

IN STITCHES

BOONEOAKLEY ADVERTISINGPROVES BEING BAD IS VERY GOOD

BY MATTHEW PORTER

SIDE SPLITTING

It is Monday, 9.30 am at BooneOakley in Charlotte, S.C.—time for the weekly traffic meeting. But Jessica Stanfield, bright, chipper, and the kind of woman who keeps meetings moving, looks uncharacteristically, disturbed by her situation. Her left arm appears stricken by paralysis. She strains as she rifles through drawers and boxes in the company canteen. John Boone regards her with concern: “Jessica, can I help you?”

“My shirt split,” she says, embarrassed, holding her arm tight to her side, “it’s torn to the armpit. I’m seriously at risk of exposure unless I find a pin. Got one?”

“Not me,” says Boone.

She looks at me.

“Me neither,” I reply.

Not a pin to be found. Given that BooneOakley resides in a former knitting factory where once socks spilled off sewing machines, this is highly ironic, even amusing. Now the inhabitants of this former knitting factory make funny, risky ads that keep people in stitches, lawyers on needles and Stanfield fruitlessly searching for pins. She resorts to duct tape.

The 9.30 a.m. meeting begins promptly at 10 a.m. Whose idea was it to hold traffic meetings on Monday mornings, anyway? Taylor Busby, lead account executive, starts off reading a letter sent to his mother from a distant cousin who claims to be “rapidly losing [his] mind.” Off subject, certainly, but no one seems to mind letters from a crackpot; they’re more interesting than the status of Job # SCI 001. In due time, Stanfield steers through the project list. The meeting ends. The BooneOakley week begins. Stanfield’s duct tape holds.

TONGUE PROTRUDING, LIPS APART, AIR EXPELLING FORCIBLY

BooneOakley began with a great, big publicity stunt on Friday, Oct. 20, 2000. They called the tactic “creating buzz.” Others defined it with a raspberry of national proportion. Webster’s New Encyclopedia defines raspberry as “a sound of contempt made by protruding the tongue and expelling air so forcibly so as to produce a vibration”. BooneOakley launched big. Thhhhhhhrrrrruubbbpp! Bhhhhrrrrraaaaackkkkk! Buuuuuuzzzzzzzzzzzzzz! Whatever: people noticed.

John Boone (co-creative director/art director) and David Oakley (co-creative director/copy writer) were born and raised in Raleigh, N.C. They think they went to the same KISS concert in 1977, but don’t remember meeting. With better haircuts and better shirts, they both built impressive advertising careers, moving to large, abbreviated cities to work for large, alphabetized agencies. In 1993, Boone left such an agency in LA to return to North Carolina. He later recruited Oakley from TBWA/NYC and the pair opened a Charlotte satellite office of The Martin Agency in 1997. There, they did good, solid ads. But, as time went on, they wanted freedom. They told their colleagues they’d be leaving. No hard feelings, fare thee well.



EVERYONE THOUGHT IT WAS A HUGE MISTAKE. WHAT IT WAS WAS A HUGE IDEA. BOONEOAKLEY PULLED THE WOOL OVER THE EYES OF THE MEDIA AND GENERATED A MILLION HITS TO 123HIRE.COM. ART DIRECTOR: JOHN BOONE, COPYWRITER: DAVID OAKLEY

On the morning of Oct. 20, 2000, they made their move. That fateful morning, BooneOakley unveiled a billboard along Interstate 485 in downtown Charlotte. The billboard featured the likeness of George “Dubya” Bush next to the official 2000 campaign logo of Al “Father of the Internet” Gore. Commuters were aghast. Drive-time talk radio lit up. Yammering helicopter traffic teams taped footage. Reporters called the outdoor sign company, which cravenly, directed calls to Oakley’s cell phone. *The Charlotte Observer* dispatched a photographer. Wire services picked up the image. By late Friday, the “screw-up” was all over the news, coast-to-coast.

By Monday morning, the story and image of the billboard had appeared on many regional news programs, as well as CNN and NBC’s Today Show. It also appeared in many newspapers including *USA Today*, the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, and *The Wall Street Journal*.

CNN DECLARES BOONEOAKLEY DOA

Delightfully, BooneOakley endured ridicule for 72 long hours. Bill Hemmer at CNN read the agency’s epitaph: “I bet this is one advertising agency that won’t be around too long,” offered the oddly permanently pubescent newsman. A hissing, foul-mouthed man from the Republican National Committee called to threaten Oakley and Boone with litigation unless they corrected their error immediately. From his weekend cell phone, Oakley calmly lied to Snotty the Elephant and told him that his North Carolina family of 12 wouldn’t vote Republican again if he didn’t make nice. Snotty backed off, and Oakley’s small family of renowned potters and glass blowers voted their conscience two weeks later. Sorry, Snotty, potters and glass blowers normally don’t vote for Spoon-Fed Frat Boys or their foul-mouthed, litigious thugs (visit www.cedarcreekgallery.com for more perspective).

