P&G Sought Small Over Scale in TV Strategy for Latest Pringles Launch

Marketer Casts Narrow Consumer Net in Choosing Start-up Late-Night Host Jake Sasseville to Promote Xtreme Crisps

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Published: August 23, 2010

NEW YORK (AdAge.com) -- Procter & Gamble could have gone with a lot of late-night hosts to promote its Pringles Xtreme crisps -- Jimmy Kimmel, Jay Leno, David Letterman or Conan O'Brien. But it chose instead Jake Sasseville.



Jake Sasseville

Yes, the nation's largest advertiser is putting some of its ad dollars into a relatively tiny start-up late-night program, "Late Night Republic With Jake Sasseville," that launched earlier this month on 75 CW, Fox and MyNetwork stations. While this may be just an incremental step for P&G, which spent \$2.7 billion on media time in 2009, according to Kantar Media, it's actually a meaningful one for advertisers that traditionally use the boob-tube to reach the biggest audiences possible.

In fact, more advertisers are thinking small when it comes to using TV. They're increasingly less concerned with swinging for the fences, lining up ads against "American Idol" or "NCIS" or "Dancing With the Stars," where their commercials are just one or two among dozens, and instead linking up with less-prevalent programming venues where their ads can soak up a greater amount of attention.

Procter has aligned itself with Mr. Sasseville, who at 24 years old, is in the third phase of a moderate professional TV career. "Late Night Republic" features Mr. Sasseville in an assortment of odd situations, like trying to talk to actor Michael Ian Black while the celebrity is also in the midst of doing a radio interview or encountering a group of people blowing bubbles in Times Square. One show included a scene of Mr. Sasseville wearing an odd crown made out of cylindrical cans of Procter's Pringles Xtreme potato chips. He urged viewers to take part in a "create a video sketch" contest that could win them a trip to New York City thanks to a sponsorship by the snack.

"The idea is having fun, creating an environment of fun" that will appeal to viewers, said Mr. Sasseville, and helping advertisers take part in it. "Most advertising had traditionally been done, even on the late-night shows, at arm's length."

Mr. Sasseville, however, might be in more need of commercial backing than his venerable competitors. He's been on the air in several different forms, first using local access TV in Maine to put on a show when he was 14. After selling his late-night programs to Fox TV stations in Maine and New Hampshire, he tried running a show called "The Edge" on ABC affiliates in 2006 and 2007.

From Procter's point of view, Mr. Sasseville's program appeals to people more likely to try its small Xtreme line of Pringles chips, which come in flavors embraced by younger consumers -- "Blastin' Buffalo Wing" and "Screamin' Dill Pickle," for example. P&G has used print ads and coupons, but not TV until now, said Douwe Bergsma, North America marketing director for Pringles.

The Pringles ad team found a "level of freedom and a level of flexibility" that was "much higher" than the norm, said Mr. Bergsma. At more established shows "we have lawyers to talk to," but with Mr. Sasseville's show "this is much more of a grass-roots co-creation, and we're getting more than I expected."

Mr. Sasseville is probably a better fit for Xtreme, which had been in the marketplace for three years with no traditional marketing support, than he is for a mega-brand like Tide or Crest, which demand a level of mass reach. Xtreme accounted for about \$16.2 million in sales at groceries, convenience stores, drugstores and mass-market retailers excluding Walmart through July 11, according to SymphonyIRI. The overall Pringles brand accounted for \$404 million in sales.

Other marketers may find they get more by choosing emerging programs, rather than getting in line to advertise on the most-watched shows. Unilever and BMW, for example have done interesting things (such as running old commercials) with AMC's "Mad Men" series. The show reaches just around 2 million people with each first-run episode.

Of course it's cheaper to do such small deals -- P&G wouldn't comment on what it paid for "Sasseville" but media buyers suggest it's likely a fraction of the \$11,000 to \$35,000 that a 30-second spot would cost on the major late-night shows. But marketers also get more room to roam when they agree to appear in lower-rated content. "You can be a bigger fish in a small pond," said Frances Page, VP-director, branded entertainment, at RJ Palmer Entertainment Media.