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Can Seinfeld Really Sell Vista?

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For the past two-plus years, Microsoft Corp. has stood by while Apple Inc.'s "I'm a Mac, I'm a PC" TV commercials treated Windows Vista like a punching bag.

But starting next week, Microsoft will fighting back with its own ad, starring funny-man Jerry Seinfeld. And not a moment too soon.

"Microsoft let Apple have the podium and dominate the communication space," said David Graves, an analyst with Forrester Research Inc. "It's not how you would do things in politics, where it's tit for tat. So it was time for Microsoft to strike back."

The reported US\$300-million "Windows, not Walls" campaign will kick off next Thursday, September 4, with the airing of the first Seinfeld commercial, the Wall Street Journal reported last week. No coincidence, the NFL season kicks off that night on NBC.

Little else is known, but it has been reported that French director Michel Gondry, the man behind Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind, may have directed the commercial.

That didn't keep the blogosphere from weighing in. And the reaction wasn't positive, reported Brandweek .

"Microsoft doesn't like being 'cast as a stodgy oldster' by Apple's advertising and has turned to Jerry Seinfeld. Oh, so they want to be cast as late-middle-age almost stodgy oldster," one blog quoted by Brandweek said.

Advertising industry experts say that whether choosing Seinfeld, 54, is on- or off-target depends on Microsoft's ambitions.

"Who is Microsoft really trying to target? If it is the thirty- and fortysomething business community, I think he's a great choice," said Marc Ippolito, president of Burns Entertainment and Sports Marketing.

But if the goal "is to woo the college-age and younger crowd to convince them not to switch to a Mac or to switch back," said Ippolito, 38, isn't so sure. "If you're 20 years old now and the show ended [in 1998] when you were 10, that's going to seem a long time ago."

Though the sitcom is widely seen in reruns, Ippolito says the "college kids in our office talk about Gossip Girl or The Office , not Seinfeld."



Steve Hall, publisher of AdRants.com, is more blunt. "If you want to make Vista a cool operating system, give it some cool. I don't think Jerry Seinfeld does anything that's cool."

Hall, 46, says it's more than just Seinfeld's recent lack of hits. "Advertising is cool. And cool, by default, is supposed to be young."

Car ads, which tend to feature actors and extras decades younger than the target demographic, follow that maxim.

"There is one general rule that people in the auto industry swear by: You can sell a young person's car to an old man, but you can't sell an old man's car to anyone," one industry expert told The New York Times .

Choosing Seinfeld would violate that rule. The long-time bachelor and, at least according to his semi-autobiographical sitcom, "man-child", is not only a father of 3 but, as noted earlier, is 54 years old -- only a few years younger than the late Lorne Greene was when the Bonanza star began pitching Alpo Dog food in the 1970s.

Microsoft rejected younger comedians Will Ferrell, 41, and Chris Rock, 43, because it did not want its campaign to be seen as pandering to the youth market or be seen as too hip, a Wall Street Journal report said.

Noting Rock's reputation for profanity-laced standup routines, Ippolito agrees that he may have been too edgy for Microsoft. But Ferrell would've not only had broad appeal but through his many successful movie comedies, "clearly is very relevant to the twenty-something audience."

But others, such as Graves, think that Seinfeld "may be above" such an ageist rule.

"He's ageless," says marketing guru Sergio Zyman, who argues that choosing Seinfeld is consistent with what Microsoft, as the still-overwhelming market leader, really needs to do.

"I think the strategy has to be to reassure all of the consumers still using Windows that 'Hey, you're OK, you're still cool,'" said Zyman, who was chief marketing officer at Coca-Cola in the 1980s . "If you actually came up with a commercial that was kind of the reverse of the 'I'm a Mac' ones, with a cool guy portraying Windows, that'd be too much on the edge, and you're not going to get away with that."

Zyman, whose consulting firm has helped Microsoft on past launches such as Excel and the Xbox, says that Apple, as the underdog, can afford to do aggressive, "insurgent" ads. Microsoft, which still must cater to senior executives and mainstream buyers, is limited to doing "incumbent advertising."

Not that he believes that the "I'm a Mac, I'm a PC" commercials have led to a lot of actual PC-to-Mac conversions. "It's still more noise than numbers," Zyman said.

AdRants' Hall expresses a similar sentiment, though less kindly.



"Maybe Microsoft is throwing its arms up and acknowledging that the people who are going to buy and use Vista are not on the cutting-edge of anything, and that Apple users will be younger, cooler, hipper, the early adopters and the 'good' geeks," Hall said.