Oakley recalls: “I spent the weekend taking calls and maintaining the ruse. An old friend in public relations from LA saw the news on CNN, jumped off her treadmill and called me immediately. She offered to fly to Charlotte to help us manage the crisis—she was really, really worried about my reputation. But I couldn’t tell her the whole truth; I had to wait until Monday.”

Early Monday morning, Oct. 23, 2000, the outdoor company pasted the payoff beneath the image of Bush and the logo of Gore: “Today’s job opening: proofreader. 123hire.com.”

Oooooops! Sooooo soooooorry. Every media outlet that had been fooled by the Friday stunt had to run a retraction. Double coverage! Other news outlets ran smug stories about the gullibility of the media or the way cynics use politics to sell soap. For 123hire.com, one billboard netted millions in free publicity. For BooneOakley, instant name recognition. For the public relations gal in LA, no free trip to Charlotte.

HAND PUPPET ACT WINS PRESTIGIOUS ACCOUNT

On the afternoon of Oct. 23, 2000, BooneOakley, now vindicated, officially opened for business. They had one client: 123hire.com. Work began. They got a phone, rented a modest office, and began fielding queries generated by their billboard stunt. A couple months later they were asked to pitch a prestigious local account: Charlotte-based Continental Tire Company.

The two founding partners worked day and night for three weeks in midst of holiday distractions and the sad awareness of the unexpected death of Boone’s father. It was a very difficult time.

The night before the pitch, the team sent for color output. The morning of the presentation, only half the presentation had been printed. Color was missing in the TV spots. Presentation boards were out of order. The PowerPoint presentation tanked. They had forgotten hard copies of the presentation deck. Boone had to choose between shadow puppets or adlibbed charts to fill the meeting time. They departed the meeting in total despair.

“I told David, ‘never again will we try to put together a major presentation at the last minute,’” Boone recalls. “All that work was wasted by a bad, disorganized presentation. We knew better, too.” They got back to the office, gathered their things and prepared to leave for a bleak Christmas break. Oakley left the office first. Boone hung around to place a call to his contact at Continental Tire to apologize for their awkward presentation.

He notes, “Just as I was starting to make my case for why everything went so bad, the client interrupted me. He said, ‘Nice job! You got the business!’ I was speechless. They felt our bumbling presentation represented us as forthright and down-to-earth. That we didn’t lard it up with a bunch of stuff about ourselves or our past experience made them like us even more. I should’ve tried the shadow puppets.”

Guess they fooled them—or perhaps they fooled them. Boone called Oakley on his cell phone to tell him their colossal screw up had turned into a major victory. They were making a habit of this kind of thing. Christmas 2000 was very merry after all.



SPECTRUM SPEAKERS: ONLY 1% OF ADVERTISING PROFESSIONALS ARE AFRICAN AMERICAN. THIS AD WAS PART OF A CAMPAIGN DESIGNED TO CREATE AWARENESS OF THIS STARTLING STATISTIC AND TO GET AD PROFESSIONALS TO OFFER INTERNSHIPS TO MINORITIES. ART DIRECTOR: PHIL MIMAKI. COPYWRITER: OAKLEY.

SCAROWINDS CAMPAIGN: EVERY OCTOBER, PARAMOUNT PARKS’ CAROWINDS AMUSEMENT PARK BECOMES SCAROWINDS, A “HAUNTED THEME PARK”. THIS CAMPAIGN SUGGESTS THAT SCAROWINDS IS MORE FRIGHTENING THAN “SEEING YOUR PARENTS NAKED” OR “A WARM TOILET SEAT.” WHICH BEGS THE QUESTION, “IF SCAROWINDS REALLY IS SCARIER THAN ANNA NICOLE, WHO WOULD ACTUALLY BE BRAVE ENOUGH TO GO?” ART DIRECTORS: BOONE, PHIL MIMAKI, RORY ODANI. COPYWRITERS: OAKLEY, RYAN COLEMAN.

PERFORMANCE BIKE: CYCLISTS ARE PASSIONATE ABOUT THEIR SPORT. VERY PASSIONATE. IT’S ALL ABOUT PRIORITIES. SOME CYCLISTS WOULD RATHER SLEEP WITH THEIR BIKES THAN THEIR SIGNIFICANT OTHER. ART DIRECTOR: BOONE. COPYWRITER: OAKLEY.

