

ADVERTISING

Which Grease For a Squeaky Wheel?

By ANDREW ADAM NEWMAN

WD-40, the 52-year-old brand of household lubricant, emphasizes versatility to consumers, with its Web site listing more than 2,000 ways that customers say they have used the product, like “cleans magazine for an AK-47” and “cleans peanut butter from shoestrings.” One recent print ad proclaimed it “The jack-of-all-trades’ trade secret” while another, for a new nonaerosol puny spray, promised, “More versatility, more control, same WD-40.”

Now, in an advertising campaign reminiscent of the tactics of the Republican political strategist Karl Rove, who has said the way to win elections was to attack your opponents’ strengths, not their weaknesses, the rival lubricant Liquid Wrench is going after WD-40’s versatility.

One ad features a scruffy model wiping off a wrench, his hands dirtied from a project, and the text, “For those who realize does-it-all only does it almost.” Another says, “For guys who don’t use multipurpose on purpose,” while a third says, “For guys who know one-size-fits-all doesn’t.”

While there is just one WD-40 formula, Liquid Wrench makes six, like Chain Lube, formulated to stay put on moving parts and reduce friction, and Dry Lubricant, which dries to a white powder and is meant for sliding closet doors or windows because it does not drip.

“We pride ourselves on being very application-specific, and on not being

generalists,” said Aaron Martin, director of marketing for Liquid Wrench.

The brand, which is nearly seven decades old and owned by the Radiator Specialty Company, has advertised only modestly and intermittently in its history, with small ads in the back of handyman magazines. The latest campaign, by Liggett Stashower in Cleveland, is by far the largest for the brand, with a budget of “several million dollars,” according to Mr. Martin, who declined to provide an exact figure.

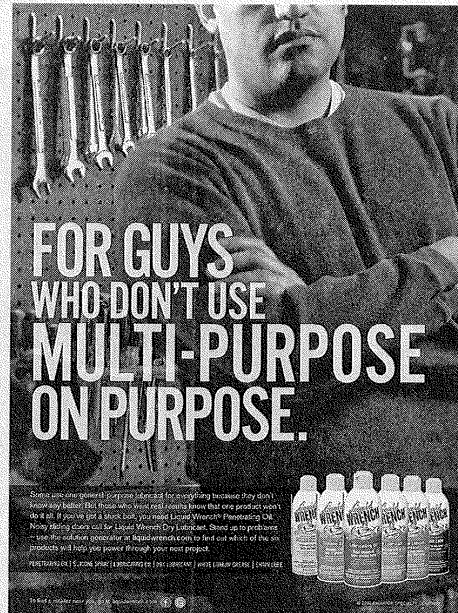
The ads never mention WD-40, but their target is clear.

“We never name them, but most people will know what we’re talking about,” said David Moore, president and executive creative director for Liggett Stashower. “We want to position Liquid Wrench as the expert brand, what that guy who everyone else in the neighborhood knows as a serious do-it-yourselfer uses.”

The ads are meant to resonate not just with such experts, but also with amateurs who “knock around the house” and aspire to “care enough to do the job yourself and do the job right,” Mr. Moore said.

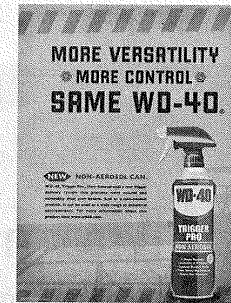
Workshops featured in the ads include tools like sockets of various sizes — to underscore that the brand’s ideal consumer is one who uses the proper tool for the job, rather than fidgeting with an adjustable wrench or Swiss Army knife.

“What we want to do is make this guy embarrassed if he reaches for a can of WD-40, because that’s not what a guy



who knows what he is doing would do,” Mr. Moore said. “It’s like using a butter knife to turn a screw — you could do it but you really shouldn’t.”

WD-40, which declined to comment, was invented in 1953 by a three-person operation called the Rocket Chemical Company, which aimed to develop a rust-prevention solvent for the aerospace industry, according to a company history on its Web site. What they were trying to develop, in chemistry jargon, was a “water-displacing” formula, and because they arrived at one on their 40th try, they called it WD-40. The name stuck, unlike much that came in contact with the substance, and it was first sold for household use in 1958.



In dueling campaigns, WD-40 emphasizes its versatility, while Liquid Wrench talks about its six different formulas, each one made for a specific task.

A campaign for a brand of lubricant uses a rival’s strengths against it.

and Stream, Popular Mechanics and Hot Rod, Liquid Wrench has hired Danny Lipford, a home improvement expert with a nationally syndicated television show, “Today’s Homeowner with Danny Lipford,” as a spokesman. Mr. Lipford appears in a number of how-to videos on Liquid Wrench’s Web site where, naturally, he makes use of the products.

Redesigned cans for the products highlight a mobile texting program that helps the brand customize recommended uses for the products. Sending a text message to 25827 that consists of just a two-letter code on the can, like DL for Dry Lubricant or PO for Penetrating Oil, instantly returns a message that changes seasonally. The text message for Silicone Spray, for example, includes a winter suggestion as a “nonstick coating for snow shovels,” while in warmer seasons it is recommended as a “nonstick coating for garden shovels, wheelbarrows, buckets.”

Of course, the 35- to 45-year-old male the brand is aiming for could just ask the clerk at, say, Lowe’s, which is the right product for the job, but the text-message program addresses one task many men can’t tackle: asking for directions.

“We believe there’s a pretty big segment of the market that knows there’s a difference between the products, but they might not know which one to use,” said Mr. Martin of Liquid Wrench. “But there’s an emotional piece where he doesn’t want to ask the clerk, so he can just text and he doesn’t have to rely on anybody else.”