



Watch Commercials

Ads deserve a place in your home. BY MARISA FINETTI

IN MY NEIGHBOR'S living room, toys lay scattered everywhere, and I could barely hear the TV above the cacophony of screams, laughter, and musical toys. Clearly it was time to round up my boys—Michael, 7, and Christopher, 2—and head home. But first the kids wanted to put on their very first “show.” OK...

The four of them marched into the room, swinging hula hoops around their waists, and

sang, “F-R-E-E, that spells free!” Huh? Then they joyfully shouted, “Creditreport.com, *baby!*”

Aha. Our kids were singing the jingle from a commercial. Horrific, right? Actually, I couldn't have been prouder.

A lot of people think life would be better without commercials. They record their favorite shows and watch them later, clutching the remote control, ready to depress the forward

button and skip the ads. They regard them as a nuisance, a frustrating interruption during a suspenseful moment on *Lost*. Some feel that commercials brainwash us into wanting things we don't need, reminding us that we are overweight or have gray hair and dirty floors. They forget that ads make viewing of many shows free for everyone.

I'm not that person. I watch commercials with sincere appreciation.

OF COURSE, I am biased. My father worked as an executive at J. Walter Thompson advertising agency, known today as JWT. I remember visiting his office often as a child. I can still visualize the florescent-lit halls filled with client products of all kinds: boxes of Parker pens, piles of Legos, jars of Pond's Cold Cream. On one wall, a poster showed an image of a Pan American World Airways Boeing 747. On another, a woman resembling Audrey Hepburn posed with a two-tone Rolex.

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This was the late 1960s; my dad was one of the guys persuading housewives that McCormick and Schilling seasoning would not only make their meatloaf tastier, but have their husbands rushing home after a hard day's work. While I stood in his office raiding the candy bowl, I overheard him talking to colleagues about brand marketing, photo shoots, client meetings, even about how an actor should apply that cold cream during a take. My dad loved his work so much that I developed a great appreciation for the field at an early age. Maybe that's why I never discounted TV commercials. I knew from the start that they had a purpose.

And so does my husband. As a cameraman, Craig has worked on a number of films, network television programs, and commercials for corporate giants. He has a great respect for any well-produced visual medium. I remember not long after we were married we saw a Dreyer's Grand Ice Cream commercial. The voiceover spoke of "extraordinary things" that happen in life over a series of beautifully lit vignettes: a police officer lent a coin to a driver for the meter, a baseball player signed an autograph. This commercial was deliberately produced to pull our heartstrings, and it worked. When the ad was over, my husband and I both wiped away tears. I



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find it fascinating that commercials can strike such a chord.

I also think that they provide an examination of our selves and our society. Take, for example, all the prescription drug medication ads that flood the airwaves. From depression to hypertension, it's clear that many American viewers have health problems. I watch those and feel grateful that I'm healthy—and that when I'm not, others will look out for my wellbeing. For those of us who are unhappy with our weight, commercials can motivate us to do something about it. We can order the Bowflex in-home gym, lose 20 pounds for \$20 by joining Jenny Craig, or simply try to become more regular with Dannon Activia yogurt. Commercials could also remind us to start a 529 for our children's education, encourage us to take a much-needed family vacation, and even inspire us to dream of achieving new goals, like owning a home, exploring life in the military, or reaching out to a favorite charity.

BECAUSE I AM a consummate consumer, commercials allow me to learn about brand-new products. I'm mesmerized by the flowers that dance across the screen during a botanical shampoo commercial. I appreciate knowing that I don't have to get out the mixing bowl to make pancake batter when I can just shake it in a container, or that I don't have to use a traditional toilet brush when I can just click a disposable swiveling scrubby head toilet wand. At least once a day I hear my kids shout, "I want mac 'n cheese!" or whine "I want *thaaaaat!*" after a TV spot. I'm impressed by how well commercials inform our family about desires and prompt some action.

