

BRANDWEEK

Tissue? I Hardly Know You! Two Brands Go Head-to-Head

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When the subject is toilet tissue, the promise of "experiential" marketing really gives pause. Oh, but the party's just beginning. It's not often that you get two major brands—Procter & Gamble's Charmin and Kimberly-Clark's Cottonelle—butting heads quite like this, but both recently, er, rolled out multiplatform campaigns (Web, TV, print, etc.) aimed at re-seating their very bottom-oriented products. But since it's not fair for us to hog all the irresistible puns, we tapped Mason Wiley, vp-marketing of Hydra Network, Beverly Hills, Calif., to take a peek at both campaigns. A marketing vet whose two-decade career has included repackaging Arnold Schwarzenegger as a politician, Wiley's not afraid of things getting messy. As Wiley concludes here, both efforts were a surprisingly clean wipe.

OK, let's get our minds into the toilet:

Two major brands, Cottonelle and Charmin, are out there in the trenches fighting for our butts. Yet, far from wiping each other out, both are sitting pretty—in my appraisal, at least.

The Toilet Paper Wars come at a time when brands are obsessed with "driving engagement." While the whole engagement thing clearly works for high emotionally invested product categories like cars or computers, I've heard expressed doubt that consumers would ever engage with the lowly toilet paper. Well, the naysayers are getting schooled—nay, potty trained—in some new truths.

Seems Charmin and Cottonelle knew something we didn't. Though looked down upon as the über-commodity, toilet paper enjoys a rather intimate position in people's, um . . . lives. And minor product differences can have, if not a big, at least a regular impact on those lives. Now, in a stroke of brilliance and courage, the two brands are finally getting down to the nitty gritty and speaking directly to benefits that, perhaps out of deference to propriety, had been implied in the past but never overtly stated.

The battle comes down to soft vs. strong and what that means for our backsides. First up in wiping away the last vestiges of an old taboo, P&G's Charmin's kicked off a host of TV spots via Publicis, New York, about their strongman product, Ultra Strong, which is paper they claim alleviates "leave behinds" (or what Trekkies call cling-ons)—that is, scraps of paper left in or on your behind after wiping. It's quite a graphic benefit, but Charmin alleviates the blow by demonstrating its pooper promise via a cast of nonthreatening cartoon bears—one of whom is forced to apply a broom to the posterior of the other until (thank goodness) their discovery of Ultra Strong 2-ply Diamond Weave tissue, the "Strongest Charmin Yet."

The rip here—on another "ultra rippled brand"—is obvious: Kimberly-Clark's Cottonelle, which hired JWT and has hit back with an ad mascot even cuter than a bear: a puppy. In Cottonelle's new "Be Kind to Your Behind" campaign, this puppy proxy is doing what he does best: sniffing behinds in a one-puppy crusade to alleviate the suffering of our tail ends. In the spots, the canine (one presumes his soft, gentle fur's an ancillary suggestion of how the tissue feels on your fanny) romps around trying to save people from sitting down on injurious surfaces until the narrator pipes in: "The world can be tough on bottoms, but you can do one kind thing for yours."

While TV's the main route for these messages, both brands have spruced up their Web sites, too—Charmin with songs, potty-training knowledge for adults and (my favorite) a toss-the-roll game to the bears standing in a forest (they really do crap in the woods). Cottonelle's site is not as hypey as

Charmin's and grants us tips on how to join the "cause" of being good to your ass. Cottonelle appears to be starting a—please forgive me—a movement, a "pledge to be kind to your behind." Slightly more compelling is a chance to "pamper yourself" by winning an all-expense trip to a luxury resort in California. The bathrooms must be amazing.

Charmin, on the other cheek, has valiantly created a grid of red and blue cultures (sound familiar, politicos?) in their heavy-handed online effort to make people "vote" on whether Strong or Soft is the choice for America. They have gone around the nation polling folks in the privacy of bathroom polling booths. Seems that right-leaning states prefer sturdy tissue while the Dems go for the soft stuff. Make what you want out of that one. (It's worth adding that late last year Charmin also re-upped for its "plush" Times Square comfort station which, by most accounts, was an experiential royal flush.)

In sum, I admire both brands for taking the plunge here. Together they've created a kind of phenomenon that's capturing the attention of a heretofore grossed-out nation. My pants off to them!