Just because I like commercials, however, doesn't mean I'm always standing by the television waiting for the next one. As a busy mom, I find it nearly impossible to find the time to sit and watch entire episodes on television. But that's another reason to like commercials. I've discovered that during a 15-second TV spot I can wipe down the banister, disinfect the doorknobs, or run upstairs

to throw in a load of laundry. I can even knock my husband out of a vegetative state and get him to take out the trash. A 30-second commercial? I can cut up a fruit salad, garnished with chopped mint, load the dishwasher, clean the cat's litter box. And in 60 seconds I can mince garlic and onion for the spaghetti sauce, set the table, and grind the coffee beans for the extra jolt I need to get through the

day. Since a full hour of programming has a maximum of about 15 minutes of commercials, I feel right up there in the speed department with Rachael Ray.

Perhaps the biggest reason I love TV commercials, however, is this: They ignite conversations at home. Recently, my son Michael watched a commercial for Christian Children's Fund. It showed a young girl and the impoverished town

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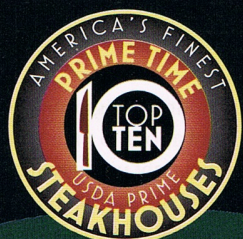
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The exhibition is organized by National Geographic, Arts and Exhibitions International, and AEG Exhibitions, with cooperation from the Egyptian Supreme Council of Antiquities. The San Francisco presentation is sponsored by The Consulate General of the Arab Republic of Egypt, Mrs. Thomas B. Crowley, Sr., and Rajnikant and Helen Desai.

Images (Left to Right): Coffinette for the Viscera of Tutankhamun, Dynasty 18. 39.5 x 10 cm. Inlaid Pectoral Spelling out the Name of the King, Dynasty 18. 9 x 10.5 cm. Egyptian Museum, Cairo. Photo: Andreas F. Voegelin, Antikenmuseum Basel and Sammlung Ludwig.

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Golden Gate Park, San Francisco

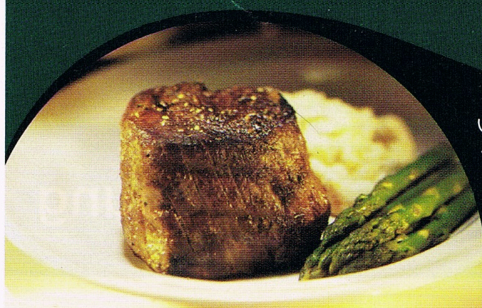



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where she lived. This launched a discussion about underprivileged children and the importance of helping if we can. Our talk not only inspired Michael to write and draw in his journal detailing what he would do to fix the world—feed the hungry popcorn, mandarin oranges, and bunny-shaped graham crackers—it also inspired the whole family. Later that week, Grandma and I began filling a large box with non-perishable items that we planned to donate to a needy family in the Philippines.

Michael stumbled on the box in the living room. He peeked inside and exclaimed, "Cheez-Its! I want some!" When I told him the box would be going to children in need, he immediately recalled the commercial.

"Is it going to that girl on TV?" he asked. I assured him that many children like her would be sharing the contents of this care package. "I want to give them something, too," he said, and we headed to the grocery store, where he combed the aisles for all his favorite edibles. "This is so yummy," he said, holding up a jar of Tang orange drink mix. "They'll love it." And he remembered to pick up a box of Cheez-Its—for himself.

That memory shows the best side of commercial-driven discussions. But commercials can also inspire family conversations that are a bit, well, unexpected. I thought I'd met my match with the ExtenZe spot, advertising male enhancement pills for "that certain part of a male body." It was Friday night, and Michael was up later than normal. I had seen the ad before, so just as the ExtenZe commercial came on, I shot to my feet for coffee. I was steering clear of this one.

As I turned my back, I heard my son's little voice from behind me. "I have a special part in my male body, right?"

I braced for a talk about human anatomy. But he clutched his fist and placed it gently on his chest. "My heart."

The situation? As the MasterCard commercial puts it, priceless.

Marisa Finetti is a Las Vegas-based writer. She will return after these messages.